

**A NARRATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE  
FACTORS REPORTED BY STUDENTS  
FROM LOW SOCIOECONOMIC  
BACKGROUNDS TO HAVE  
FACILITATED THEIR PROGRESSION  
TO POST 16 AND WITH HIGHER  
EDUCATION ASPIRATIONS.**

VOLUME ONE OF TWO VOLUMES

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research set out to explore the views and elevate the voices of post-16 students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds regarding the factors they believe facilitated their progression to further education and subsequent aspirations for higher education. The focus on factors facilitating achievement and aspirations are lesser researched and documented within the literature around socioeconomic situation and academic attainment. However, the exploration of facilitative factors may offer important insights into how children and young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds can be better supported in the future to not only close the attainment gap that exists throughout their educative journey, but also to increase the representation of this cohort within higher education. Given the focus on the voices of young people themselves, a narrative approach was employed, both in the collection of data and in the subsequent analysis of it. Findings point to the importance of investment in these young people's education, not simply through financial means as part of widening participation initiatives, but also through teacher-student relationships that foster confidence, inspire aspiration, build skills, and equip students for the management of their own learning.

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my younger self, my family, and my community.

To my community I owe you my moral compass, my compassion and ultimately my calling in always supporting others where I can.

To my family I owe more than can be captured; you have been my anchor, my rock, my everything.

To my younger self I owe you my thanks; thank you for sticking with it even when times were tough. May you now make your peace with the knowledge that you are indeed enough.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

AER: Application for ethical review

BPS: British Psychological Society

CYP: Children and Young People

DfE: Department for Education

DfES: Department for Education and Skills

EP: Educational psychologist

EPS: Educational psychology Service

EY: Early Years

FE: Further education

FSM: Free School Meals

HE: Higher education

IAG: Information, advice and guidance

LA: Local authority

ONS: Office for National Statistics

SDT: Self-determination Theory

SEB: Socioeconomic Background

SEN: Special educational Needs

SEND: Special educational needs and disability



SES: Socioeconomic Status

TA: Teaching assistant

TEP: Trainee educational psychologist

## **1. CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Chapter Overview and Thesis Layout**

This section looks to broadly introduce the area and aims of this research and in doing so points at the rationale for the study and speaks to my positionality as a researcher. It should be noted that the aims, context, and rationale for the research will be explored more fully within the literature review that follows (chapter 2). Key terminology will also be outlined within the literature review in tandem with a description of the literature search strategy.

Chapter three will offer a full description and consideration of the narrative methods used for both data collection and analysis, before chapter four shares the findings of this enquiry. The research findings reflect two parts to the analysis process: firstly, the stories of the participants as arrived at through Polkinghorne's (1995) narrative analysis approach; secondly, a narrative descriptive account, including participant quotes, of the similarities and differences elicited across all stories.

Chapter five will offer a discussion of the analysis and findings, focusing on the research aims and questions whilst also drawing on the similarities and differences across participant narratives, in line with the approach to narrative analysis undertaken. Furthermore, chapter five's unfolding discussion will evolve into recommendations for future research and offer suggestions regarding possible implications for practice.

Finally concluding remarks will be offered. Aside from providing a summary statement in relation to the overall impact of the research, I will provide a personal reflection as to the role and responsibility of the researcher in both elevating the voice

of underrepresented individuals in education, while simultaneously empowering them to take their place within that system.

## **1.2 Context of the Research, Aims and Rationale**

The literature review that follows will offer greater depth into the context surrounding this research, and thus make clear the rationale. However, in the interests of introducing this research, a brief overview of the context of the research, aims and rationale will be provided.

### ***1.2.1 Context of the Research***

This research should be understood within the context of the English education system. This system stipulates that education is compulsory for children and young people (CYP) between the ages of 5 years old and up to the age of 18 years (The Education and Skills Act, 2008). Post-16 education and training, whilst compulsory, does not have to be undertaken within a school setting. Many different provisions offer further education and training including technical colleges that offer a wide variety of vocational qualifications, sixth form provisions typically attached to state (or private) schools and offering A-Level qualifications and equivalent, or young people (YP) may engage in apprenticeships or other work-based training routes. YP may alternatively secure an occupation for themselves, benefiting from job specific continuing professional development.

Within the English education system post-18 education is optional and typically refers to higher education (HE). YP hoping to access HE will need to have achieved a particular level of qualification in their prior education. YP need to obtain a certain level at GCSE, thus enabling them to access the necessary qualifications at post-16 to then grant access to HE. HE typically takes place within university institutions, and there

are differing types of universities and courses on offer. HE can alternatively be offered through work-based learning apprenticeship programmes or via online learning.

Outside of work-based apprenticeships, HE comes at a financial cost to the student. Whilst student finance is available in varying degrees to support studies, statistics continue to tell the story that HE is lesser accessed by those of low-socioeconomic-status (SES). The reasons for this are likely more complex than financial barriers alone, as the literature review that follows will explore (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021). Given the gap between who does and does not access university in England, widening participation policy and related initiatives were introduced. These initiatives, including differing levels of government funding, were brought in to try and tackle the gap. The overarching policy around widening participation, enabling access to HE for groups (historically and still) underrepresented, would be penned by central government. However, individual educational provisions would have some creative licence as to what their own initiatives would offer and what increased enrolment to HE would look like on the ground (Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020). Typically, widening participation initiatives include: the provision of information, advice and guidance (IAG) for YP less familiar with the HE system; ‘aspiration raising activities’ (Harrison & Waller, 2018, p.1); and financial incentives. These initiatives will be discussed in more depth in the chapter that follows (chapter 2 – Literature Review).

### ***1.2.2 Research Aims and Rationale***

This research looks to explore the views and foreground the voices of post-16 students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, as to what has facilitated their academic success in enabling them to access post-16 education and what they feel has contributed to their aspirations to attend university thereafter. The focus on

aspirations is integral to this inquiry, given that the research influencing current widening participation policy and practice stresses that low aspirations for this cohort of YP is a significant contributing factor to their non-attendance to HE (Strand, 2021).

There are many other aspirations that YP from low-SEBs may have in relation to education and gaining formal qualifications, or in relation to career goals. Not all of these aspirations will require HE qualifications. These aspirations are equally valid and greater exploration of these alternative aspirations and the realisation of them would be equally useful. The Social Mobility Commission's State of the Nation (2022) Report suggests, there needs to be a broader consideration and understanding of different routes to securing social mobility beyond attendance to university. The concept of social mobility will be expanded upon in the literature review that follows (chapter 2). Though, for context here, "[s]ocial mobility refers to the ability of individuals to change positions within a social stratification system. When people improve or diminish their economic status in a way that affects social class, they experience social mobility" (Dina Radeljas, n.d.).

There is a need for a broader understanding, and consideration of aspirations outside of HE, with different enactments of social mobility being celebrated. However, the limitations of time and word count do not allow for this broader view of aspiration and attainment within this research. I am further minded to the continuing reported benefits of gaining a HE qualification. According to the Department for Education's latest statistics (2023), university graduates earn £11,500 per year more than their non-graduate counterparts (based on a 'median nominal salary'). Further benefits include the nature of employment secured, with 66.3% of university graduates engaged in high-skilled employment in comparison to 23.6% of non-graduates. This gap further increases in the case of postgraduates. Of course, financial earnings and

job type are only two measures of success/social mobility and may be considered somewhat reductive. However, they still offer an indication of the continued benefits of accessing, and indeed aspiring to access, HE.

Whilst attending university is undoubtedly still a vehicle for social mobility then, widening participation continues to be a relevant area for research. This research focuses on a somewhat persistent narrative around the aspirations of YP from low SEB's with regard attending university. This narrative continues to be felt keenly by young people aged 16-18 in England today (Harrison & Waller, 2018) and suggests that YP from low-SEBs lack the aspiration to strive for HE. This particular narrative around aspirations for HE from those of low-SEB's will be explored more within chapter 2 - the literature review.

Widening participation seeks to encourage and enable entry into HE by underrepresented individuals, but currently there is a distinct lack of YP voice feeding into policies around widening participation, as well as limited research around what facilitates, rather than hinders, their enrolment in HE (Jones, 2021). The use of a narrative approach would allow me to explore what factors fostered high aspirations for these YP, and what had enabled their academic progress in their schooling so far. Again, this would elicit invaluable insights as to what might support the academic achievement of individuals from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, when the literature and legislation stress stark differences in 'the attainment gap' (Hutchinson et al, 2020).

### ***1.3 Theoretical position***

Given the research aims of this study and the narrative approach adopted, a theoretical position that enabled me to take a broad view was felt necessary. I would need to consider all aspects of participants lives and experiences and ascertain what

they felt to be influential in their educational attainment and aspirations. Bronfenbrenner's (2001) bioecological systems theory allowed me to consider YP's individual stories more broadly, considering what different factors might be at play, at different levels, for them. As per Bronfenbrenner's theory, consideration of the YP themselves, their characteristics and biological factors would be important. Whilst further consideration would need to be given to the interactions between YP and those in their immediate environment: i.e., family members, school staff, peers, and neighbours (referred to as the mesosystem). Stories shaped would consider how YP and significant others interact(ed) with each other and the impact that this has, or had, for them, as per Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem (2001).

At the level of Bronfenbrenner's exosystem (2001), data analysis would ask how wider systems, from the media, policy and community resources, might influence other systems and ultimately the individual themselves. In shaping participant stories, I would need to give further consideration to Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem. The macrosystem attends to the cultural context within which these other systems are operating, what this means for society, social norms and dominant ideologies at any time. The sense of time is important, as captured by Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem (2001), considering key milestones and transitions across the life course (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). This broad view of possible influential factors for YP and consideration of how these might change, influence or be influenced over time was important in this narrative research. Such a broad view would be needed to understand the intricacy of individual stories.

Beyond Bronfenbrenner, I propose that the theories of Contextualism (Krauss and Stephens, 2012) and Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self Determination Theory (SDT) also have much to offer in sense-making of participant stories. Both theories give due

consideration to the contextual factors impacting an individual's motivation, self-efficacy, attainment and aspiration, and can arguably be said to align well with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (2001). Contextualism considers how an individual's characteristics might be influenced by their lived experiences. Whilst SDT emphasises the role of external driving forces and factors in facilitating, or dampening, one's motivation for education. The far reach of Bronfenbrenner's (2001) bioecological systems theory enables other relevant theories to be considered within this research and these theories will be explored further within the literature review.

#### **1.4 Researcher Positionality**

Whilst the positionality of myself as researcher will be explored more in chapter three (methodology), it would be remiss not to outline my own position from the outset, given the underlying principles of constructionism and the recognition that my own experience and interaction with participants may play a part in the data-collection and interpretation. I am a student from a low-socioeconomic background myself; I was the first, and only, in my family to attend university and have been keenly aware of that fact throughout my studies. Reflecting on my own story (appendix 12), I know that there are, and were, a number of factors that contributed to my academic achievements to date. This prompted me to think about what might have facilitated other YP in a similar position (though at the start of their journey into HE), to aspire for progression into HE and achieve what was needed for this.

This positionality as a student from a low-SEB myself was arguably beneficial in supporting my connection with participants and ensuring a greater understanding of their experiences (Dwyer & Buckle, 2006; Ross, 2017). However, I must also consider the impact that this could have had on, not only my interpretation of participant stories,



but also on the stories shared (Dwyer & Buckle, 2006). Sharing my own story with participants before starting interviews, and as part of the recruitment process (see Participant Information Sheet in appendix 6), could have had implications for what participants chose to emphasise in their own stories. Furthermore, my own experiences may have unwittingly led me to respond to certain aspects of their stories differently, based on how much I felt I could relate to, or understand their reference (Ross, 2017). I tried to be mindful of this risk (Dwyer & Buckle, 2006) though the use of active interviewing (as discussed under section 3.8.1 in the Methodology chapter) which acknowledges the researcher's active role in meaning-making within the interview.

Mindful of the potential influence I may have had on the participants story, and the potential impact of my own positionality, each interview also started by sharing the 'Charter of Storytelling Rights' (p8-9) (appendix 7):

"The stories we tell about ourselves are not created in a vacuum. All too often, the stories we believe about ourselves have been written by others...Storytelling rights are not as well-known as other forms of rights, but they are important. One of the first steps in rewriting the stories of your identity may require you to reclaim the storytelling rights over your own life" (Denborough, 2014, p.8).

This sharing of the storytelling rights was important in trying to ensure that participants understood that I was interested in the uniqueness of their story. I wanted participants to feel empowered that they, and they alone, are the author of their story. I hope, and believe, that this empowered participants to tell their own personal truth, irrespective of how it did, or did not relate to mine. My own experience of the interviews was that we embraced the differences in our experiences as much as we connected on account of the similarities. My positionality within this research will be reflected on throughout.

## **2. CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Chapter Overview**

This research looks to elicit and understand the factors that might support YP from low socioeconomic backgrounds throughout their educational journey and into HE. This literature review will include consideration of the barriers faced by YP from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and will aim to assess the current and historic political position on how to address the attainment gap and the legislative landscape around widening participation.

The chapter will begin by clarifying some key terminology that is central to this investigation and that was fundamental to the literature search, before moving on to outline key policy and legislation and its impact on practice, over time. Next, efforts will be made to outline the barriers to, and possible factors that support, educational achievement for children and young people (CYP) from low-socioeconomic backgrounds based on narratives shared within the existing literature. This chapter will then end with a justification for the present research, which aims to highlight the disproportionate literature available as to 'what works' for these CYP, in contrast to research around understanding the barriers faced. Final thoughts will be dedicated to a consideration of the distinct lack of voice from CYP themselves particularly in relation to the research that has previously informed social policy in this area.

### **2.2 Literature Search Strategy**

Search terms, including Boolean logic phrases, were used in the initial scoping of the literature across the following databases: EBSCO; Google Scholar; Psych Info; Web of Science and the University of Birmingham's own library search engine Findit@Bham. The terms illustrated in Box 1 below generated an initial literature:

**Box 1:** Search terms for literature review:

- low socioeconomic background OR low socioeconomic status OR lower class OR working class OR disadvantaged
- access\* OR achievement\* OR success\*
- SAME Higher Education\* OR Post 16\* OR Further Education\*.

Following this initial review/scoping scan of the literature, a ‘snowballing’ approach was employed, which involved reviewing the reference lists of the research papers that were drawn from the initial literature search. Broad searches of relevant UK governmental policy and legislation were also completed.

### **2.3 Terminology and Definitions of Socioeconomic Positionality**

The terms low-socioeconomic status (SES), background, and social class were terms used when identifying relevant literature to inform this literature review. The choice taken to use all terms within the literature search reflected, as Rubin et al (2014) suggest in their review of the means of measuring social class, that these terms are often used interchangeably. However, some researchers, including Rubin et al (2014), propose that, whilst there is crossover, these terms do not necessarily refer to the same thing (Ostrove & Cole, 2003; Sirin, 2005). As such, I have deemed it important to carefully consider the definitions and terminology used within this area of research and wish to provide clarity on the definition adopted within this study.

Rubin et al (2014) suggest that SES refers to a more tangible (or objective) assessment of a person’s material existence and access to resources at a moment in time; it is suggestive of their current access to resources in relation to their social standing and economic position. SES is therefore subject to change; in cases of social mobility for instance (Rubin et al., 2014). One’s SES will be relative to the society

within which they live, and impacted by the local economy, political climate and social priorities within that society; this will be considered in due course, with regard to the role of relative poverty (Chen, 2015). Whilst social mobility speaks to an individuals elevated social and economic status within said society in comparison to that of their parents (Social Mobility Commission, 2023).

Social class on the other hand, speaks to something more deeply rooted, and less malleable; “social class refers to one’s sociocultural *background* and is more stable, typically remaining static across generations” (Rubin et al., 2014, p.196). This suggests that one’s sense of belonging to, or identification with, a particular social class does not necessarily change, even when their SES and access to material resources does. It highlights not only that social class is more subjective, but also speaks to the ongoing impact one’s sense of social-class can have over the life-course, irrespective of social mobility. This suggests that particular “identity-related constructs” are strongly “associated with peer-group memberships” (Thiele et al., 2017, p.49) such as identifying with a particular social class. The implications of social and/or economic disadvantage here prove to be more than material, whereby increased access to resources will not necessarily break that *sense of belonging* (Rogers, 1951) to a particular peer/social group, or alter the “identity-related constructs” (Theile et al., 2017, p.49) one has internalised on account of their belonging to that group. The work of social scientist, Bourdieu (1984), captured in Kraus and Stephens (2012) speaks to this: “social class environments guide psychological experience because they shape fundamental aspects of the self and patterns of relating to others” (p.644).

Here Bourdieu would argue that the systems within society, of which education is just one, are set up to reproduce the class system; with each social actor playing their part accordingly:

“[S]ocial class contexts expose people to common material and social conditions, which foster and require certain types of behavior over time...these behavioral patterns become norms and expectations for the self and for how to relate to others. In this fashion, social class contexts serve to socialize and reinforce class-specific psychological patterns” (Kraus & Stephens, 2012, p.644).

Here we can understand social class to operate at both the level of the individual as well as at a systems level; Bourdieu (1984) suggests that there is an interaction between both, that enables the individual to internalise a classed identity that will go on to influence their way of ‘being’ over the life-course.

Given that social class appears to concern itself with historical experience and standing in society, as much as, if not more so than, concerning itself necessarily with an individual's current economic status; it could be seen to share characteristics with the marker ‘low-socioeconomic background’. Low-socioeconomic background refers to the conditions in which one grew up, periods of poverty or money in their lives, and how this may have shaped their identity and experiences that still impact them today and as such is closely related to social class (Stripe et al., 2022). Arguably, social class and low socioeconomic background may be integral to one's current SES and position; again, Bourdieu's (1973) notion of *cultural reproduction and social reproduction*, suggests that we should not expect our social or economic standing to change, which may indicate how intrinsically linked Bourdieu believed these to be. This suggests a strong interrelation between SES and social class, and that it may be challenging to talk about either one without giving due consideration to the other. It further brings to the fore consideration of ‘relative poverty/deprivation’, whereby

objective measures of what it means to be considered as being disadvantaged, and one's own sense of their SES, will be determined by their context:

“Relative poverty, an important but often neglected policy target, is measured by the resources needed to maintain the social and economic lifestyle that is widely accepted by the society in which one lives, whereas absolute poverty is measured against a fixed standard of the income required to meet basic subsistence needs” (Chen, 2015, p.2).

The notion of relative poverty/deprivation leads us again into discussions of the subjective verses the objective, and this is a matter that will be returned to in some more depth within the methodology chapter; for now, it is worth picking up what these differences, in language, measurement, and understanding, might mean for social policy within the UK context and within education in particular (Fischer, 2018). This is picked up in the section that follows.

It should be noted that low socioeconomic background (SEB) is the term that will be used most consistently within this thesis. I believe this term allows me to capture not just YPs current economic position (SES), but also their subjective sense of social class, in relation to their family history and wider context. The terms of social-class and SES may be used where another researcher has used these terms specifically, and where, as a result, translating to the more general use of SEB does not feel appropriate.

## **2.4 Students from Low-Socioeconomic Backgrounds and Access to Higher Education - The Story So Far**

### ***2.4.1 The Legislative Landscape for the Last Half Century***

Research around access to university for those of a low-SEB, has long since been a topic of social interest, and as such, social policy (Greenbank, 2006). In 1963,

Robbins made the case for an expansion of HE, to “make better use of under-utilised ability, especially among those from lower [SEBs]” (Greenbank, 2006, p.143). This is perhaps not dissimilar to today’s government agenda, whereby the Conservatives are pushing for an expansion of HE to include a diversifying of qualifications on offer, as well as flexibility around the modes of study; the goal being, to “enhance the competitiveness and productivity of our economy” (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2017, p.1).

Throughout the political shifts and resultant agendas on the topic of access to HE for those of a lower-SEB, there seems to remain the steady influence of “the ideological environment created by the Conservatives” back in 1979 (Greenbank, 2006, p.144); where HE, despite its place as a public-sector organisation, was somewhat commodified within a “laissez faire” economic system, that promoted “individual responsibility” and “self-interest”, in making choices that would serve to feed a competitive market (Greenbank, 2006, p.143). Even when New Labour picked up and published the Dearing Report (1997), it was noted to have undertones of the rhetoric of the Conservative government previously commissioning it (Greenbank, 2006).

The Dearing Report (1997) coined the term that would become synonymous with future policies and strategy around YP from low-SEBs, as well as other underrepresented individuals, gaining access to HE – ‘widening participation’ (University of Chester, 2020). Following, what has been criticised to be, a rather short enquiry into the issue, perhaps prompted by concerns around HE funding at that time (Greenbank, 2006); it was proposed that the fundamental reasoning behind the lack of participation by students from low-SEBs in HE was the consequence of “poor qualifications”, resultant of “low aspirations” and “flawed educational decision making”

on their part (Greenbank, 2006, p.145). As a result, and over the coming years, initiatives such as AimHigher were rolled out in a bid to raise the aspirations of those from low-SEBs, where potential was proven to be present. The notion of 'potential' is important, in ensuring that "widening participation is *not* about advancing one group over another, or giving groups advantages over others" (*University of Chester*, 2020); it rather situates support at the level of the individual, which prevents the possibility of widespread "positive discrimination" (Department for Education & Skills (DfES), 2003). This became a cause for concern as widening participation initiatives developed throughout the early 2000s. However, the notion of potential itself has been somewhat contested over time, with their being concerns around prioritising 'potential' over grades. This spoke to "a fairly widespread view that entry to university must be based purely on merit; nothing else should be a factor, and regulation of admissions could lead to positive discrimination, putting the 'middle classes' at a disadvantage" (DfES, 2003, p. 12).

Arguably this raises the issue of a reliance on hard measurements in the formation of social policy (Fischer, 2018); raising questions around how potential might be measured, and thus compared across candidates in a selection process for access to HE. Here Gazeley (2019) raises a crucial point for consideration, in stressing the "difficulty of separating current from future 'potential'" (p.4) given that "a number of studies [have shown] that young people educated in more advantaged contexts are later out-performed by those from schools disproportionately attended by young people from less advantaged social groups and where overall levels of attainment are low" (p.4). In Greenbank's (2006) paper on "The Evolution of Government Policy on Widening Participation" he reflects that the concepts of *merit* and *potential*, typically stipulated within policy at that time, sent out confused messages; both advocating for



the identification of “potential, which may not be fully demonstrated by examination results [whilst also highlighting that] the admissions system should not compensate for social disadvantage” (p.158).

Arguably, the notion of ‘potential’ itself could be seen as exclusionary and feeding into the wider deficit model (Kasprisin, 2015), seemingly subscribed to by the Dearing Report (1997), whereby the YP appears to be blamed for their absence in the HE system and thus becomes the target of intervention (Kintrea et al., 2015). Such interventions are those that seek to raise aspirations and facilitate better decision-making (Greenbank, 2006). But to hone in on some individuals with potential, suggests that others are without it, when ultimately all CYP should have the opportunity to develop their potential through universally enabling systems and support. Gazeley (2019) suggests that there needs to be a “shift towards more situated understandings of ‘potential’...[whereby] the quality of the learning experiences afforded to individuals within different contexts [is considered]” (p.3). Here the point is that potential, like aspiration, is something that is fostered, rather than being something that individuals either innately have, or do not.

Bourdieu (1973) might suggest that notions of potential simply offer a justification for continuing to exclude the majority of YP from low-SEBs from HE, thus maintaining the status quo:

“Bourdieu highlights the fact that allowing some low-SES students to access the educational system serves not as a tool for low-SES students to increase their status, but to camouflage education as a system of merit rather than a system of class reproduction” (Johnstonbaugh, 2018, p.593).

Gazeley (2019) equally highlights that “[t]he idea that a meritocracy will lead to higher levels of social mobility has been critiqued for its unfairness” (p.3). Here, it is worth

noting the current situation in relation to widening participation. Whilst the most recent data (only data for the academic year 2020/21 was available at the point of writing this Literature review) published by the UK government states that there has been an increase in entry to HE for YP of low-SES, the overall picture, reflects the continuation of a significant difference, with 28.1% of students in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) entering HE in the 2020/21 academic year, compared to 46.8% of YP not in receipt of FSM (*Widening participation in higher education, Academic year 2020/21, 2022*).

It is noteworthy that this data is already a few years out of date and will not necessarily reflect today's position; particularly considering the cost-of-living crisis and following the impact of Covid-19 (Percipio Global Ltd., 2022). Even if these figures were reflective of the widening participation picture as it stands today, given that widening participation, with or without this label, has been the subject of social policy for the last half century and more, it is curious that any gap should still exist. Perhaps, as Jones (2021) outlines, the continuities of the discourse laden in social policy around the subject, since Dearing (1997), and still evident in the legislation of today, means that there is little room for translation into radical change in real terms. The lack of change in enrolment figures to HE may mirror the lack of change in policy and reflect a lack of understanding as to the real issues that need to be addressed. On this, each enquiry into widening participation over the last 50 years, seems to have been met with criticism around the distinct lack of voice given to those whom the policy is meant to represent; instead focusing on crude facts and figures (Jones, 2021). Again, this might reflect the favouring of hard data over more nuanced, qualitative accounts of lived experiences (Fischer, 2018). However, it is worth holding this in mind, and considering what it is we might understand better by talking to those from low-SEBs,

about what is enabling them to consider accessing HE, as well as understanding the reasons they might not aspire to this.

Some researchers have sought such insights outside of the realm of government led research more recently, and attention will be given to this in due course; within this, aspects of policy and related practice will continue to be considered, i.e., the introduction of variable tuition fees and access to student loans.

#### ***2.4.2 Widening Participation Initiatives***

Whilst the evolution of widening participation as an area for policy and legislation is alluded to under the previous heading, it is important to stress that these policies are enacted differently across different local authorities (LAs) and within different educational settings (Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020). There are largely agreed eligibility criteria in determining which YP should benefit from widening participation initiatives; referring to indicators such as household income, parental education and/or occupation and with regard geographical location (which will be explored in due course within this chapter). However, the type of initiative/intervention that is offered varies greatly between settings and within geographical areas (Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020). This will likely depend upon the local picture, which again, will be considered in due course. Widening participation initiatives will typically involve financial support and/or the provision of information, advice and guidance (IAG).

#### ***2.4.3 Ages, Stages and Social Mobility***

“Early years and primary school provide a foundation for the rest of a child’s life. On average, 40% of the overall development gap between disadvantaged 16 year olds, using eligibility for free school meals (FSM) as the measure, and their peers emerges by the age of 5. By 16 years old, disadvantaged children are 18 months behind their peers. In 2018, 18% of school leavers left education at age 18 without reaching Level 2 attainment, with poor children twice as likely to do so. These attainment gaps form early on and tend to widen throughout the course of a child’s life. This widening

matters as success in education at 16 years old is strongly predictive of later occupational, economic, health and well-being outcomes and to future social mobility” (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. (2021).

As the quote above alludes to, the trajectory for an individual’s social mobility starts early on, and education plays a key role within this. Strand (2021) stresses that given the inevitable correlations between education and outcomes many of the “social mobility indicators drawn up by the UK government are...measures of educational attainment” (p.7); particularly pertinent to this study is the indicator featured in the box below:

**Box 2:** Youth indicator used as a measure for social mobility as quoted in the Social Mobility Index Report (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2023, p.8).

“% of disadvantaged young people not in education, employment or training one year after completing Key Stage 4”.
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The social mobility indicators largely focus on hard data – such as attainment figures; these do tell us something – albeit more about the *what* than necessarily the *why*. For instance, these statistics tell us that the picture looks markedly different across different geographical areas in England, that the education level of parents appears to correlate with the child’s own educative attainment, and that educational performance also differs by ethnicity. The data tells us that low-SES (as determined by FSM within educational government commissioned research) appears to be the strongest predictor of educational outcomes and that children underperforming in their earliest years are twice as likely to be excluded before completion of their primary school education (*Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021*).

These are all incredibly important insights, but arguably what we really need to understand is *why*. Professor Strand, a researcher from the University of Oxford,

authored a report on “Ethnic, Socio-economic and Sex Inequalities in Educational Achievement at Age 16” that feeds heavily into the data presented by the UK government. This report does offer some explanations around some of these key findings. For instance, Strand gives weight to the Immigrant Paradigm (Kao & Thompson, 2003), in reasoning why some ethnic minorities appear to be outperforming others. The Immigrant Paradigm suggests that “recent immigrants devote themselves more to education than the native population because they lack financial capital and see education as a way out of poverty” (Strand, 2021, p.17). This is followed up with further suggestions of low aspirations being present for the lowest performing ethnic groups – White British and Black Caribbean pupils (Strand, 2021). Both the use of the Immigrant Paradigm and the narrative of low aspirations, again seem to situate the responsibility within the individual YP; success is dependent upon their individual drive, or lack of. Arguably, much of the report looking into the disparities in relation to education and training, can be interpreted as suggesting that individuals and families are the necessary sites for intervention, as opposed to wider systems. For instance, “the Commission acknowledges the need for more imaginative support for families...providing services to improve family resilience and good parenting” (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities: The Report, 2021, p.62), whilst somewhat dismissing the potential impact of systemic stereotyped attitudes:

“...indeed, if there is racial bias within schools or the teaching profession, it has limited effect and other factors such as family structure, cultural aspirations and geography may offset this disadvantage” (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. (2021).

These notions of individual and/or familial responsibility for change fit with today’s political rhetoric, and as argued above, that of the last half century (Manstead, 2018). Furthermore, there are questions as to what research feeds into this, which voices

have been given precedence (if any representation at all). Again, it is worth considering whether we should be making assumptions around the causes of success for ethnic groups, or if we should rather be asking these groups what has contributed to their success to really understand and learn from it. There is some acknowledgement of this need within the Social Mobility Commission's State of the Nation (2022) report, which states:

"Despite the popular narrative, it's not true that social mobility is getting worse on all counts. In reality, the picture is complex...we plan to undertake research to get a better understanding of what real people actually think about social mobility, so we can ensure the work of the Commission is aligned to their needs and wants" (p.4).

This may offer some hope for the future, if research that is to feed into policy and practice, gives voice to those most affected by said policies; hopefully providing insight where before there has arguably been only conjecture. For now, though, in the sections that follow, I attempt to unpick government findings, as they stand today, around widening participation and the disparities within education and training more widely. There is an attempt to ascertain further what the key drivers are in achievement for CYP from low-SEBs and what the barriers to achievement might be. The sections that follow also bring in key findings from wider research on the subject; research that use a myriad of methodologies and give voice beyond that of policy actors to hopefully offer a broader view of the experiences of CYP from low-SEBs (Jones, 2021).

## **2.5 Factors Affecting Educational Underachievement for Young People from Low-Socioeconomic Backgrounds**

Some possible factors contributing to underachievement, throughout the educative journey, of YP from low-SEBs, have already been alluded to. These are

further highlighted within the quote below taken from the government's report on Education and Training in the UK (2021):

“Coming from a struggling, low income family has an influence on life chances, both directly and indirectly. For example, those in low-income households may face an increased risk of health and developmental problems, limited financial resources in the home, low parental education, reduced ability to help with homework and remote learning, and other stresses such as higher crime rates in more deprived neighbourhoods” (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021).

These factors are now explored in more depth and cross-referenced with wider research; along with additional factors being considered.

### ***2.5.1 Area, Aspirations, Assumptions and Attitudes:***

#### ***2.5.1.i Geographic Area:***

“Students from areas with higher deprivation levels have poorer outcomes than those from areas with low deprivation” (Bolton & Lewis, 2023, p.6). This quote speaks to the notion that “the local context matters” (Burroughs et al., 2019, p.vi) to the life outcomes of individuals. Whether this is about access to opportunities and resources, quality educational provision and employment opportunities (Burroughs et al., 2019) and/or in relation to the collective aspirations of the community (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). This acknowledgement gave rise to a system that allows for area-based measures of YP's access to HE, which many widening participation initiatives use as a proxy of a YP's advantageous or disadvantaged position (Harrison & McCaig, 2015). The pros and cons of such measures will be discussed more within the methodology section. Regardless of the complications associated with such measures, it is helpful to consider why efforts are being made to understand communities and the correlations with individual and collective outcomes. The importance, and potential impact of the community on an individual's outcomes is captured in Bronfenbrenner's “Ecology of Human Development” (1979); a groundbreaking theory within popular

psychology at the time, and one that continues to be applied in practice and research today:

“The perspective is new in its conception of the developing person, of the environment, and especially of the evolving interaction between the two. Thus development is defined in this work as a lasting change in the way in which a person perceives and deals with his environment” (p.3).

Bronfenbrenner’s theory has developed over time (1979; 2001) to include individual factors, such as biological factors, and how the interactions between an individual, societal systems and the environment evolves over time. This Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2001) allows for consideration of context in the broadest possible sense, giving attention to the political underpinnings of societal systems, such as education, the health system and family structures. This theory allows for sensemaking of individual differences beyond (though including) biological factors; illustrating how the individual’s interaction with the world around them impacts and shapes their development. Given this, it is reasonable to suppose that context does indeed matter (Burroughs et al., 2019) and worth considering how individual developmental differences might reflect different contextual factors. Geographic area and local demographics will have a part to play here, in terms of access to resources, local infrastructure and cultural norms and expectations. This latter consideration is one that will be expanded upon within Section 2.5.2 in relation to Kraus and Stephens (2012) theory of Contextualism.

#### 2.5.1.ii Aspirations

The notion that CYP from low-SEBs lack aspiration has been a key driver for policy and subsequent practice related to widening participation in HE (Jones, 2021). In a recent report looking into the disparities between race and ethnicity performance within education and training (Strand 2021) attention is given to Strand and Winston’s



(2008) research in the field; this research purports that aspiration has a major role to play in contributing toward educational achievement, or underachievement. Within this research, Strand and Winston (2008) sought “to assess the nature and level of pupils’ educational aspirations and to elucidate the factors that influence these aspirations” (2008, p.249). They did this through the initial use of a far-reaching survey, before using focus groups with a smaller sample of those surveyed participants to drill down on detail. Findings suggest that the lowest aspirations were indicated by White British children. Strand and Winston (2008) correlated this finding with the YP’s own “lack of academic self-belief” and the “low educational aspirations in the home” (p.249).

Given that this research, from 2008, is cited in a recent report published in 2021 and informing government policy (Strand, 2021), it might be considered contradictory to the Department for Education’s (DfE) statement in 2014: “that low aspirations are not the problem – the issue is those aspirations becoming realised” (p.11). This of course, speaks more to the systems around the CYP, that can either support or stifle their progress (Binning & Browman, 2020): “[A]spirations are highly influenced by economic and societal factors including external expectations and perceptions” (McCabe et al., 2022, p.1443).

Again, this is something that will be returned to under Section 2.5.2, in relation to the role of Contextualism in shaping or stifling aspirations (Kraus & Stephens, 2012).

#### 4.5.1.iii Teacher Assumptions and Attitudes

“Research suggests that biases relating to SES are ingrained from an early age and are easily activated” (Doyle et al., 2023, p.92). In justifying their own research on the “roles of socioeconomic status, ethnicity and teacher beliefs in academic grading” within the UK context, Doyle et al (2023), highlight the findings of some key

experimental studies. These include teacher, and teacher in training responses to tests and vignettes designed to assess teacher reactions to students work in the context of their SES or ethnicity (Batruch et al., 2019; Anderson-Clark et al, 2008). These studies concluded that “teacher evaluation of the high achieving low-SES student’s test was harsher than all others...[whilst they also] tend to show a bias in favour of students with typically white-sounding over black-sounding names” (Doyle et al., 2023, p.93). Doyle et al (2023) wished to add to this bank of experimental evidence and used an online platform to recruit participants (teachers at various stages of their career) to a study that would seemingly evaluate education overall. Teachers completed a ‘bogus’ task initially, but one that did expose them to a student record that was written to make explicit a child’s SES and/or ethnicity, before embarking on the ‘true’ test, which would be to judge a piece of this child’s written work; a standardized piece, the same for all participants. Only at the end of this second task were participants debriefed on the true undertaking of the study and offered to withdraw their data. Despite the arguable deception, ethical approval was secured for this study and much important data was accrued.

This data confirmed a seeming bias in favour of students from higher-SES: “we found that teachers judged an identical piece of work as being of poorer quality if it was presented as being written by a student of lower rather than higher SES” (Doyle et al., 2023, pp.104-106). Conversely, no such biases were found in relation to ethnicity, which the authors acknowledge is in contrast to previous research within the area and argue may be due to teachers ever-growing awareness of ethnicity biases. The researchers suggest that this could “provide hope for the tempering of SES and other biases” going forward (Doyle et al., 2023, p.106). This hope is worth hanging onto given the proven detrimental effects of Other-Imposed (Self-Fulfilling) Prophecies

(Adler et al., 2012) and Steele et al's (1995) related Stereotype Threat; where negative perceptions projected by external sources can become internalised and ultimately enacted by the individual themselves. Again, upcoming discussions around Kraus and Stephens (2012) theory of Contextualism will allow for further consideration of how external factors impact at the level of the individual.

## ***2.5.2 Contextualism (Kraus & Stephens, 2012), Capital and Cognition:***

### ***2.5.2.i Contextualism and Capital***

In line with Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 2001) afore mentioned focus on the impact of an individual's interaction with their environment, and systems inherent, Kraus and Stephens, (2012), give credence to the idea in their formulation of a somewhat related concept; that of Contextualism. Contextualism is "a psychological orientation that is motivated by the need to deal with external constraints and threats" (Manstead, 2018, p.273). Contextualism speaks to how individuals are impacted by their social position (social-class/SEB) and all that this arguably determines in terms of their context; i.e., access to materials/resources. Contextualism sits in stark contrast to 'solipsism', whereby those enjoying a higher social-class position are motivated, not by fear of constraints and threats, but instead by "internal states such as emotion and by personal goals" (Manstead, 2018, p.273).

A fundamental difference between the states outlined above is said to be *perceived control* (Kraus & Stephens, 2012). This invariably relates to one's access to material resources that could offer some sense of control (Kraus & Stephens, 2012). This links to Bourdieu's concept of economic capital (1986); with Bourdieu's further interpretation of capital, including social and cultural capital undoubtedly having a role in Contextualism too. Bourdieu (1986) states that capital, in all its forms - whether it relates to access to social networks, or to the transfer of knowledge on how to navigate

idiosyncratic middle and upper-class societal systems/contexts – offers *useable* resources and *powers* that, in line with contextualism, could be understood to also offer control, or highlight a lack of (Keltner et al., 2003). Where an individual perceives they lack control, they are less likely to try to garner their own goals, feeling disempowered in their own ability to do so. Manstead (2018) stresses that individuals who perceive themselves to be of lower social-class have a “tendency to see phenomena as caused by external factors” (p.274) and somewhat outside of their control. This could be misinterpreted by others as a lack of aspiration on the part of the individual and could also explain aspects of perceived “flawed educational decision making” (Greenbank, 2006, p.145). However, students of a lower-SEB do not always feel that such decisions are theirs to make; financial difficulties still play a major part in decision-making for students from a low-SEB, with many subsequently deciding not to go (McCabe et al., 2022).

### 2.5.2.ii Intelligence

#### *The Nature Verses Nurture Debate*

Intelligence, like SES (SEB and social-class alike), can be a strong predictor of one’s trajectory and life outcomes (Plomin & Deary, 2014). Much research would further suggest that SES and intelligence are interlinked with each impacting on the other and enabling predictions to be made about each other (Plomin & Deary, 2014; Von Stumm & Plomin, 2014; Trzaskowski et al., 2014). Within this body of research, it is now widely accepted that there are both environmental and genetic factors at play in the development overtime of any trait, such as intelligence (Plomin & Deary, 2014). This is an important acknowledgement, given the afore alluded to issue of Contextualism (Kraus & Stephens, 2012) but also in the interests of avoiding the dangers posed by theories of biological or genetic determinism (Floodlight, 2022).

Quantitative, experimental research (i.e., ‘twin studies’ and/or the use of ‘Genome-wide Complex Trait Analysis’ (GCTA) (Trzaskowski et al., 2014)) in intelligence, however, does paint a somewhat bleak picture, that can at times read as deterministic, regarding the limited capacity or capabilities of those from low-SEBs on account of heritability (Plomin & Deary, 2014). Here, heritability is called upon to explain the picture of stagnated social mobility among those of low-SEBs:

“[T]aking genetics into account suggests that higher parent–offspring correlations indicate social mobility. To the extent that genetics is important, parents and their offspring will be correlated; removing environmental sources of inequality will not remove this fundamental resemblance between parents and offspring” (Trzaskowski et al., 2014, p.87).

Whilst this can read as worryingly deterministic, and seemingly justifies inaction with regard trying to level the playing field in terms of the attainment gap and environmental factors, it comes with an important caveat that “heritability does not imply immutability” (Trzaskowski et al., 2014, p.87). It is important going forward that research looks at the interplay between the environment and an individual’s genetics, to establish how environmental factors may better mediate seeming genetic limitations.

### *Beyond a Single Definition of Intelligence*

There are researchers in the field of intelligence that would argue that intelligence itself goes beyond the single definition on which much research depends; this might pertain to Gardener’s (1983) multiple intelligences, that include the body as well as the mind, Salovey and Mayer’s (1990) emotional intelligence or Sternberg’s (2003) three-part Successful Intelligence. Arguably, some of these intelligences might paint quite a different picture for the social classes, with both emotional intelligence and Gardeners (1983) Interpersonal intelligence possibly playing to the strengths of

those from low-SEBs. Here, there is a body of research that has evidently found those of lower-SES to be more attuned, empathetic and prosocial (Manstead, 2018). Beyond this, and in relation to Sternberg's (2003) Practical intelligence, there is an emphasis on academic resilience, and the ability to adapt to stress; again, this might speak to the strengths of those from low-SEBs, given what we know about Contextualism. Discussions pertaining to any classed disposition will be returned to in Section 2.6.6 in considering the part one's personality might play in attainment and how this might fit with their SEB.

### *Intelligence or Talent?*

Given the above, why is it that a more multifaceted, nuanced view of intelligence is not more widely accepted? Kaufman (2023, 30:06) sums up the views of many researchers and theorists in the field of intelligence, stating that many of these intelligences still depend on general cognitive ability, whilst others can be better understood in terms of talents. Whilst acknowledging the apparent irrefutable existence of general cognitive ability, Kaufman (2023, 41:29) also makes a case for another, or rather infinite intelligences, in his proposal of 'personal intelligence':

"Intelligence is the dynamic interplay of engagement and ability in pursuit of personal goals...the kind of intelligence that you and only you can display, by your own unique constellation of abilities and interests" (Kaufman, 2023, 41:29).

Personal intelligence then is somewhat domain specific, in that it reflects an individual's specific interests, motivations and commitment to an area of learning and development within that area overtime (Kaufman, 2023, 41:29). Kaufman (2023, 41:29) stresses that this taps into notions of 'self-actualisation' (Maslow, 1943). Again,

self-actualisation is arguably easier for some individuals than for others, and so similarly to notions of aspiration and potential, the role of systems and the environment should not be overlooked here.

### ***2.5.3 Socioeconomic Background, Socialisation, the Self and the Higher***

#### ***Education System***

“Social psychological analyses of identity have traditionally not paid much attention to social class or SES as a component of identity... [but] there is converging quantitative and qualitative evidence that SES plays an important role in structuring the self-concept” (Manstead, 2018, pp.269-270).

In line with Contextualism (Kraus & Stephens, 2012) and bearing Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Theory (2001) in mind, one’s SEB and what this means for the way they interact with the world, has the potential to shape the very person they become over time. Contextualism can see people from low-SEBs operate from a place of constraint and threat (Kraus & Stephens, 2012); and arguably this will not only impact upon their motivation, as previously acknowledged, but it is also thought to impact the way they conduct themselves socially. Research purports that individuals of low-SES are more empathetic and prosocial (Manstead, 2018). This ability to be attuned and more readily responsive to the needs and experiences of others, seems logical given that individuals from low-SEBs will be more accustomed to the risks and realities of adversity themselves:

“Over time due to the diminished resources, uncertainty, and unpredictability of their life contexts, individuals from lower social class contexts come to understand themselves as connected to others and as responsive to the social environment” (Kraus & Stephens, 2012, p646).

This prosocial positionality places those from low-SEBs in contrast to their middle and upper-class peers, whom, according to various experimental research studies, have a “stronger focus on the self” (Manstead, 2018, p.279). It should be stressed, that for all of the experimental studies showing this difference (be it through the use of the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001), or through playing the Dictator Game, where participants are enabled to allocate, publicly and privately, much needed resources to another - or not (Piff et al., 2010)), there are research that would contest such thinking. Korndörfer et al., (2015) stress findings within their research that sees individuals from higher social class backgrounds more giving of both their time and money. However, the researchers of this study stress that the results are based on participant self-reports of prosocial behaviours engaged in over the last year and that the experimental element of their research involved public, not private, displays of prosocial behaviour. Here, Kraus and Callaghan (2016) have since tested and concluded that “lower-class participants were more generous in private than in public, whereas the reverse was true for higher-class participants” (Manstead, 2018, p.278).

Essentially, this prosocial positionality is no bad thing; however, these juxtapositions of the classes, akin to egalitarianism verses individualism, may mean that YP from lower-SEBs are more interdependent and thus lack the necessary independence skills needed to access and be successful in HE: “in which the dominant cultural expectation is one of independence, self-expression, and personal freedom” (Kraus & Stephens, 2012, p.646). Kraus and Stephens (2012) stress that working-class students who pursue university in the hopes that they can “help others” and “contribute to their community”, in the spirit of the interdependence they have grown used to, can experience the isolating effects of a “cultural mismatch” when they enter



the sector (p.647). This cognitive dissonance impacts not only the student's sense of belonging when they reach HE (Carruthers-Thomas, 2018), but may also be a reason that they refrain from applying in the first place - especially to more elite institutions (Johnstonbaugh, 2018).

#### 2.5.3.1 Intersectionality

The picture of underachievement of students from low-SEBs is further complicated by intersectionality; that is the prevalence of interconnected identities, or characteristics further associated with their own experience of disadvantage; for instance, race, ethnicity, gender and/or disability. Some of these have already been alluded to within the opening sections of this chapter focusing on legislation and social mobility, and also in considering teacher attitudes and bias. Unfortunately, there are too many variations to go into depth within the restricted wordcount of this literature review. The key message here is to consider that students from low-SEBs may also have other factors and protected characteristics that intersect with their classed or socioeconomic identities and experiences.

### **2.6 Changing the Narrative - Factors Supporting Educational Achievement for Young People from Low-Socioeconomic Backgrounds**

Whilst there is less literature that solely and wholly focuses on an overview of possible factors facilitating students of low-SEBs to achieve, there are some studies that start to shine a light on possible enabling factors.

#### **2.6.1 Intersectionality**

As referenced above and earlier within this literature review, there appear to be some aspects of intersectionality, such as ethnicity, that can prove to be more of a mediating factor when it comes to SEB and educative performance. Future research

should seek to establish why this might be, through direct engagement with those impacted; so that this interplay can be better understood and learning can be applied in the case of those that appear to be underachieving. Whilst Strand (2021) puts forward the Immigrant Paradigm theory as a possible explanation for the underachievement of working class White British boys, the proven relevance of this today is yet to be realised within recent research.

There are also differences between gendered attendance at university, and achievement prior to this decision point, especially when it comes to White British students of low-SEB. There appears to be a picture of male underachievement (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021). Whilst White British working-class girls are similarly outperformed by girls of a similar SEB but different ethnicity, the overall picture across ethnicities is that girls outperform boys academically (House of Commons Education Committee, 2021). Again, this data is often explained away by narratives of low aspiration, although, there is some recognition of the identity struggle that White British working-class males may experience in imagining that university is a place for 'people like me' (Johnson, 2019). Research would do well to attempt to ascertain and understand what drivers factor in girls' academic achievement and subsequent attendance at university, despite SEB - particularly given that HE used to be a male dominated space; there might be much to learn and subsequently apply here.

### ***2.6.2 Access to Information, Advice and Guidance and Financial Support***

There have been suggestions around the benefits of using technology to link prospective students currently underrepresented, including White British working-class males, with HE students and graduates of similar backgrounds, that took the decision to follow an academic path (Johnson, 2019). It is hoped that this would offer

a safe space for like-minded individuals to meet and share experiences and IAG that can support prospective students of low-SEB in their decision-making around future prospects and HE (Johnson, 2019). This kind of peer-mentoring has proven useful in the past for students of low-SEB and the use of technology for implementation makes it a cost effective and accessible initiative (Castleman & Page, 2015). Castleman and Page (2015) in their research in the USA, found that peer-mentors sending text messages during the summer period before applications were due for college and university, ensured that students from underrepresented backgrounds sustained their aspirations for HE, maintained their motivation to complete the necessary tasks in readiness, and that they felt supported in the process. Similarly in the UK, “students exposed to the Aimhigher Personal Advisor Programme, a one-to-one mentoring and support programme, expressed an increased awareness of, and aspirations to study at the level of HE (Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020).

Part of peer-mentoring, but also standalone, is the role of IAG. In a recent review of widening participation initiatives, Robinson and Salvestrini (2020) suggest that IAG matters. Many recent papers share positive results of the impact of IAG, including Sanders et al. (2018) research, which measured the impact of past HE students of underrepresented groups visiting schools and colleges to talk about their own paths into, and experiences of HE. It would appear that “the provision of easily accessible information about university matters, especially for students who are initially uncertain about whether they want to participate in higher education and/or are uncertain about whether they can afford it” (Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020, p.29).

Part of this accessibility of IAG, especially for prospective students of low-SEBs, is undoubtedly around understanding the financial implications of decisions to access HE, or not. Robinson and Salvestini (2020), in their recent review of widening

participation initiatives, including financial support, paint a complex picture of vastly differing financial aid packages nationally, and equally distinct conclusions around their impact. They highlight the “severe lack of evidence on the effectiveness of student aid in encouraging higher education participation for the UK” (Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020, p.23); but conclude that what little evaluation there is, does point to financial supports such as grants, having positive effects on enrolment and participation in HE.

### **2.6.3 Raising Aspirations**

As alluded to above, some initiatives and programmes, such as the Aimhigher Personal Advisor Programme, have been seemingly successful in raising the aspirations of YP from low-SEBs (Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020). Widening participation initiatives typically include “‘aspiration-raising’ activities to promote higher education” (Harrison & Waller, 2018, p.1). Robinson and Salvestrini (2020) stress however, that the diversity of approaches taken to raising aspirations make it hard to determine “definitive conclusions on the effectiveness” (p.5) of differing activities. Ascertaining the specific causal components of interventions thought to be impactful were even harder to distinguish given the heterogeneity of initiatives on offer (Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020). As a result of this review there has been a recommendation for more targeted efforts in evaluating such interventions going forward.

In the section preceding (section 2.6.2) interventions focusing on ‘mentoring, counselling and role models’ seemed to have the greatest impact on levels of ‘student confidence’ and ‘higher aspirations’ (Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020, p.6). It may be that the relational aspect of mentorship and counselling is integral to the success of these types of interventions. This is something that will be considered more under section

2.6.5, in which relationships in school are explored. It may also be the aspect of IAG in these interventions that is proving most powerful (as in section 2.6.2). Again, Robinson and Salvestrini (2020) stress that individual, causal components have been impossible to pull out from the evaluative information available. They further state that what appears to be measured are confidence levels, or reports of raised aspirations, rather than actual enrolments to university (Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020). This suggests that evaluation of the impact of interventions to raise the aspirations of CYP from low-SEBs to attend university is relatively unclear.

Some caution around evaluating the impact of ‘aspiration raising’ interventions should be considered. Harrison and Waller (2018) suggest that the hypothesis around YP of low-SEBs lacking aspiration feeds into a “deficit discourse” (p.2). Further suggesting that this hypothesis lacks a strong evidence-base in the literature today (as outlined in section 2.5.1):

“Raising the proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds progressing to higher education has been a key policy objective for successive governments in the United Kingdom since the late 1990s. Often this has been conceptualised as a problem with their ‘aspirations’, with the solution being seen as the provision of ‘aspiration-raising’ activities to promote higher education to those thought to have the potential to progress. Recent large-scale studies cast strong doubt on this hypothesis by demonstrating that aspirations are not generally low, that different social groups have similar levels of aspiration and that school attainment accounts for nearly all the differences in participation rates between different social groups” (Harrison & Waller, 2018, p.1).

#### **2.6.4 Parental Achievement, Attitudes, and Involvement**

Zhang et al., (2020) suggests that parental involvement in their child’s education, and their holding high aspirations for them, given a belief in social mobility, can lead to positive gains in academic achievement for the child. The Family Investment Model shows that parental involvement is typically highest amongst parents of higher-SES

(Zhang et al., 2020). Lower parental involvement for families of low-SES can be attributed to many factors, be it financial strain, work / life commitments and/or meeting the needs of other, especially younger, children within the household (Williams et al., 2002; Zhang et al., 2020). Here parents' *subjective social mobility* (Zhang et al., 2020, p.564), their belief that one can move up the social and economic ladder with effort and ability, motivates higher levels of involvement in low-SES families (Zhang et al., 2020). This is not only about parents placing value on education, but also, and importantly, about their belief that efforts in this area, by them and their child, will result in upward mobility (Zhang et al., 2020). This belief could be seen to somewhat challenge the earlier explored notions and limiting beliefs associated with Contextualism (Kraus & Stephens, 2012):

“Individuals with a high level of subjective social mobility are more likely to believe in social equality and justice...and are also more likely to ascribe success to self-effort (e.g., diligence and willpower)” (Zhang et al., 2020, p.564).

### **2.6.5 Recognition and Relationships in School**

Given the existing literature on the dangers of a diminished sense of belonging for students from a low-SEB at university (Carruthers-Thomas, 2018), it will also be important to consider how earlier educative experiences might reflect a message of *belonging* (Rogers, 1951) for these students in education altogether. In a key study by Cunninghame, Vernon and Pitman (2020), pupil voice, which they argue is symptomatic of engagement, is championed for its role in instilling confidence and thus raising aspirations amongst pupils of lower-SES. Where pupil voice was encouraged, pupils were subsequently empowered; this depended on reciprocal relationships with teachers, where the child felt valued and listened to (Cunningham et al., 2020). Here there are arguably aspects of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

at play, with YP's own motivation and engagement increasing in line with their growing levels of competence, in a context where connections (or relatedness) with others are strong, but one's own autonomy, through voice, is encouraged and celebrated.

Indeed, the role of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) in enabling a move "From Poverty to Flourishing" (The British Psychological Society (BPS), 2021) is recognised within a recent UK Briefing Paper, which suggests:

"Self Determination Theory (SDT) serves as a useful lens through which to view agency and empowerment with regard to how poverty reduces people's agency and stifles their empowerment" (BPS, 2021, p.2).

Recommendations within the Briefing Paper go on to suggest the need to grow individual's self-determination, which is namely a theory of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006), which refers to an individual's self-belief, that arguably has a part to play in one's subsequent levels of motivation. However, as the above quote alludes to, the authors strongly stress the role of the systems around the individual in enabling "agency and empowerment" (BPS, 2021, p.1).

#### ***2.6.6 Prosocial Behaviour, Personality and "Possible Selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986)***

SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006) will arguably have a key role to play in individual's both envisioning, and being empowered to attempt enactment of, their "possible future selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

"The "possible selves" literature from social psychology, whilst acknowledging the centrality of the past and the sociocultural location of individuals and the fluidity of identity, clearly conceptualises young people as agentic...Young people are seen through the lens of possible selves to be envisioning desired and undesired possible future selves and to be actively creating their own pathways towards their future" (Gartland & Smith, 2018, p.639).

Gartland and Smith's (2018) study into "*The Role of Vocational Colleges and Courses Supporting Progression into HE*" highlight the importance of students growing sense of competence (in their field) and self-belief, or efficacy, in their coming to identify themselves as "successful learners" (p.642). They suggest that this might allow these YP to gradually see themselves in the HE space (Gartland & Smith, 2018). As expressed in notions of *solopsism* (Kraus & Stephens, 2012), but also in the idea of personal intelligence (Kaufman, 2023, 41:29) earlier explored within this literature review, Gartland and Smith (2018) stress that students of a low-SEB need to similarly develop a "degree of confidence and entitlement in relation to academic knowledge [within their field]" (Reay et al., 2010, p. 109). Arguably, vocational routes, enable these YP to not only invest in a clearer career trajectory that they feel will enable social mobility, but also to develop their personal intelligence, that thus then enables them to feel equipped and entitled to progression into HE.

Beyond institution and course choices, and the role educational institutions play in developing student's personal intelligence and self-efficacy, there are also some key personal traits and characteristics that have been credited with YP's successful navigation of the education system. For instance, there is an ever-growing literature around the benefits of individual's levels of *grit* – their perseverance of effort and conscientiousness (Lam & Zhou, 2022). Whilst Lam and Zhou (2022) question and somewhat deflate arguments around the role of grit in individuals' achievement against the odds, through their critical unpicking of methods applied to previous studies in this area, they still, through their own research, state that "students' grit level generally had positive effects on academic achievement" (p.611).

Beyond the role of grit, there is compelling evidence as to how children from low-SEBs, in their earliest years, are benefiting from their tendency toward more



prosocial behaviours. In their study of children in low-socioeconomic neighbourhoods in the UK, Carter et al., (2021) found that “Prosocial behavior may mitigate academic risk across early childhood” (p.1509). Children’s prosocial disposition proved to offer several functions and protective factors; from eliciting the support and favour of teachers, who perceived them as “helpful”, to “foster[ing] positive relationships” (Carter et al., 2021, p.1511). These factors and functions have a further positive impact upon the child’s emotional state, which better enables them to cope with “the negative effects of contextual stressors and resource limitations...such as those encountered in low SES neighborhoods” (Carter et al., 2021, p.1511). This will have a role in building academic resilience and be highly protective in the face of risks associated with Contextualism (Kraus & Stephens, 2012).

#### **2.6.7 Academic Resilience**

Mulcare (2020), in her study of discourse relating to YP of low-SEBs reiterates the role of academic resilience in the academic achievement of these YP. “Academic resilience refers to students’ capacity to perform highly despite a disadvantaged background” (Ye et al., 2021). Mulcare (2020), like many researchers before her, stress that academic resilience does not reside within the individual alone. There is a role for those around the CYP, and across systems, to nurture academic resilience (Cui et al, 2022). For instance, Agasisti et al (2018) suggest that academic resilience can be fostered through the teacher-student relationship and a sense of belonging in school. In growing a sense of belonging in school, Mulcare (2020) further stresses the importance of students from low-SEBs feeling valued, with teachers taking an interest in them as a person, beyond the school gates; this speaks to Cunnigham, Vernon and Pitman’s (2020) emphasis on pupil voice as well as to Bronfenbrenner’s (1979; 2001)

notion of interacting systems. Similarly, to the concepts of aspiration and potential then, academic resilience should be understood in relation to context.

## **2.7 Closing Comment on the Factors Supporting Educational Achievement for Young People from Low-Socioeconomic Backgrounds**

Similarly to factors affecting underachievement, the aspects explored above, that may have a place in supporting achievement for CYP of low-SEBs, map onto Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (2001); with some speaking to individual drivers and other's referencing systemic supports, and with consideration as to how these might interplay.

## **2.8 Justification of Research**

"Bourdieu does not easily provide a "recipe for action" (James, 2015, pp.107–108). Ferrare and Apple (2016) suggest Bourdieu's emphasis on "the macro view of cultural fields" has not allowed for more "nuanced understanding of how actors construct, experience and struggle over meanings in local contexts" (p.45). Understanding wider social processes is vital, but to understand how to better support students' progression to HE and how colleges in the post-16 field support this, we also need an understanding of the interplay between these social processes and students' motivation and ability to take action" (Gartland & Smith, 2018, p.639).

The above quote, along with the other literature shared throughout this chapter, offers some justification for this small scale, in-depth, narrative research that focuses on factors supporting CYP from low-SEBs to achieve throughout their educative career and reach a position where they can consider a continuation onto HE. Whilst this remains less likely for such individuals, and whilst this has consequences for social mobility and a deleterious impact on life outcomes more broadly, I would argue that there is room for ever more research in this area. As this literature review highlights there is a greater tendency to focus on the barriers faced by those from low-SEBs. In

creating narratives of achievement and even where identification of possible supportive factors are sought, there can be a tendency to rely on quantitative, large scale methodologies, that fail to unearth the necessary nuance and understanding of what works for who, when, where and how. This research seeks to do the latter and is more in line with the Government's recent recognition of the need to speak to individuals and communities to truly understand their situations and success (Social Mobility Commission's State of the Nation (2022) report).

### **3. CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Overview**

This chapter outlines the methodological approach that was taken and the philosophical thinking and researcher positionality that fed into decision making with regard data-collection and analysis. The research aims and questions are also presented. Consideration is given to who took part in the research, and their active role as participants. As touched upon within the introduction to this thesis (chapter 1) I also reflect on my own, equally active role, as researcher, whilst also being a student from a low-SEB myself – albeit outside of the post-16 age/stage bracket. This positionality as researcher and ethical considerations in relation to the nature of the research are discussed in the final sections of this chapter.

#### **3.2 Research Aims and Research Questions**

The literature suggests that there is a distinct lack of voice from students from low-SEBs regarding the factors that they feel have supported their educational attainment enabling progression into post-16 education and higher. This narrative research aims to give voice to a small sample of such students and elicit their views regarding the factors that they believe facilitated such success. Given the perpetuating narrative around low aspirations for CYP from low-SEBs, this research also looked to consider the aspirations of these post-16 students. By giving voice to YP from low-SEBs around what has helped them to achieve and aspire, I hope to challenge the dominant narrative around low aspiration and thus low attainment. Within this broad narrative inquiry and analysis, the research questions in the box below were devised to direct the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of data-collection and analysis (Sharp, Bye & Cusick, 2018):

**Box 3:** Research questions:

1. What do post-16 students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds report to have been facilitative to their academic achievement?
2. What do post-16 students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds report to have been facilitative in their aspirations of continuation into higher education?
3. What factors do post-16 students from low-socioeconomic background perceive might continue to support them in realising their academic aspirations?

**3.3 Research Design**

A narrative inquiry and analysis methodological design was adopted. The choices and decisions that led to employment of this approach and the overall research design will be discussed under the remaining headings within this methodology chapter.

**3.4 Logic of Inquiry**

Given that the aim of this research was to give voice to post-16 students from low-SEBs with aspirations to attend university, and the academic attainment to date to do so, a qualitative approach that facilitated and foregrounded the voice of participants was chosen. This approach would need to allow for the exploration of YP's experiences over time; in essence I was looking to understand events and factors, past and present, that had facilitated their educational success so far, whilst also giving time and space to focus on their future hopes and aspirations. This focus on YP voice and their experiences over time, spoke to an interest, overall, in their 'story'. "Stories are our crucial equipment for making sense of, organizing, rewriting and communicating our past, present and possible futures" (Smith, 2016, p.210).

This research sought to give voice to a cohort of YP underrepresented within HE currently, and historically. It was felt that this research would naturally be situated within a narrative camp, whereby a *counter-story* to the perpetuating narrative of low aspiration, attainment and thus attendance within HE, could be written:

“Narrative inquiries can be categorized as narratives of the self, narratives and society, and narratives for/of social justice. They are distinguished by their focus on the author’s story, composition and analysis of narrative within broader cultural and social discourses, and use of critical theories to tell counter-stories of oppressed and marginalized groups” (Wolgemuth & Agosto, 2019, p.1).

### **3.4.1 Why a Narrative Approach?**

Whilst other methodologies may have similarly lent themselves to answering the research questions, it was in the author’s opinion that a narrative approach presented as best fit with the research aims. There was a want to write an alternative, more positive narrative, to that presently offered around aspirations for university from those of low-SEBs (Harrison & Waller, 2018). The existing narrative around the attainment gap (Hutchinson et al., 2020) and low aspirations, starts in the earliest years and continues throughout the life course. This narrative affects opportunities, or the lack of, for social mobility across that life course (as explored within the Literature Review – Chapter 2). This research hoped and intended to contribute to the writing of a new narrative, in which the young people who participated were given the opportunity to reflect on their journey through time and consider important factors within their story. In considering the chronological aspects of participant stories, a narrative inquiry was deemed most appropriate. The narrative approach would enable a focus on the chronology of individual experiences across the life course, including thinking forward to the future, and to consider how these experiences interrelate and impact each other.

Other approaches, such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) may similarly have offered an exploration and greater understanding of the *what*, *how* and *why*, of participant's personal experiences. However, IPA puts greater focus on finding the correlations between accounts, and researcher interpretation of the 'essence' of experience (Tuffour, 2017, p.4). I wanted to also recognise and celebrate the differences within experiences and personal sense-making, not only focusing on commonalities. I was interested in the nuance of these narratives and what the differences between, as well as the similarities across stories, might tell us. I was interested in learning about the factors individual's perceived as facilitative, or not, to their progression through education so far and in relation to their aspirations going forward. I wanted to explore why facilitating factors were present for some, and not for others, or in what ways, and why, individual's perceptions of facilitative factors differed. Narrative allowed for this exploration and differentiation.

### **3.5 Philosophical Approach and Methodology**

This research is underpinned by constructionism (Smith, 2016). Within "**epistemological constructionism**...it is accepted that [whilst] physical things exist, psycho-social phenomena are multiple, created and dependent on us, as opposed to existing independently of human conceptions and interpretations" (Smith, 2016, p.204). Suggesting that *meaning*, or 'sensemaking' (Weick, 1995) of a situation or *thing*, is unique to each individual, given that it is shaped by their own experience and interactions with and within the world. A constructionist view discounts notions of one *truth* or *reality*, instead believing that there are as many realities and truths as there are individuals within the world. This rejection of an objective *real* or *truth* (Maxwell, 2004) justifies a more qualitative, interpretivist, approach to inquiry, that seeks to elicit

and understand the meaning that different individuals place upon *events and happenings* within their lives (McAdams, 1998, p.1).

This is not to say that there is no shared understanding in relation to collective experiences; the 'social', in *social* constructionism, speaks directly to the idea that meaning is constructed through our social interactions with others (Burr, 2003). Narrative Constructionism simply foregrounds the role of language and communication within this social learning and understanding (Esin et al., 2014; Sparkes & Smith, 2008); suggesting that the sharing of stories is a natural means of human connection and communication and means of generating shared understanding (Smith, 2016). The nature of storytelling ensures that these shared ideals and experiences are passed down between generations (Smith, 2016), which might offer some explanation as to why and how dominant narratives persist overtime. Here, storytelling is brought to the fore, in having an active role in shaping both individual and collective understanding and sensemaking of the world and our experiences, and place, within it (Sharp, Bye & Cusick, 2018).

"[T]he stories that people tell are constructed from resources that emerge outside them and these stories need to be considered as culturally and relationally constructed, as partly manifested in types of narratives that surround them within culture and relationships rather than inside their minds" (Smith, 2016, p.205).

For this research, as well as shining a light on the nuanced experiences of individual YP from low-SEBs, there is also an interest in considering the "similarities and differences" across stories, that may "provide greater insight and understanding of the topic" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.20). These similarities and differences may point to aspects to consider, when seeking to support the journey of YP from low-SEBs into



HE; thus, making change possible and feeding into new, alternative narrative for YP from low-SEBs.

### **3.6 Data-Collection and Analysis**

The aim of this research is to both share the unique stories of YP from low-SEBs and to explore the “commonalities and contrasts [that exist across them]” (Sharp, 2018); as such this enquiry and analysis has been guided by Polkinghorne’s (1995) Narrative Analysis. This approach was adopted, not only because it allowed me to look at the nuance of individual stories and compare these for greater insight, but also because it offered some clear direction where there is otherwise much creativity, but also confusion in narrative research (Smith, 2016; Sharp, Bye & Cusick, 2018). Where Robson (2016) suggests that narrative research can be considered a ‘family of approaches’ (p.373), Reissman (2008) stresses that “[a]s in all families, there is conflict and disagreement among those holding different perspectives” (p.151). On trying to navigate all the possible options for “*doing analysis*” (Smith, 2016, p.203), it became apparent that “[t]here is no set approach to undertaking a narrative inquiry...[and] limited detailed accounts of the actual techniques and processes undertaken during the analysis phase of narrative inquiry” (Sharp, Bye & Cusick, 2018, p.862).

With a want to do my ethical best with the stories I would elicit, and a further desire to use these stories collectively to make a case, albeit not generalisable (Thomas, 2017), for how YP from low-SEBs might be better supported in education, I arrived at Polkinghorne’s (1995) Narrative Analysis approach as best fit. This approach has also been adopted by some more recent research that reassured me of its continued applicability within the field of narrative inquiry (Sharp, 2018; Petty, 2016,

2018). This approach to analysis is outlined under the headings that follow, as are the methods utilised for data-collection.

### **3.7 A Note on Terminology**

Given the emphasis that has already been placed on the role of language and meaning, it is important to acknowledge that there is a debate, within the narrative tradition, around whether ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ hold the same meaning – often being used interchangeably. Sharp, Bye and Cusick (2018), align themselves with many other researchers in stating that these terms, today at least, refer to the same thing. Reissman (2008) suggests that this simply acknowledges “contemporary conventions” (p.7) in language use, which given the emphasis on meaning as being socially constructed, feels appropriate. Even where authors stress a separation of these terms, with stories belonging to individuals, and narratives considered “a resource that culture and social relations make available” to individuals (Smith, 2016, p.204), there is still an acceptance that these concepts are related (Sharp, Bye & Cusick, 2018). This speaks to how intertwined our stories become with wider narratives, and for me, further justifies why the terms can acceptably be used interchangeably.

### **3.8 Narrative Inquiry**

A narrative approach to research endeavours to elicit individual’s subsequent sensemaking; it concerns itself with *what* meanings are arrived at, and *how* this knowledge came to be (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004; Smith, 2016). Attention is afforded to the events and happenings that the individual brings to the fore in their story; these are understood to be significant and to hold meaning (Elliott, 2005; Labov & Waletzky, 1967), for how they “make sense of themselves and their lives” (Ylijoki, 2001, p.22). Naturally, these key events and significant happenings span the life course, and offer

opportunities for meaning-making to be challenged or confirmed. This speaks to the idea that meaning is malleable and subject to change over time; like all good stories, plot twists and character development are to be expected (Sharp, 2018). This sense of development over time, both of the story and author/actor, is central to narrative inquiry, with Elliott (2005) emphasising temporality to be an essential aspect. The focus on the development of meaning and meaning-makers over time was fundamental to this research; I wanted to elicit and understand what happenings and events, interactions or relationships lead to the participants being enabled to access post-16 and apply for HE, despite the wider narrative of low aspirations associated with YP from low-SEBs.

Given the age and stage of the students I spoke to, and again the remit of narrative research to also offer space to think about what one's future might look like, I also hoped that this narrative research would enable participants to celebrate "what they are and where they are headed" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.14). Aside from this future focus facilitating some sense of an ending in these stories, that in real-time, will of course run on; Atkinson (1998) also stresses that narrative sharing has the propensity to bring about benefits such as: "perspective", and a "greater sense of meaning in one's life"; "self-awareness and self-esteem"; "validation of experience" and "inner peace"; "a catalyst for desired change"; and "a sense of how one wants their story to end, and how this might be achieved" (p.25). All of which felt important given the aims of this research and the milestone moment in which it was taking place for participants.

### ***3.8.1 Active Interviewing (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) and Mapping the Journey of Life (Denborough, 2014)***

Given the aims of this research and use of a narrative approach, a qualitative method was appropriate in assisting the inquiry. Holding the belief that we should all

be the authors of our own story (Denborough, 2014) I was keen to adopt active interviewing within this narrative inquiry (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). This approach to interviewing has been used in similar narrative enquiries (Sharp, Bye & Cusick, 2018) and invites the researcher to think about the role of interviewing, its purpose and process a little differently:

“Thinking about the interview as being “active” is somewhat unconventional. Typically, we approach the interview as a neutral means of extracting information. Interviewers ask questions. Respondents provide answers. The interview process is merely the conduit between the two participants” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004, p.140).

On the contrary, Holstein and Gubrium (2004) argue that interviews are far more active in reality, not least because of the inevitable interactive nature of them. Interviews consist of an interviewer and interviewee, and as such, no matter how structured the interaction might be, there is an interaction (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004). “In simple terms, interviewing provides a way of generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives. In this respect, interviews are special forms of conversation” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004, pp.140-141). Conversation, being very much a hallmark of social interaction, might suggest that interviews are not only interactional, but also have a transactional quality (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004). To view an interview interaction in this way accepts that the interviewer has as active a role in contributing to the data that emerges from the interview as the interviewee:

“Treating the interview as a social encounter in which knowledge is actively constructed suggests the possibility that the interview is not so much a neutral conduit or source of distortion, but rather a site of, and occasion for, producing reportable knowledge” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004, p.141).

Here I acknowledge my own part in shaping the stories, not least through my interaction with participants, but also through the use of a narrative therapy activity that guided our conversations, albeit loosely. The use of Mapping the Journey of Life,

a narrative therapy tool by Denborough (2014), also facilitated recording individual's stories in real time with them; using a visual representation that enabled them to see what was being recorded and flag up any misinterpretations. This visual, after being transformed into a computerised image, would later be gifted to participants – both to enable further checking that I had understood their story correctly, and as a reminder of what they shared, and celebrated, in interview. The visual map gifted to participants illustrated all they had achieved, captured their aspirations for the future and their ideas around what might facilitate these, given everything they have learned because of their journey so far (as promoted by Atkinson, 1998). The narrative therapy activity enabled the elicitation of a life over time, which is illustrated both in the visual provided under Figure 1 and the process facilitating completion of this map (detailed in Table 1 beneath it). The other, and by no means lesser, benefit of using this visual tool from narrative therapy was in acknowledgement of the sensitive nature of discussing one's socioeconomic standing in society; and this is something that will be returned to under Section 3.11 (particularly within table 5).

### ***3.8.2 The Mapping the Journey of Life Activity (Denborough, 2014) and Narrative Inquiry***

The use of Mapping the Journey of Life (Denborough, 2014) was felt to be a good fit for this narrative inquiry. The research sought to develop a deeper understanding of personal experiences over a life course, that participants felt had fed into their attainment and aspirations to apply for HE (the denouement). The Mapping of the Journey of Life tool enabled various aspects of participants lives to be explored. It would prompt conversation around what participant's community was like, their experiences in their earliest years and the relationships that felt most important to them. In line with Bronfenbrenner's (2001) bioecological systems theory, the

theoretical lens that lends itself to this research, the mapping activity enabled exploration of different influences and interactions within an individual's life and across eco-systems. Participants would be urged to reflect on their home life, their place within the community, their experiences throughout schooling and their relationships within these environments. These felt key owing to the focus on socio-economic backgrounds. The narrative tool prompted conversation around all aspects of an individual's life, as well as enabling a chronological account of what happened when. A focus on eliciting the temporal aspects of a narrative enabled a consideration of how events and experiences fit together and what this might mean for the future. The tool further urged participants to think about themselves, their character, their achievements and aspirations as they understand them, in relation to, or separate from their context. The Mapping the Journey of Life tool was therefore thought to lend itself to the research aims, questions and theoretical position inherent within this narrative research.

The use of this tool was also felt to uphold ethical foundations that embodied and reflected my intentions as a researcher. As a narrative therapeutic approach, it would enable me to ensure a strengths-based and empowering exploration of YP stories, past, present and future. The sharing of individual maps with participant's afterwards, enabled them to validate the data being foreground, and ensure that it was representative of their life journey, experiences and aspirations as they perceived them. This validation would be important in enabling the elevation of YP voice in line with the aims of this research. The creation of maps to be gifted (and checked) was therefore an important part of data-collection and validation. Empowering and ensuring participant voice in the interview process was paramount, in line with narrative research. I feel my role as an 'insider' (being a student of a low-SEB myself) enabled

me to 'connect' and make 'comfortable' the participants. I believe this subsequently enabled them to share their stories with me (Ross, 2017, p.328).

“[I]nsider role status frequently allows researchers more rapid and more complete acceptance by their participants. Therefore, participants are typically more open with researchers so that there may be a greater depth to the data gathered” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p.58).

Whilst the insider role, and use of a narrative therapy tool, enabled me to thoughtfully elicit participants stories, the process of validation was important in avoiding the pitfalls of insider research (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). The debate between insider and outsider research has long since been a topic of interest, and sometimes divide, within the social sciences (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Ross, 2017). Researchers acknowledging an insider position have been criticised for the influence and bias this might bring to their research, particularly with regard interpretation of the data (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Ross, 2017). However, as Dwyer and Buckle (2009) acknowledge, “being an outsider does not create immunity to the influence of personal perspective” (p.59). It is rather, a matter of reflexivity in research, being minded to one’s position and the implications this might have (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009):

“Being a member of the group under investigation does not unduly influence the process in a negative way. Disciplined bracketing and detailed reflection on the subjective research process, with a close awareness of one’s own personal biases and perspectives, might well reduce the potential concerns associated with insider membership.” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p.59).

Part of being minded to my own story and the influence this might hold, was in creating my own map and subsequent story (Appendix 12). The creation of my own map also helped me to appreciate how the process might feel for participants, which was of ethical import. Reflecting on my own experiences through the mapping process allowed me to sense-make my own story. Furthermore, the process helped me to

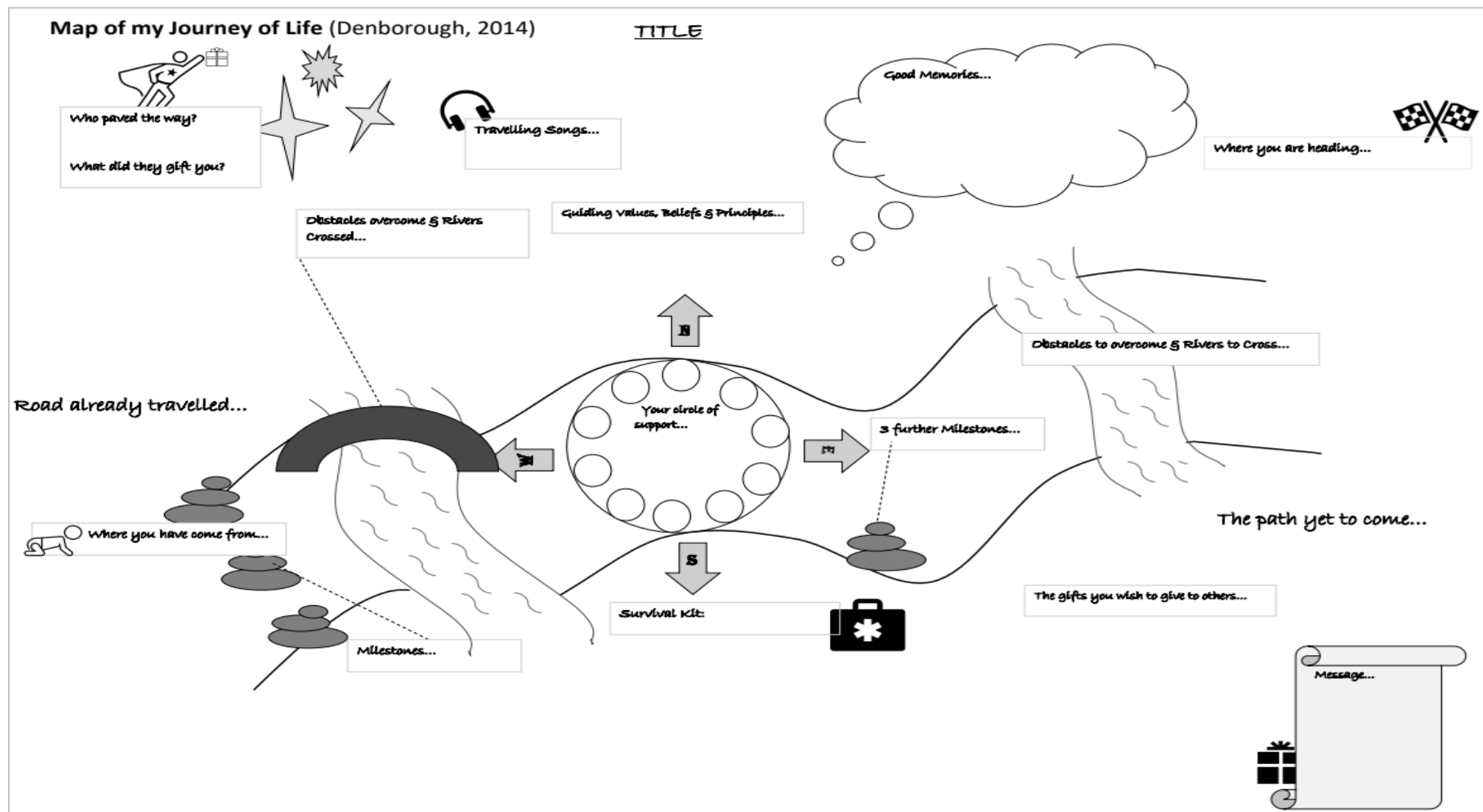
acknowledge how my experiences may shape this sense-making. This acknowledgment would be important in my being minded to how this may further threaten the analysis of participant stories. The creation of my own map and subsequent story was therefore an important step in my situating myself within the research (Ely et al., 1991). The sharing of my story (Appendix 12) further offers the reader the opportunity “to decide if my insider status improve[d] or impede[d] my ability to carry out the study” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p.56).

In the interests of building ‘rapport’ with participants (Ross, 2017), so they would feel able to share their stories, I would share my own map with them. Sharing my own story in this way felt important in creating the necessary safe space for discussing a topic as sensitive as low-SEB. I wanted to ensure that participants felt reassured that I would have some of my own understanding and experience, and maybe even be able to relate to their experiences of being from a low-SEB (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Whilst this perhaps speaks to an assumption that we will have shared experiences and understanding (in line with a constructionist epistemology), the sharing of my own map also enabled me to illustrate the uniqueness of my story. Highlighting the nuance of my own experience would be important in emphasising the expectation that their own map will be unique to them. To further press the importance of this, and try to avoid influencing their own narratives, as far as possible, the ‘Charter of Storytelling Rights’ (Denborough, 2014, pp.8-9) was also shared. The sharing of the Charter of Storytelling Rights would promote participants to take authorship of their own stories, whether this was similar or different to my own: i.e., “Article 1. Everyone has the right to define their experiences and problems in their own words and terms” (Denborough, 2014, pp.8-9).



The use of a narrative therapy tool was integral to ensuring that the research, and I as researcher, remained ethical and importantly, reflexive. Reflexivity, the mindedness of my own story and sense-making, is what I believe enabled the benefits of being an insider, whilst also being mindful of the pitfalls (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

**Figure 1.** Mapping the Journey of Life visual adapted from Denborough, 2014, p.133



**Table 1:** Mapping the Journey of Life process and questions to facilitate interview (adapted from Denborough, 2014)

<b>Preparing for interview / Mapping the Journey of Life activity (Denborough, 2014)</b>	
Examples of 'Getting to know you' / rapport building questions (further examples can be seen in my AER, 2022, in Appendices: )	<p>How has your day been so far?</p> <p>What would you normally be doing if you weren't here with me right now?</p> <p>Do you have any hobbies? What are they?</p> <p>What do you like to do in your spare time?</p>
Environmental / comfort checking questions / reassurance (further examples can be seen in my AER, 2022, in Appendices: )	<p>Are you comfortable? (Too hot? Too cold? Have the refreshments you need?)</p> <p>Check that participants know where the nearest restroom facilities are and reiterate a rough idea of how long the interview and activity might last (this will have already been broached through the recruitment process). Reiterate the participants right to leave, stop the process, and /or withdraw from the study.</p>
Explain the aims of the research study, illustrated through the sharing of my own story, which will also illuminate the process to be expected.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Explain the aim(s) of the research</li> <li>- Share my own story via talking through my own 'Map of Journey of my Life' (Denborough, 2014) (My 'Map of my Journey of Life' can be found in the original AER, 2022 – Appendices: ). In sharing my own <i>Map</i>/story I hope to inspire confidence in participants to do the same as well as talk them through the process / what they can expect.</li> </ul>

Share the 'Charter of Storytelling Rights' (Denborough, 2014, pp.8-9) and check / go through consent form together.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Share the 'Charter of Storytelling Rights' (Denborough, 2014, pp.8-9) discussing / drawing attention to each article as necessary (The 'Charter of Storytelling Rights' is detailed in Appendix 7).</li> <li>- Check in on consent forms already completed, and ensure consent still remains in place /or, go through the consent form with the participant there and then – ensuring consent is willingly given and informed.</li> </ul>
<b>Core interview/ activity schedule:</b> <i>NB. The following questions will support movement through the Mapping of the Journey of Life activity (Denborough, 2014)</i>	
Part of the Mapping of the Journey of Life activity (Denborough, 2014)	Questions to facilitate a focus on 'events and happenings' (Sharp, Bye & Cusick, 2018, p.864; McAdams, 1998, p.1), context and consequential relations/interactions:
Part One – Looking Back (Denborough, 2014)	<p>The following questions / prompts, quoted directly from Denborough (2014, pp.133-135), were to be <b>loosely</b> used to direct the conversation between Interviewer and Interviewee:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Where You Have Come From? At the starting point of the path, note where you have come from. Include such things as places, ancestors, culture, language, and/or spirituality... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who travelled first to make it possible for you to start this journey?</li> <li>• What are the gifts that they gave you that you are carrying with you on this journey?</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Your circle of support:</li> </ol>

	<p>Who are your companions on this journey (alive or in your heart)? These might be individuals, or they might be groups, communities, or organisations...In the circle that you drew initially at the midpoint of the path, write the names of everyone you have chosen. If you like, you may paste in photos or draw pictures of them. This is your “circle of support”.</p> <p>3. Values, Beliefs, and Principles:</p> <p>Around the circle of support, write down some of the key values, beliefs, and principles that guide you on the journey of life. These values are like our compass. They guide us on our journey. Where or whom have they come from?</p> <p>4. Favourite Places:</p> <p>Along the road that you have already travelled, draw or list some of the favourite places you have been on your journey so far?</p> <p>5. Milestones:</p> <p>Along the road already travelled, what are some the key things you have already accomplished on this journey? Draw two of these. How were these things accomplished? Who played a part?</p> <p>6. Obstacles Overcome and Rivers Crossed:</p> <p>Along the road already travelled, draw rocks (or a mountain) and a river to symbolise two obstacles that you (or you and your circle of support) have <i>already</i> overcome on your journey of life. Indicate how you overcame, avoided, or got around the obstacles and how you crossed the river. How did you do this? Who helped?</p> <p>7. Survival Kit:</p>
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	<p>Toward the top of the page, draw your survival kit. Within it, write down what helped you during difficult times. What things have you turned to for strength? These could be values, skills, people, customs, beliefs, proverbs, songs, and so forth.</p> <p><b>Additional interview questions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Tell me more about where you grew up? What's the community like? Do you feel you are a part of a community?</li> <li>- What do you consider to have been your first key educational experience? What role has this played in your life?</li> </ul>
Part Two - Looking Forward (Denborough, 2014)	<p>The following questions / prompts, quoted directly from Denborough (2014, pp.133-135), were to be <b>loosely</b> used to direct the conversation between Interviewer and Interviewee:</p> <p>Now it is time to look toward the future-the "path yet to come."</p> <p>1. Where You Are Heading:</p> <p>Toward the end of the path yet to come, write down some of your hopes, dreams and wishes. These might be for yourself, your friends, your community, or the next generation. How long have you had these hopes, dreams and wishes? How have you held onto them? Who has helped?</p> <p>2. Places you wish to see:</p>

	<p>Along the path yet to come, name some places you (or other people in your circle of support) wish to see on the rest of your journey of life. These might also be places you wish to show others.</p> <p>3. Things You Wish to Make Happen:</p> <p>Look back at some of the milestones you have already achieved and then, along the path yet to come, mark three future milestones you and your circle of support are aiming for. These should be achievable steps-things you wish to make happen. Include one in relation to your own life, one for your community, and one for the next generation.</p> <p>4. Gifts You Wish to Give Others:</p> <p>Look back to some of the gifts you identified as having been given to you and then mark on your future path some gifts you wish to give or share with others. Alternatively, perhaps there are things that you were not given in your life that you would like to pass on to others.</p> <p>5. Obstacles to Overcome and Rivers to Cross:</p> <p>Along the path yet to come, draw a rock (or mountain) to symbolise one obstacle that you (or others you care about) may face in the future and one river that you may have to cross. How will you be able to tell when these obstacles are coming up? How will you and your circle of support try to avoid, get around or overcome these difficulties? (refer back to survival kit for ideas...)</p> <p>6. Travelling Songs:</p> <p>What songs will you/ your circle of support be singing or playing as you travel forward? Mark along the side of your path the songs you will be taking with you. Why these particular songs? What do they mean to you?</p>
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	<p><b>Additional interview questions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Tell me more about your hopes, dreams and wishes...What role might education play?</li> <li>- Does your history, path already travelled, determine/affect your path going forward? How? Why?</li> <li>- What part might education have to play in your future / path not yet travelled?</li> </ul>
Part Three: Looking Down at Your Journey (Like an Eagle) (Denborough, 2014)	<p>The following questions / prompts, quoted directly from Denborough (2014, pp.133-135), were to be <b>loosely</b> used to direct the conversation between Interviewer and Interviewee:</p> <p>1. Good Memories: As you move along the path yet to come, what are some good memories that you will take with you into the future? Draw these as stars along your journey. Describe these good memories. Include the sounds, sights, tastes, touches, or smells they are associated with. Who played a part in these memories? How and when do you remember these times? Why is each of these memories important to you? What does it offer to you and your circle of support? What will it continue to offer in the future?</p> <p>2. Naming your Journey: Give your path a name to symbolise what this Journey of Life means to you.</p> <p>3. A Message to Others:</p>



	<p>Look back over everything that you have spoken about. If you were to share a message, a proverb, a story, or a song to a younger person just starting out on their journey, what would it be? What is one lesson you have learned that you would like to pass on to others?</p> <p><b>Additional interview questions/prompts:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Pull out educational/school memories as well as memories pertaining to their wider context...</li></ul>
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### **3.8.3 *Transcription of Active Interview Data***

As the schedule in figure 1 above indicates these were in-depth interviews. Aside from visually recording the life events and happenings shared in real time onto a paper version of the map for participants to be able to follow, celebrate and challenge as necessary; interviews were also recorded using a Dictaphone. One pilot interview was carried out online using Microsoft Teams video conferencing software. In this instance the visual was shared on the screen and completed by myself as researcher/interviewer, in view of the participant on screen in much the same way. The offer for online interviews was available to all interviewees in the interests of avoiding costly travel for students if preferable; this is discussed more under Section 3.11 – ethical considerations. When the audio file for one interview, that had taken place in person was lost due to difficulties with technology, a further online session took place to recapture as much of the story the participant shared as possible; the use of the assistive visual map drawn in real time helped this process, given that it provided a written record of what had been shared within the initial interview. This unfortunate loss of data, and the choice to try and recreate and include the YPs story will be discussed further under Section 3.11 – ethical considerations.

In the case of the online interactions using Microsoft Teams video conferencing software, there was the option to both audio-record the interview and to have the system itself transcribe what was said. All audio recordings were listened to and checked against pre-recorded transcripts (in the case of online interviews) or dictated through Microsoft Word Software and similarly checked to ensure transcripts were captured verbatim. These transcripts facilitated the process of narrative analysis that is described in the following section.

As earlier outlined, the visual representations of the interviews, as facilitated by Denborough's (2014) Mapping of the Journey of Life, were transformed by myself, the researcher, into a computerised image that was then shared with participants. This would serve both as a record of our interactive interview and as a keepsake of the story of their life so far and their hopes and dreams for the future. Each participant's anonymised map can be found in the appendices (Appendix 1, 2, 3 and 4).

### **3.9 Narrative Analysis**

Narrative analysis differs from other forms of qualitative analysis, in that it seeks to "synthesiz[e]...the data rather than...separate...it into its constituent parts" (Polkinghorne, 2006, p.15). The task of the researcher is to craft a thoughtful, but sensible narrative from data that might otherwise feel dispersed, or disjointed (Polkinghorne, 2006; Sharp, 2018). As with all qualitative inquiry, a wealth of rich data is sought and collected and it remains the job of the researcher to decide which data suitably addresses the research aims and questions (Polkinghorne, 2006). Deciding what data will feature in a narrative account, and the part it will play, is complex: there is both a responsibility to give voice to, what appears to be foregrounded by the participant themselves, in terms of "how and why a particular outcome came about" (Polkinghorne, 2006, p.19); whilst at the same time drawing on knowledge from the disciplinary field within which the research is grounded to offer a theoretically plausible story (Polkinghorne, 2006). Whilst the latter prescribes a positionality of narrator to the researcher, the former acknowledges that active interviewing within the data-collection process should have ensured an understanding of "the thoughts and plans of the protagonist" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.19), so that these can equally feature. In this research, the use of Denborough's (2014) Mapping the Journey of Life, provided an

opportunity for myself as researcher to start thinking about possible plots, and to check these out, ensuring plausibility, with participants directly. These maps assisted in capturing, meaningful events and key happenings, that then informed a possible plot; however, the final narratives required a deeper dive into the data to facilitate further formulations as to how certain events and happenings contributed to the stories denouement (Polkinghorne, 1995).

For this research, the plans of the participant around potential enrolment to HE, provide the all-important denouement (Polkinghorne, 1995). This denouement, or outcome, provides a starting point, or “lens” (Sharp, 2018, p.132) through which the researcher can make sense of the further retrospective data collected (Polkinghorne, 1995). The inclusion of data that supports the development and sensemaking of this denouement speaks to the process of *narrative smoothing* (Spence, 1986):

“The configuration...[of the data]...cannot impose just any emplotted order... The final story must fit the data while at the same time bringing an order and meaningfulness that is not apparent in the data themselves” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.16).

This order speaks to the temporal quality of narrative analysis, which in this research, was again, aided using the Mapping the Journey of Life tool (Denborough, 2014) during data-collection. This process of narrative smoothing and the crafting of a plot, which in the narrative field is termed ‘emplotment’ (Polkinghorne, 1988 & 1995; Mischler, 1995, Petty, 2018) can be likened to Bruner’s (1991) notion of Story Making. This process speaks to the final criterion in Polkinghorne’s (1995) “seven criteria for judging a life history” (p.16) as reworked from Dollard (1935), and outlined within the table below:

**Table 2:** The Seven Criteria for Judging a Life History adapted from Polkinghorne (1995)

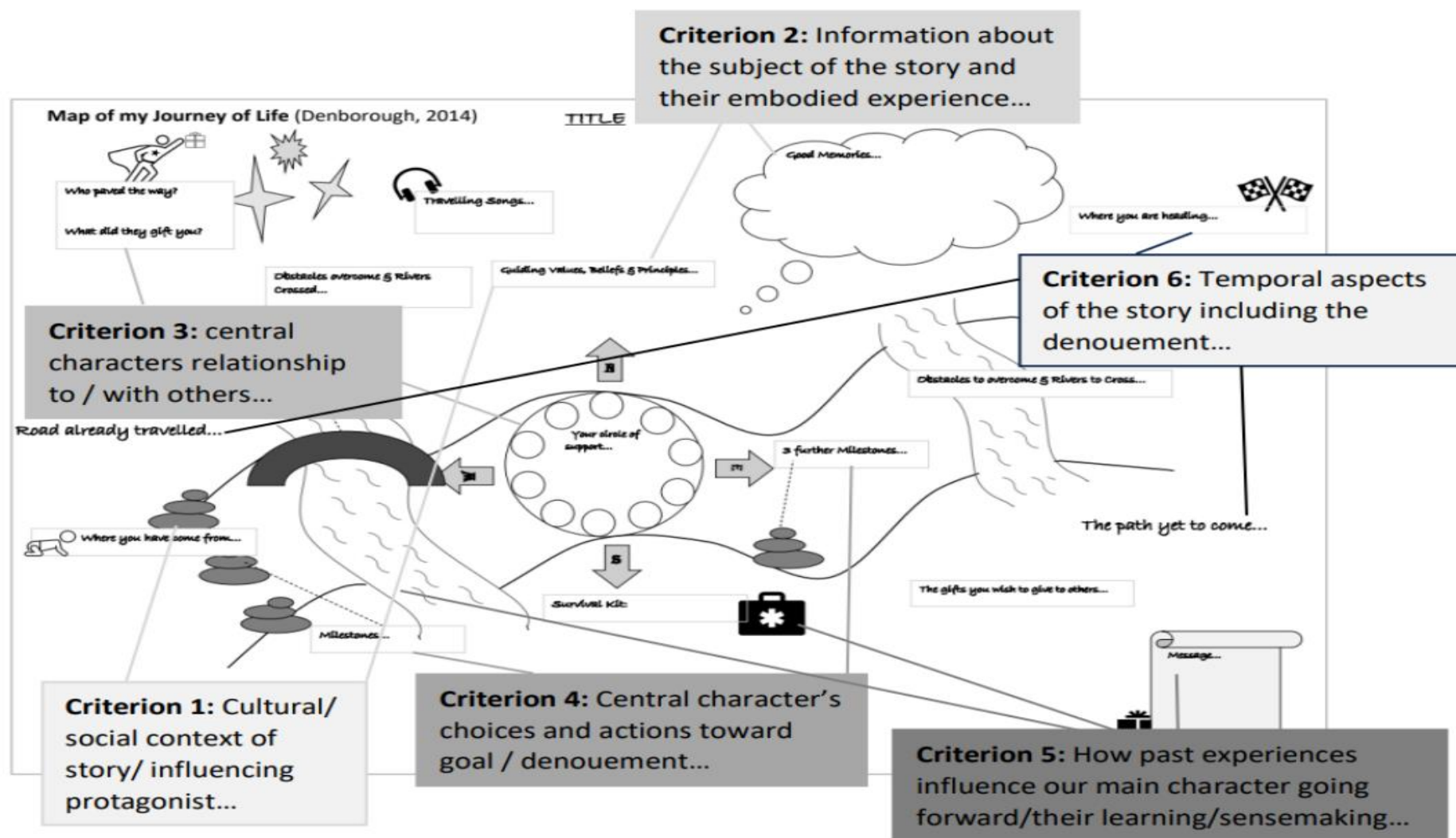
Number of criterion and qualitative label:	Criterion description:
<b>Criterion 1 -</b> Cultural / social context	<p>“The researcher must include descriptions of the cultural context in which the storied case study takes place” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.16).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ascertaining and accounting for the role of the participants <i>cultural context</i> and <i>environmental presses</i> is important given the constructionist philosophy underpinning this research; the all-important understanding that an individual’s experience and understanding of <i>events and happenings</i> will invariably be impacted by their social interactions and situations (Polkinghorne, 1995).</li> </ul>
<b>Criterion 2 –</b> Information about the subject of the story and their embodied experience	<p>“In gathering and configuring the data into a story, the researcher also needs to attend to the embodied nature of the protagonist. The incarnate nature of human existence locates the person spatially and temporally” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.17).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In this research the embodied aspect of participants in their stories is important. It speaks to experiences of travel and movement, developmental differences, welfare and wellness over time.</li> </ul>
<b>Criterion 3 –</b> Central character’s relationship to / with others	<p>“In developing the story’s setting, the researcher needs to be mindful not only of the general cultural environment and the person as embodied, but also of the importance of significant other people in affecting the actions and goals of the protagonist” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.17).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The social constructionist underpinnings of this research further imply a focus on social relationships with others central to the individuals story – be these</li> </ul>

	characters supporters or <i>antagonists</i> to the <i>protagonist</i> (Polkinghorne, 1995).
<b>Criterion 4 –</b> Central character's choices and actions toward goal denouement	<p>“The story is about the central character and movement toward an outcome. The researcher needs to concentrate on the choices and actions of this central person...his or her plans, purposes, motivations, and interests” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.17).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Here, again, Polkinghorne (1995), stresses the role of the setting in shaping certain decisions, actions and interests, but also emphasises the role of the participant as an “actor who alters the scene” (p.17). Polkinghorne (1995) stresses that “[t]he story needs to describe the interaction between this particular protagonist and the setting” (p.17). This will inevitably focus on the emotions and characteristics of the protagonist, that equally propel the plot to its denouement.</li> </ul>
<b>Criterion 5 –</b> How past experiences influence our main character going forward / their learning / sensemaking  Including aspirations for the future	<p>In constructing the story, the researcher needs to consider the historical continuity of the characters. People are historical beings retaining as part of themselves their previous experiences...Although a person's past experiences persevere into the present, they do not necessarily determine future actions” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.17).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Again, Polkinghorne (1995) pays particular attention to the cultural context, social interactions and embodied experiences within a given environment, in constructing and understanding the narratives of individuals, and particularly how these develop and change over time.</li> </ul>
<b>Criterion 6 –</b> Temporal aspects of the story including the	<p>“The outcome of a narrative analysis is the generation of a story. A story requires a bounded temporal period; that is, it needs a beginning, middle, and end...The power of a storied outcome is derived from its presentation of a distinctive</p>

denouement and in this case, thoughts around the future also	<p>individual, in a unique situation, dealing with issues in a personal manner” (Polkinghorne, 1995, pp.17-18).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- This focus on nuance, difference and uniqueness firmly situates narrative analysis within the qualitative camp. Whilst the temporal aspect – what happened when, to who, how and why - speaks further to both the process of constructing a story and again the constructionist underpinnings.</li> </ul>
<b>Criterion 7 –</b> How events and happenings culminate in the story’s denouement: emplotment	<p>“This final guideline concerns the need for the researcher to provide a story line or plot that serves to configure or compose the disparate data elements into a meaningful explanation of the protagonist's responses and actions...The story is a reconstruction of a series of events and actions that produced a particular outcome” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.18).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- This process has already been highlighted outside of this table, and speaks to the construction of a logical sequence of <i>events and happenings</i>, and the participants interpretation and understanding of these; considering “[h]ow...[an] outcome came about; what events and actions contributed to this solution?” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.18).</li> </ul>

Criterion 1 through 6 are reflected in the Mapping of the Journey of Life tool/activity (Denborough, 2014) used at data-collection, as alluded to earlier and illustrated in the image below (Figure 2).

**Figure 2:** How Polkinghorne's (1995) criteria map onto Denborough's (2014) Mapping the Journey of Life tool



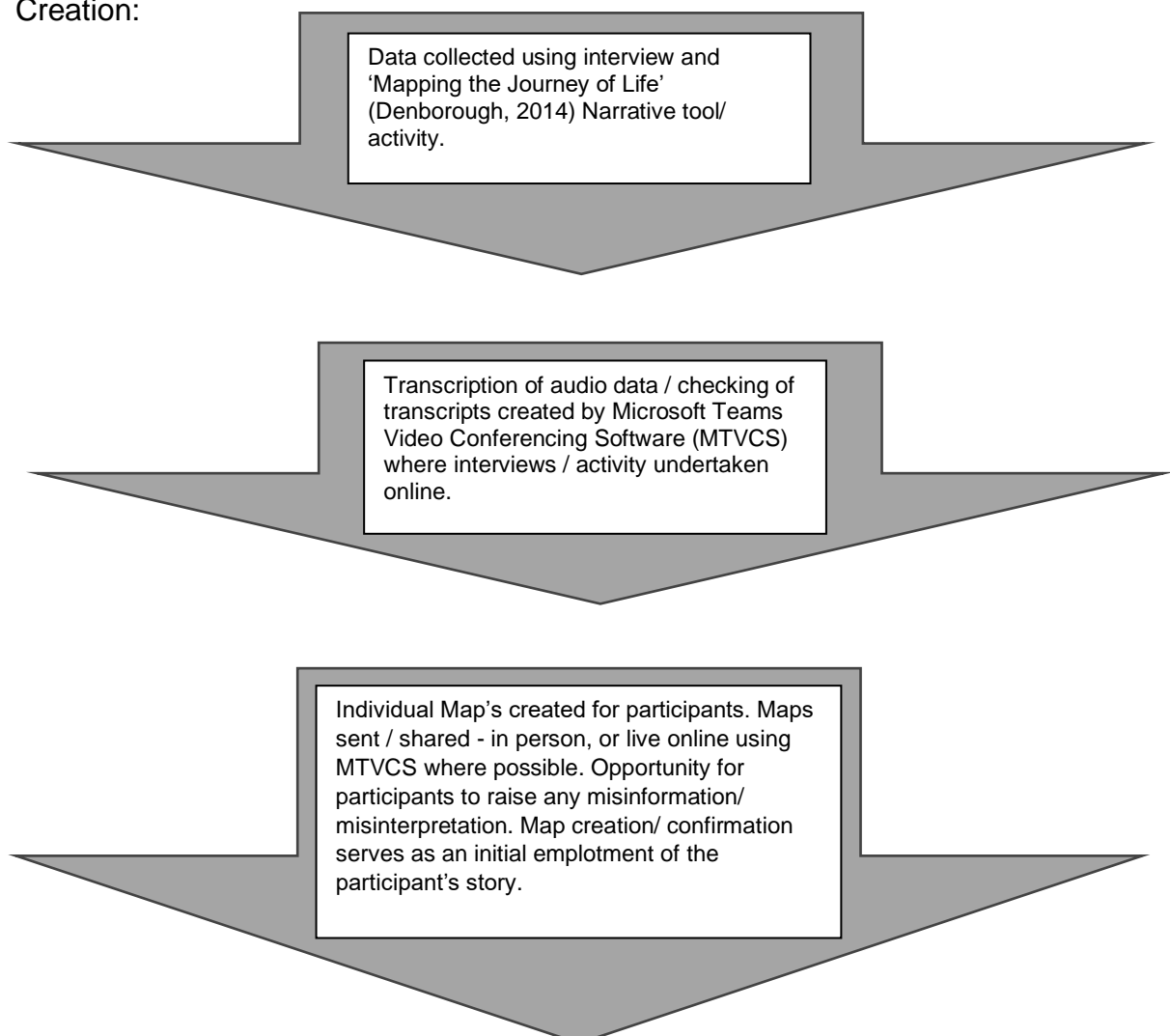


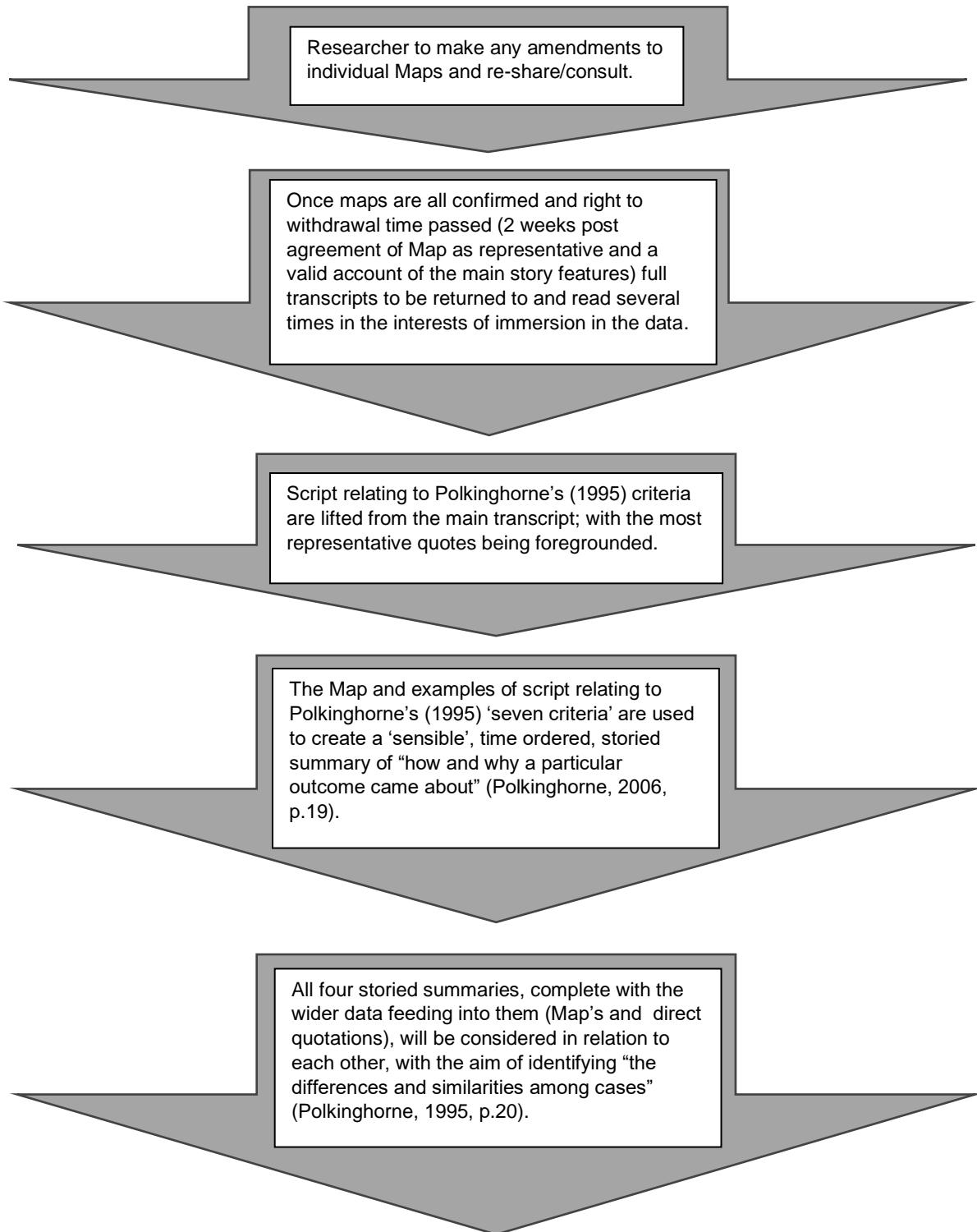
The processes of emplotment and narrative smoothing inherent in criterion 7, will be actively applied in the final creation of a summarised story that makes sense; i.e., where the denouement can be understood in the context of the events and happenings leading up to it, with the participant/protagonist's active role, their choices and actions being equally present (Polkinghorne, 1995). Ultimately, all seven criteria were used in the crafting and checking of individual narratives and considered in the writing of the "commentary chapter in which the differences and similarities among cases is highlighted...provid[ing] greater insight and understanding of the topic" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.20).

With due consideration to Polkinghorne's (1995) seven criteria detailed above, the process of data-collection and analysis is akin to that displayed in the below flow diagram (Figure 3). This process speaks to a similar method that was drawn up by Emden (1998) for her narrative research; Emden wished to apply a methodical and replicable method to data-analysis and the creation of a story that drew on Polkinghorne's (1995) principles. Emden (1998) coined the term Core Story Creation to capture this process. This process has been adapted and applied in the later research of Kelly and Howie (2007) and Petty (2016; 2018). While my process is not precisely the same, given that I wanted to make my use of Polkinghorne's (1995) seven criteria more explicit, it draws on similar actions to "re-order the raw data into an altered form" (Petty, 2018). The practical process of core story creation would see the contributions of the interviewer deleted from the original transcript, alongside perceived "unnecessary words or sentences that detract from the key idea" (Petty, 2018) of the plot. Rather than delete data from the original transcript, I have lifted key quotes and sections of script spoken by the participant and mapped these against Polkinghorne's seven criteria. This ensures that all the key elements are there for the

creation of a considered story, whilst also foregrounding the participant's voice in my (the researcher and narrator's) mind. Polkinghorne's (1995) sixth criterion include a focus on temporality that enables the chronological ordering of key events and significant happenings to further aid the process of emplotment in the creation of a summarised story. The process of mapping against this criterion and the creation of individual maps for participants prior to this (which also speaks to Petty's notion of 'verification'; 2018, p.9) is akin to the process of text-reconfiguration undertaken in Core Story Creation. The process applied in this research, as described here, is further depicted in Figure 3 below.

**Figure 3:** Flow diagram detailing full process of data-collection and analysis – adapted from Polkinghorne's (1995) Narrative Analysis and Emden's (1998) related Core Story Creation:





To elicit the similarities and differences in relation to the research questions, I used the questions offered by Sharpe (2018), in her research that similarly adopted

Polkinghorne's (1995) Narrative Analysis approach; these can be seen in the box below:

**Box 2:** Questions guiding the elicitation of similarities and differences across stories.

"Making comparisons allows incidents within the data to be compared to other incidents in order to group them into categories according to similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Questions the researcher asked of the data to help guide comparisons included "did other participants have a similar experience", "did others report different experiences", and "what seems to be influencing the differences in experience?" (Sharp, 2018, p.134).

In the interests of ensuring that these categories pertaining to similarities and differences remained grounded in the data, participant quotes and story excerpts that are illustrative of these categories were drawn out and are plotted in tables in the appendices (appendix 11). A narrative of these findings is offered within the following findings chapter (chapter 4).

### 3.10 Sampling

"Qualitative research is concerned with in-depth understanding of the issue under examination. It relies heavily on individuals who are able to provide rich accounts of their experiences. For this reason it usually works best with small numbers of individuals. Morse (2006, p. 530, original emphasis) says, 'Qualitative researchers sample for meaning, rather than frequency. We are not interested in how much, or how many, but in what'. Qualitative research aims to examine a 'process' or the 'meanings' that people give to their own social situations. It does not require a generalisation of the findings as in positivist science" (Liamputtong, 2017, p.17).

As the above quote suggests, qualitative research, is typically small-scale. Subedi (2021) suggests that of all qualitative research, narrative recruits the smallest number of participants. Subedi (2021), amongst others (Sarfo et al., 2021) stresses that there is no prescribed sample size for qualitative research, with it rather depending on the scope and design of the study. A few researchers do offer estimates regarding typical sample sizes for the main types of qualitative research, which provide a helpful

starting point. Cresswell (2013) suggests that narrative inquiry will typically look to enlist just “one or two cases...unless developing a collective story” (Guetterman, 2015, p.4). Sarfo et al., (2021) similarly offer:

“Since narrative inquiry seeks to learn more about the narrator’s culture, historical experiences, identity, and lifestyle, the emphasis is not on large sample sizes. As such, many narrative studies focus on one individual, and this individual is selected based on his or her ability to provide an understanding of the issues being addressed” (p.62).

As compelling as the case is for focusing on one narrative alone, I agreed with Vygotsky (1978) who “argued for the need to go beyond the isolated individual when trying to understand human development and functioning” (Moen, 2006, p.59). I wanted to ensure I had enough accounts to evidence and celebrate the nuances within stories, whilst also accounting for the commonalities.

This narrative research would celebrate both the nuances of individual stories (differences) and consider collective experiences (similarities). To look in-depth at individual stories, but also have enough stories to compare for similarities and differences, I looked to recruit between three and five participants. This sample size was in keeping with much of the narrative research I had encountered when reviewing relevant literature/similar studies (i.e., Simon, 2019). Four participants would eventually be recruited, including the pilot participant, which fell between the possible sample size of one to ten offered by Subedi (2021) and as similarly reflected across other systematic reviews (i.e., Guetterman, 2015).

The aim was to explore these participants’ life stories in depth, to dedicate time and space to exploring what factors were perceived to be facilitative in their educational attainment and aspirations for HE over time. The temporal aspect of narrative research and eliciting and understanding the development of the story’s

denouement, requires time and attention, both in terms of data-collection and in-depth analysis (Smith, 2016). This in-depth data-collection and analysis determined a smaller sample size, whilst time frames and word-count restrictions, around this doctoral research, would further warrant this. Arguably, the nature of this research, with its focus on elevating the voice of an underrepresented group in HE, also has a role in limiting access to a relevant sample; only so many post-16 students will identify with the inclusion criteria of this research. Within the extensive LA within which this research is based, there were thirty-two *mainstream* post-16 provisions that could potentially have been approached. Their participation would further have depended on their affiliation with a widening participation initiative, thus having access to students that met the inclusion criteria. I was fortunate that my connection with one sixth form provision within the LA facilitated my access to all participants beyond the pilot participant. This particular provision caters for 149 students overall, with only three of these being put forward for the research on account of their meeting the inclusion criteria and assumed comfort in being approached (as judged by the gatekeeper).

As alluded to above, and given the aim of this research, to challenge the dominant narrative suggestive of low educational attainment and aspirations of students from low-SEB's, a purposive sample would need to be sought; I would need to recruit and speak to students from low-SEB's who have both achieved the qualifications needed to progress to post-16 and who have aspirations (and the necessary qualifications) to continue into HE. As Thomas (2017) suggests, purposive sampling "involves simply the pursuit of the kind of person in whom the researcher is interested, [and] professes no representativeness" (p.142). Again, as highlighted in the opening quote to this section (3.10), and in line with a narrative methodology,

qualitative researchers are less concerned with quantifying data, and more interested in the details of *what* that data might be communicating. A narrative approach was chosen to enable an exploration of nuance and difference between accounts of personal experience and individual influential factors, negating any need to generalise findings, and celebrating uniqueness as well as considering any commonalities. As such it was felt appropriate to conduct this research with 4 participants.

### **3.10.1 Participant Selection and Recruitment**

Inclusion criteria for participation in this narrative research was as outlined in the table below.

**Table 3:** Inclusion criteria for participation in the research

Inclusion criteria:	How determined:
Post-16 (aged 16-25 years) student from a low-socioeconomic background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- YP would be post-16 (aged 16-25) student's engaging with a Widening Participation initiative through their post-16 educational setting.</li> <li>- Student's enrolment on / engagement with this Widening Participation initiative would be resultant of the student's low-socioeconomic status (SES). All Widening Participation initiatives will be different in their approach and eligibility criteria may also differ; however, typically low-SES markers might include a combination of any of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Household income is less than £20,852 per year (£401 per week) (NB. The figure stipulated differs between initiatives and can go up to approximately £42,875 per year)</li> <li>• Successfully claimed 'Free School Meals' for current or previously academic year.</li> <li>• You attend or attended a school or college that performs below the national average at Key Stage 4 or Key Stage 5.</li> <li>• You currently live in a low progression area.</li> <li>• You are the first generation of your immediate family to attend higher education.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Aspirations to continue into Higher Education (HE) with the appropriate qualifications to apply	YP are engaged in post-16 education following successful completion of their GCSE's. YP are in a position to apply for a University place due to their current progression at post-16; this would be determined through the educational setting's gatekeeper (who will already be identifying suitable YP in relation to their enrolment on/engagement with a Widening Participation initiative, as a result of low-SES identifiers). Student's will have declared an interest in applying to University; again the gatekeeper within the post-16 educational setting will be able to identify to which student's this applies.
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The recruitment process originally outlined in my Application for Ethics Review (AER) had to be amended following a failure to make contact with a widening participation body I hoped might act as *gatekeeper* (Denscombe, 2014). After many failed attempts, I secured a pilot participant for the trialling of my interview approach through a connection within the educational psychology service (EPS) where I am placed as a trainee education psychologist (TEP). The pilot participant qualified for the study in terms of meeting the inclusion criteria outlined in Table 3 but was not required to be representative of the sample I might draw from through a potential gatekeeper. The pilot interview went well and the data resulting was rich. This participant was keen to have their data included in the main study, and given that they otherwise qualified for participation, I too wished to action this. At this juncture and given the lack of response from the widening participation body that had been stipulated in my AER, it was decided that I needed to cast the net more widely to recruit participants.

The inclusion criteria would remain the same; i.e., YP would need to be aged between 16-25 years old, and applying or considering applying (therefore able to apply – having the relevant qualifications and residential status, etc.,) to HE. Participants should still be eligible to...[and/or] known (by their setting) to be accessing widening



participation programmes/ initiatives. Similarly, to the sourcing of the pilot participant, participants were sought and recruited via my links with post-16 settings through my work as a TEP. Setting staff were initially contacted as gatekeepers and asked to consult potential participants that meet the inclusion criteria.

Participant information and consents were shared as part of this, before my initial meeting with students one-to-one in setting to introduce myself before interview and to answer any initial questions. The first and only sixth form setting approached agreed to act as gatekeeper, meaning that three participants link with the same setting. Two are enrolled on different courses to each other, with the remaining YP had completed their studies already and was taking a year out before university at the time of interview. More information regarding individual participants is captured in the pen portraits in Table 4 below.

**Table 4:** Participant pen-portraits

<b>John</b>
John attends the sixth form attached to the secondary school he attended. This school and sixth form is in an area situated outside of John's local community where he lives with his parents and siblings. The community where John lives is considered to be an area where there is notably low progression to HE (as measured by the POLAR system which will be outlined in within the following section). John was in year 13 at the time of interview and had been encouraged to apply to undertake a geography degree at a Russell Group university. As part of the application process for this university, John was eligible to join their widening participation programme, which he did.
<b>Matilda</b>
Matilda attends the sixth form attached to the secondary school she attended. Matilda does not live in the exact area but lives near this post-16 provision. Both postcodes are recorded as having low rates of progression to HE according to POLAR. Matilda lives with her grandparents and has done for the majority of her older childhood and young adult life; following removal from her mother and father by social services in her earliest years. Matilda is now studying child development and health and social care at further education level. Matilda funds her studies by working in health and social care part-time, but also benefits from the post-16 bursary fund, as part of her sixth forms widening participation initiative.

<b>Proud</b>
<p>Proud had already completed her post-16 education at the point of interview but was working as a teaching assistant (TA) in the secondary school attached to the sixth form setting she had attended. Proud was still in the 16-19 age bracket at the point of interview and lived with her mother and younger siblings. Proud had applied for university and was taking a year out to save finances for this upcoming venture. Proud had applied to train as a primary school teacher with a specialism in maths. Proud had both been supported by the post-16 bursary fund during her further education (FE) studies, as well as engaging with the better known widening participation programme – HE Plus.</p>
<b>Timothy</b>
<p>Timothy attends the sixth form attached to the secondary school he attended. Timothy was in year 13 at the point of interview and was studying Geography, Core Maths and a more project-based qualification; with a hope to apply for an environmental sciences degree at university. This was Timothy's first choice (but not only) option and would include the opportunity to study or work abroad for a year where possible. Timothy loves the outdoors, which is reflected in his first choice university option, and has a desire to travel. Timothy lives with his mother and sister and is in receipt of the post-16 bursary fund to support his current studies in FE.</p>

### **3.10.2 The Subjective – Objective Debate**

The inclusion criteria outlined within this research raises an interesting dichotomy between objective data and subjective positioning of participants; this is something that transpires within the inquiry itself, and which will be discussed in due course (within the discussion chapter – chapter 5). In line with much research around socioeconomic and/or social-class status I have relied on objective data, such as parental income and demography, i.e., the Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) classification, which “groups areas across the UK based on the proportion of young people who participate in higher education” (Office for National Statistics, 2023). This reliance on hard data, perhaps seems at odds in this piece of research that otherwise sits within a constructionist paradigm. Given what has already been outlined within the literature review regarding subjective notions of relative poverty felt by individuals in a myriad of socioeconomic situations; in taking an objective approach to inclusion criteria and recruitment of participants, I was conscious that this may have been seen to ignore, or worse, discount or discredit these voices.

“Social class and SES need to be considered within the context of the broader social, economic, and political context...Subjective measures are better placed to accomplish this goal than objective measures because they have an intrinsic capacity to assess social class in a contextualized manner. Unlike objective measures, subjective measures do not require pre-established benchmarks against which to interpret different levels of social class or SES (e.g., cutoffs for family income). Instead, respondents are able to reflect on their own internalized standards based on their individual, context-specific experiences and reference groups” (Rubin et al., 2014, p.199).

Whilst this subjective self-assessment feels more in keeping with a narrative inquiry that appreciates how meaning is socially and narratively constructed and influenced by context; it could have had implications for gaining ethical approval and the subsequent timeliness of recruiting participants. Recruiting students that were

already enrolled (or had been recently in the case of Proud) to some kind of widening participation initiative ensured their awareness of their socioeconomic situation and thus, lessened the potential upset that could be caused by approaching someone who would not otherwise identify with this label/characteristic. The timelines associated with this doctoral research would also have made it challenging to wait for self-selecting students to come forward on the back of a blanket recruitment campaign. As Bruce et al., (2016) stress:

“Our experience in launching a narrative study reinforced the emergent, nonlinear, and often messy nature of qualitative inquiry. It also foregrounded how institutional ethics review boards are increasingly calling for predetermined, step-by-step outlines for research projects that can unwittingly constrain emergent approaches” (p.1).

### **3.11 Ethical Considerations and Practical Implications**

Before this research started in earnest it went through the necessary administrative systems to secure ethical approval. Ethics was updated and approved again to reflect changes to the recruitment process a short time into beginning the study (as reflected under Section 3.11) The original AER signed off and later amendment are shared within the appendices (Appendix 5).

Given my role as a TEP I am bound, in all that I do, by the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2021). The below table details how ethical considerations were addressed – both prior to, and in the process of, this narrative inquiry.

**Table 5:** Ethical considerations (planned for and arising) and counter actions:

Ethical consideration	Counter action
Participant's voluntary and informed consent and right to withdraw	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- As post-16 students, falling within the 16–25-year-old age bracket, parental consent was not required for participants. Participants were known to the gatekeeper, who could vouch for their capacity to make their own decisions, i.e., Gillick competence.</li> <li>- Participants would give their own consent. This consent would be informed, with initial information being shared via the gatekeeper and then initial contact being made by myself, as researcher. In the case of the pilot interview, this contact took place over email, whilst further participants were initially met in person for a brief reiteration of the purposes of the research and to answer any questions. In the case of the pilot interview, the consent form was completed in advance of the interview date but checked again at the start and end of the interview. All other participants signed consent at the beginning of their face-to-face interviews, following further reiteration of the research aims and explanation of the processes involved.</li> <li>- Consent was checked again when participants were gifted their map (as Mapping the Journey of Life - Denborough, 2014).</li> <li>- At each point of checking consent, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw.</li> <li>- Following feedback as a result of the initial AER, a time limitation was placed around participants right to withdraw, as stated in the AER: participant's will no longer have the right to withdraw two weeks after receiving the write up/visual representation of their own</li> </ul>

	<p>interpreted story [Mapping the Journey of Life (Denborough, 2014)]; or two weeks after the final rewriting/redrawing of a story if it is revised upon participant request.</p>
<p>Remuneration of participants travel costs / electric/broadband use / time given their being identified as low-SES</p>	<p>All participants were remunerated £10.00 for their time / travel costs and/or broadband/electric use. The need to remunerate participants was raised through the initial application for ethical approval, and as a result I offered this contribution to participants. This contribution would not affect participants right to withdraw.</p>
<p>Protection of participant identity</p>	<p>The ethical review process offered a suggestion regarding offering participants the option to be named within the research. After careful consideration, and discussion with supervisors, this suggestion was not implemented; this decision was taken in the interests of protecting the identities of other people central to participant's stories. However, it was felt important that participants could recognise themselves and their story within the research, and therefore it was proposed that participants would be given the choice to suggest their own pseudonym, that would not identify them to others, but allow them to recognise themselves within the research.</p>
<p>Participant voice and co-production of their narratives</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- As previously outlined, an Active Interviewing (Holstein &amp; Gubrium, 2004) approach was taken, whereby the participant, and interviewer alike are understood to have an active and collaborative role within the interview and the resultant data.</li> <li>- The Charter of Storytelling Rights was shared and discussed with each participant before beginning the interview, to encourage participants to feel confident in authoring their own story:</li> </ul>

	<p>“The stories we tell about ourselves are not created in a vacuum. All too often, the stories we believe about ourselves have been written by others...one of the first steps in rewriting the stories of [our] identity may require [us] to reclaim the storytelling rights over [our] own [lives]” (Denborough, 2014, p.8). This Charter of Storytelling Rights was central to the process and can be found in Appendix 7.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participants were reassured that they can check my interpretation / understanding of their narrative at any time; this was further facilitated by the visual Mapping the Journey of Life (Denborough, 2014) that was recorded in real time with participants. Participants could see what was being recorded and challenge / clarify anything they felt was incorrect / misrepresented.</li> <li>- There was a further opportunity for participants to challenge/clarify the recording/representation of their key ‘events and happenings’ (Sharpe, Bye &amp; Cusick, 2018) when they were gifted their own copy of their map. Participants had 2 weeks within which to do this.</li> </ul>
Credibility/ dependability / transferability / confirmability of the data:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- As above, the issuing of individual maps to each participant allowed for an element of ‘respondent validation’ (Denscombe, 2014, p.297): whereby, participants are invited to check/challenge/clarify the recording/ interpretation of the key events and significant happenings in the story of their lives so far. For example, on revisiting a story captured at initial interview through the written/visual recording of the Mapping of the Journey of Life for a participant, my recording of their housing situation was corrected by the participant. This respondent validation goes some way to bolstering the credibility of the data; as does wider</li> </ul>



	<p>reading informing the literature review feeding into the research inquiry and analysis of data (Denscombe, 2014).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In the interests of 'dependability' (Lincoln &amp; Guba, 1985), "the provision of a fully reflexive account of procedures and methods, showing the readers in as much detail as possible the lines of enquiry that led to particular conclusions" (Seale, 1999, p.157) is essential; all of which are provided within this write up of the research. I.e., reflexivity is evident within the sharing of my own story (appendix 12) and my consideration of my positionality within the research below.</li> <li>- It is accepted that research findings within interpretivist research will not be generalisable. However, one can strive for a level of transferability. Transferability depends on the transparency of the information supplied around the sample and settings and situations applicable to the research; so that a reader might consider "[t]o what extent <i>could</i> the findings be transferred to other instances?" (Denscombe, 2014, p.299). The pen portraits offered in Table 4, alongside participant narratives shared within chapter 4, might go some way toward offering the reader a sense of 'what works in which circumstances and for whom?' (Pawson &amp; Tilley, 1997). However, given the uniqueness of the narratives, and the YP to whom they belong, transferability cannot easily be claimed. Perhaps, "[i]t is, in summary, not the naturalist's task to provide an index of transferability, it is his or her responsibility to provide the data base that makes transferability judgements possible on the part of potential appliers" (Lincoln &amp; Guba, 1985, p.316).</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In the interests of confirmability of the data resultant from this research, I have chosen, in line with narrative approaches, to include a reflexive account of my own story (see appendix 12), whilst below in this table there is consideration given to how this may affect my positionality within the research. The adoption of Active Interviewing within the research design takes further account of my role in generating the data resultant from this inquiry (Holstein &amp; Gubrium, 2004).</li> </ul>
<p>Practical issues arising in the carrying out of research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lost audio data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unfortunately, following one in-person interview with participant <i>Proud</i>, the audio file/account of this conversation was lost. Given that the participant, like all participants within this research, was passionate about being involved and having their story heard, it felt important to offer them a repeat opportunity to capture their story. Given that written notes were made during the initial interview, as a result of the Mapping the Journey of Life activity, these could be used to complete the YP's map, which would then be shared back with them, and this feedback session audio recorded and transcribed through Microsoft Teams Video Conferencing Software. This feedback session acted as a repeat interview, where the participant had the chance to revisit our earlier conversations and even add to their initial thoughts and reflections. Whilst it is accepted that this could be seen as detrimental to the credibility/ dependability / transferability / confirmability of the data, it was felt that the ethical implications of not including their story / giving them voice, was more</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Online / in-person active interviewing</li> </ul>	<p>consequential. The importance of sharing Proud's story also speaks to the benefit for readers of this research; Proud's story will inevitably be a source of inspiration alongside the further stories shared within this research, and in line with the Charter of Storytelling Rights (Appendix 7): "Everyone has the right to know and experience that what they have learned through hard times can make a contribution to the lives of others in similar situations" (Denborough, 2014, p.9). This decision, to include Proud's story, was talked through with my research supervisor and course lead and deemed appropriate given the written record that had been produced at interview and subsequent steps taken to check, but also build on this, with the participant.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- As referenced above, the feedback session with <i>Proud</i> was facilitated online using Microsoft Teams Video Conferencing Software; this was due to strike action within the setting where I would have been meeting the participant. Participant <i>John</i>, who was part of the pilot interview chose to have the interview conducted online. I do not feel that the research has been negatively impacted by the use of online software, noting the benefits for participants of being online where they can be in comfortable surroundings, have the option to log off easily should they wish to leave the interview and the continued benefit of being able to see each other on screen as active interview participants. The Mapping the Journey of Life activity translated well online, given the ability to be able to share on screen and complete similarly as we moved through the interview, in view of the participant. Ethically, it was important to offer participants the choice to meet online, given that it may have been more convenient / financially viable.</li> </ul>
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<p>Managing potential upset/discomfort that could arise for participants as a result of discussing their low-SEB and/or other aspects of their identity/life (Atkinson, 1998)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In using the Mapping of the Journey of Life technique, a narrative therapy tool, I hoped to work sensitively, positively and in a way that empowered participants (Denborough, 2014): <b>“WHO WE ARE</b> and what we do are influenced by the stories that we tell about ourselves. While we can’t always change the stories that others have about us, we can influence the stories we tell about ourselves and those we care about. And we can, with care, rework or rewrite storylines of identity” (Denborough, 2014, p.3).</li> </ul> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">The sharing of the Charter of Storytelling Rights (Appendix 7) set the stall for this empowering approach.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The focus was largely on facilitative factors and acknowledging the success and strengths of participants.</li> <li>- It was hoped, and perceived, that by sharing my own experiences, regarding the significant events and happenings in my life thus far as a student from a low-SEB, throughout the interviews, this provided participants with some reassurance that they were heard, understood and appreciated.</li> <li>- I, as researcher, completed my own Map of my Journey of Life in the interests of experiencing how this might feel for other students from low-SEBs.</li> </ul>
<p>Positionality of the researcher</p>	<p>In keeping with the interpretivist tradition I, the researcher, declare my vested interest in the foci of this research, as a student (albeit outside of the post-16 age bracket) from a low-SEB. My own story is shared (see appendix 12) in the interests of making transparent my own positionality in relation to this research. “In interpretivist research there is an assumption that knowledge is situated in relations between people” (Thomas, 2017, p.152); and this will clearly have implications</p>

	<p>for the data /stories constructed within the interview process (as earlier acknowledged in stipulating the adoption of Active Interviewing). It is appreciated that my own life experiences and resultant story will influence the way that I interpret and understand the stories of others – again this is in keeping with the philosophical underpinnings of this research. Whilst the use of ‘respondent validation’ illustrates efforts made to limit such bias within the narrative analysis, I accept that I cannot divorce myself completely from the data and findings within this research (Denscombe, 2014).</p>
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### **3.12 Meet the Researcher:**

In the interests of reflexivity, regarding my position as a researcher who is also from a low-SEB, and in the interest of transparency, I have included in the appendices (appendix 12) my own story. I hope, by making available my story, this will allow the reader to assess for themselves what influence they feel this may have had on the data generated and participant stories produced (Ross, 2017). As a reflexive researcher, with practices in place to address the risks posed by my positionality (i.e., use of the Charter of Storytelling Rights (Denborough, 2014) and respondent validation) I endeavoured to minimise my impact, as an 'insider' (Dwyer & Buckle, 2006; Ross, 2017) as far as was possible, when employing narrative research methods within a constructionist paradigm. I would also want to give due credit to the strength of character of the YP I met, who I believe felt comfortable enough to share their truths. However, as already stipulated in the introduction (section 1.4), I acknowledge that my own positionality, will invariably have impacted the data collected, the analysis and interpretation of it.

## 4. CHAPTER 4 - FINDINGS

### 4.1 Overview and Chapter Layout

The following chapter is committed to presenting the individual narratives of each participant. The full process of emplotment and analysis (akin to *core story creation*) is only included in the case of the first participant, due to the limitations of word count/space within the main body. The full process of emplotment for all other participants can be referenced within the appendices (Appendix 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, and 10). The version of the participant map shared in the case of the first participant, is an adapted version, to aid visibility whilst complying to the layout conventions in the main body of a thesis. The original version can be found in Appendix 1. The map is illustrative of the first stage of emplotment, whilst the Table that follows (Table 6) offers an example of the next stage. Key quotations, taken from the overall interview transcript for participant 1, are plotted against Polkinghorne's (1995) seven criteria to further illustrate the formation of the participant's story. Resultant from this process of emplotment is a short, summarised story. Each participant's summarised story is included within this chapter, illustrative of their unique journey and wider story, resulting from the process of emplotment and narrative analysis. Whilst this story is narrated by myself in accordance with my own sensemaking of a plausible plot, the afore mentioned process of emplotment that foregrounds the voices of participants, will have informed this.

The summarised stories and all the data feeding into them were then compared to draw out the similarities and differences between them. The raw data, taken from participant stories and the records of emplotment, that are suggestive of similarities and differences across accounts, is presented in tables within the appendices (Appendix 11). Whilst a narrative account of these similarities and differences will be

offered in brief within this chapter (section 4.6), the following, and final chapter (chapter 6 – discussion) serves as the “commentary chapter in which the differences and similarities among cases is highlighted...[in relation to the literature and in order to]...provide greater insight and understanding of the topic [overall]” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.20).

## **4.2 Plotting John’s Journey**

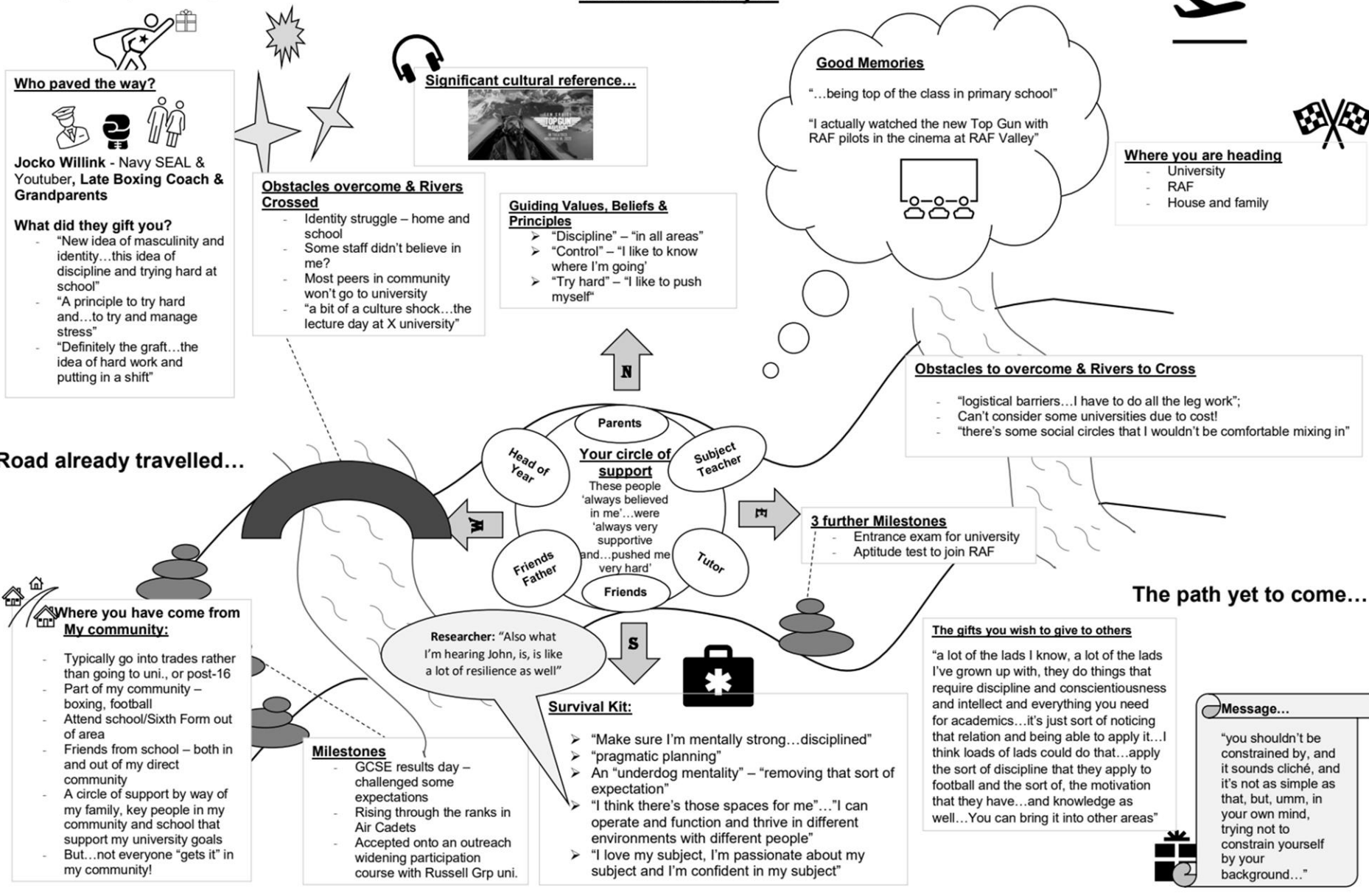
In line with the data-collection and analytical process illustrated in Figure 3, the creation and confirmation of John’s map would serve as the initial stage of emplotment. John’s adapted map can be seen under Figure 4 below.

**Figure 4:** John’s Map of his Journey of Life (Denborough, 2014), illustrating the first stage of emplotment:



## Map of my Journey of Life (adapted from Denborough, 2014)

## John's Journey...



#### 4.2.1 The Next Stage of the Emplotment Process:

As illustrated in Figure 3 within the methodology chapter, further plot development is aided by lifting direct quotations and sections of script from the original interview transcript and mapping them onto Polkinghorne's (1995) seven criteria for judging a life history (p.16). The lifting of direct speech, foregrounded the participant's voice in the process while mapping it to Polkinghorne's (1995) criteria, ensured that all of the salient aspects of a story were attended to.

**Table 6:** Direct script taken from John's interview and narrative activity (demarcated by italics and speech marks) as it pertains to Polkinghorne's (1995) Seven Criteria

<b>Criterion 1 – Cultural / Social Context</b>	<p><b>John's story is set across two stages – his hometown, an area understood to be a low progression to HE area (POLAR) and his secondary school and sixth form, which is a comprehensive school in "a very, very middle-class area" located outside of his hometown and where "university's a bigger push".</b></p> <p><b>Whilst the school and sixth form John attends pushes for progression into HE, John stresses that "there's always that, sort of local constraint, and that local context that sort of holds it back".</b></p> <p><i>"So I think, sort of, my local context, my local community, umm, it always felt like it held me back in many ways...so, pretty much, all of the circles that I've mixed in, so, whether that be the youth clubs that I did in my town growing up or now I do boxing, it seems that there is almost a complete separation between the academic route and what, what people there do. Umm, so, I spend a lot of time there, I do boxing, football and just, quite simply, a lot of the lads just don't go on to university, don't pursue actually moving onto post 16 and even some of the lads that I hang out with at the boxing gym, they, they, they leave school before they even get to high school".</i></p> <p><i>"But, where I'm from and like, sort of the youth club that I went to and the boxing gym, that's like, that's just part of the culture... And I think that's where it started to clash and merge; and it seemed that I couldn't separate the two? So... and that also creates a sort of</i></p>
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	<p><i>identity where I had to, I had, I felt like I had to be the umm, like, lairy, working class lad; I feel like I had to fulfil that identity because that would sort of, gave me social status in the school, because it was seen as something different...Umm, but I think slowly, as I've got older, I've begun to separate them".</i></p>
<p><b>Criterion 2 –</b> Information about the subject of the story and their embodied experience</p>	<p><b>In line with Polkinghorne's (1995) notion of embodiment, John makes reference, within his narrative, to both his 'physical and cognitive development' over time, and how he works to improve both:</b></p> <p><i>"Like every morning I wake up and there's these RAF practice for these - you do an aptitude test to join the RF pilot and they have these ones online. So, like every morning when I'm in the gym, I'm doing these tests on my phone between sets".</i></p> <p><b>When asked to think about factors facilitating John's academic progression and confidence, John shared that:</b></p> <p><i>"Probably the first time I ever spared...umm, was a massively, so it's a massive obstacle to overcome, being really nervous and then going in and overcoming that and umm, coming out more confident from the other end. Think that, so that's certainly helped. And, umm, mainly just this year, my geography lessons; so it's possibly the first time that I've looked forward to a lesson every time I've turned up, and that sort of, I've actively done the homework and enjoy doing it and sort of read beyond that as well".</i></p> <p><b>John speaks about his body and brain, physical and cognitive development, within the same breath. John emphasised that:</b></p> <p><i>"...basically, I like to have discipline in all my areas, umm, and I probably like, like control as well, in my areas as well".</i></p> <p><b>John attributes these values of discipline and control, that affect both body and mind, to a figure of inspiration he found online:</b></p> <p><i>"So, like in COVID I can remember being exposed to sort of, these new role models so, umm, I've always wanted to join the military, but I, I remember seeing this post and these guys... So there's a guy called Jocko Willink, who's a Navy SEAL, umm, and I</i></p>

	<p><i>remember being exposed to sort this new idea of masculinity and identity; this idea of discipline and trying hard at school. And it's sort of the first time that someone, that was a strong, masculine role model, that I looked up to, told me to try hard in school. And I thought that was very strange, it was a strange thing at first. And then it was sort of explained that, to be disciplined in one area means you have to be disciplined in all areas? Umm, so that's, that was sort of, umm, that's fed into my values, I'd say".</i></p> <p><b>John views body and mind as sites for change and growth, but hints at the role context has to play here; for instance, John hints at the possible link between social class, different educational establishments, and intellect:</b></p> <p><i>"I went to a lecture day in July...umm, which was... yeah, that was a bit of a culture shock, the lecture day in July. So, I turned up and umm, got off, and, I didn't really know what to expect when I got there... So, I, I turned up and, umm, when I got off I saw some people in gowns? And I was like, what's going on? And I turned up and I said, "oh, is this the Geography department?" And they went "Yeah". Went in, and handshakes, all formal with the people, and then I said, "what school are you from?", and they were like, "we're from Eaton"... "We're from Saint Pauls"... And it was a bit, a bit of a step back... And I was...Initially I was shocked and initially I, I was sort of taking aback and thought these people must be very highly intellectual and very, very intelligent and once I sort of broke it down, the conversation barrier, I thought, that... possibly they aren't, umm, more intelligent than me? And sort of, we share that interest in the subject. So I think that was the initial culture shock".</i></p>
<p><b>Criterion 3 –</b> Central character's relationship to / with others</p>	<p><b>Whilst John's own discipline and motivation accounts for much of his success, he also acknowledges the essential role that other's play in supporting this; including their role in growing John's aspirations:</b></p> <p><i>"So I think my parents have been really supportive and they're quite supportive in whatever I want to do. Umm, so I think that that helps massively".</i></p> <p><i>"So having, umm, like grandparents and whatnot that have, they've done hard manual jobs and having that background, sort of, the Union background and the idea of hard work and just putting in a shift".</i></p>

*"a tutor, umm, a form tutor that I had, tutor X, umm, who sort of... yeah, it sounds cliché, always believed in me? ... Umm, from year 7 to 11. So, I remember getting a lot of behaviour points and threatened suspension, stuff like that; and everyday, I remember walking in and she would give me a house point for turning up, to sort of balance the books per se... So I wouldn't get in too much trouble and sort of, that belief carried me through".*

**John noted that even those teachers who had lesser expectations of / belief in him, may have had a role to play in his drive to do better:**

*"I think that, yeah, it can be, can be motivating, and like an alternative way, I suppose... but not too much of it. So, it has to be balanced; I don't think, I don't think anyone could sit there being put down constantly and could ever make it through. I don't think it's that simple. I think it was just, I think it was just different, different people giving different responses; and so if you have enough of that doubt, umm, if you have small amounts, there's enough of that doubt, then you can certainly use it as a motivating factor. But of course we have too much of it then, umm, then you're likely to, umm, sort of derail yourself".*

**Ultimately, John stressed that the belief and support of school staff had the most notable impact:**

*"...when you start doing well, your teachers, especially when you go from doing poor to doing well, they start to motivate you a lot. Umm, so, I thought that sort of helped".*

*"...so probably my geography teacher at school, is probably the biggest one that's spurred me on... Umm, so she, when I, when I was just in lesson one day, she pulled me outside of lesson and she said, "have you thought of applying for geography?" And she said "have you thought of applying to X university? [a Russell Group university]"; because of, sort of, the stuff I was talking about in lessons and umm, the extra reading that I've done just of my own accord...umm, and that sort of, was instrumental in me thinking, 'ohh, maybe I can go and do this'".*

*"...so my head of year has been quite supportive in that aspect and sort of explained the system" - here John refers to the financial*

	<p><b>systems supporting HE study and the realities of student debt; making HE feel like a plausible option.</b></p> <p><b>John also links much of his success to members of his hometown community:</b></p> <p><i>“...so, one of my friends dad, whose been quite a role model for me, he always seemed to just understand it and understand the benefits and sort of supported me in it; always asking about how I'm doing at school umm, when it's kind of separate from the culture completely. So, I thought that that's been quite instrumental as well”.</i></p> <p><i>“I had a boxing coach that, umm, sort of was always very supportive and that pushed me very hard, but at the end of the session, and I always noticed he was the only coach, at the end of the session he would always ask about external stuff out of boxing... So he'd always asks me how schools going? And different stuff in my life - how the jobs going? And I sort of, thought, that sort of provided a role model and pushed me on...and that's been a massive driver from that point on really. Umm, Yeah, definitely”.</i></p> <p><i>“Possibly some friends as well; and like there's, there's some friends who possibly didn't go to university, and through stuff like the boxing gym, they're still supportive and they still see it as a good thing. So, there's some that don't understand, and then there's some that do and there's some that get it”.</i></p>
<p><b>Criterion 4 –</b> Central character's choices and actions toward goal denouement</p>	<p><b>The coming to terms with an identity conflict, whereby John was “getting in trouble and not really doing any work” at school, would be facilitated by John's coming of age – “helped by my maturity in a way”:</b></p> <p><i>“I think that sort of separation, has just more been an individual thing that I've had to work out on my own”.</i></p> <p><b>Part of this self-development, John does attribute to his interactions with technology:</b></p> <p><i>“I think that's where the interesting thing comes in is that, obviously I've grown up with the Internet, umm, from a young age, so, it's sort</i></p>

*of that, that bridge that would be like defined by the local context that I've got has sort of been crossed; because I've been able to research since a very young age, it's been sort of, I've grown up with technology, I've grown up with YouTube, Instagram, the Internet and those sort of opportunities have been... I, I've got to know those opportunities through, umm, research, and just through, just stumbling across things".*

**John's interest being sparked in a subject was key to his increased engagement and the subsequent success:**

*"I remember distinctly having a geography lesson, and that being the first time that I was genuinely interested. Umm, actually interested in what was going on and wanting to read further, so I remember going home that night and reading a news article that the teacher had actually said to read, umm, and I think that was probably a defining moment for me where I thought, Umm, 'I could actually pursue this beyond post 16 and post 18'".*

**With thoughts emerging around Post-18 and beyond, John would, in time, engage with Widening Participation opportunities through the Russell Group University he hoped to eventually enrol with:**

*"Umm, to start when you go so, so when I went to X university open day, I started to meet people, and students, and you with...but then start to realize that the gap is not that, not as big as you think it is...Umm, it's, it's just, different, sort of, norms in the way that you speak rather than... there's no difference in intellect or anything like that. And that, that's where, sort of like, the barrier has been crossed for me".*

*"Beyond that as well, I've also had, like a week at X university as well, so I got accepted onto an outreach course with X university, so Humanities outreach course, and that was for state school kids only, which I thought was brilliant".*

*"So, they had ex-students from different state schools, and then it was all nonselective state school kids; and that sort of helped to break down the barrier for me as well, umm, sort of showed another side to the university that possibly you don't see in the news so often".*

**Whilst the Widening Participation experiences clearly contributed to John's aspirations for HE, he knew he would also need to work hard to realise these aspirations:**

*"A principle to try hard and, it sounds cliché, but a principle to try hard and, umm, to try and manage stress as well, umm, and accept that there's gonna be stress in life, umm, and provide yourself with a framework to do that and deal with that... So, I like to push myself and, umm, make sure I'm mentally strong".*

*"I think it's about probably pragmatic planning for me... Umm, when I, when I get dealt with a very massive task, so, umm, when I found out that I was gonna be sitting an entrance exam for UNIVERSITY, which I am in November, umm, I took the first paper and possibly got about 25%? So, I absolutely was just destroyed and I thought I'm never gonna be able to do this...Umm, so the instant thing that I did was I wrote down a framework of how much you're gonna practice for the test? I thought right let's break it down, how much can I do every day and then how much can that build up over time? How many papers have I got access to? And I thought that's sort of my biggest strength, is my ability to break hard tasks down and long-term tasks down into smaller tasks that can be completed every day and that I think that's sustainable as well over time, rather than just attacking a massive task and, yeah... And I think I approach my work the same way as well, my revision, umm, so I'll never do more than an hour, two hours in a day, but it's all broken down and then consistent over the week. So, I think that's probably my biggest weapon in the arsenal, is the ability to break stuff down and manage it".*

*"I think I've been disadvantaged by having to do that research... so, it felt like with X university for me, umm, [inaudible/undiscernible speech] with the application, it sort of feels like starting a race with your shoes untied; so I had to come down and tie my own shoes and then I just had to start running and it certainly felt like that...So, everyone that I met, so of course on the open day, I met plenty of private school kids, so made friends and stuff; and they all had, sort of, their application done and they knew where they were going... umm, all the references were done. Whereas we're into like the last week of sending off the application for university now...And sort of, my teacher asked me last week 'what do they write in the reference?'... And I was sort of sat there flabbergasted, not knowing what to say really, when everyone else*



	<p><i>that I knew that had gone to, maybe, higher institutions had had that sorted already".</i></p> <p><b>Whilst John might attribute his work ethic to his classed roots; as highlighted through John's recognition of his Grandparents "hard graft" and "putting in a shift", John also speaks of a lack of expectation around academic outcomes within his community that conversely removes a sense of pressure – somewhat lightening the load:</b></p> <p><i>"...in my local context, people don't really care? Umm, how you do? And that sort of, that, in a way that sort of motivates me because I can just do it in, in the quiet and just, and just get it done really".</i></p> <p><i>"The fact that you're the underdog and you've got the lack of expectation on yourself, so I think removing that sort of expectation and just breaking it down to take on the barriers... not placing all that pressure on yourself and that, that underdog mentality".</i></p>
<p><b>Criterion 5 –</b> How past experiences influence our main character going forward / their learning / sensemaking</p> <p>Including aspirations for the future</p>	<p><b>John reflects on his various experiences through extra-curricular activities that he has been fortunate to access and thus thrown himself wholeheartedly into:</b></p> <p><b>Of his place within the Air Cadets – which John stresses is "a very, very middle class thing to do", John reflects on how he has found a place for himself within this environment:</b></p> <p><i>"I think it's sort of helped my confidence and definitely going on to university and obviously beyond that, has made me realize that I can operate and function and thrive in different environments with different people".</i></p> <p><i>"...that sort of environment's definitely helped".</i></p> <p><b>John equally reflects on his experiential learning through another extra-curricular activity, boxing – available and enjoyed within his hometown:</b></p> <p><i>"Probably the first time I ever sparred... umm, was a massively, so it's a massive obstacle to overcome, being really nervous and then</i></p>

	<p><i>going in and overcoming that and umm, coming out more confident from the other end. Think that, so that's certainly helped".</i></p> <p><b>Within academia alike, John has enjoyed similar experiences that have allowed him to see himself as successful:</b></p> <p><i>"And, umm, mainly just this year, my geography lessons; so, it's possibly the first time that I've looked forward to a lesson every time I've turned up, and that sort of, I've actively done the homework and enjoy doing it and sort of read beyond that as well".</i></p> <p><i>"I think there's also always the thing that if you're good at something, you're more likely to enjoy it. So, I was just sitting there knowing that I'm, I, I like geography and I'm good at geography and I can understand the subject. It of course makes things more enjoyable".</i></p> <p><b>This self-belief was a protective factor for John when initially he felt somewhat "alien" on arriving at a Russell Group University for their open day:</b></p> <p><i>"Initially I was shocked and initially I, I was sort of taking aback and thought these people must be very highly intellectual and very, very intelligent and once I sort of broke it down, the conversation barrier, I thought, that... possibly they aren't, umm, more intelligent than me? And sort of, we share that interest in the subject. So, I think that was the initial culture shock".</i></p>
<p><b>Criterion 6 –</b> Temporal aspects of the story including the denouement and in this case, thoughts around the future also</p>	<p><b>Beginning:</b></p> <p><b>John's earliest memories of education are few, but positive:</b></p> <p><i>"I mean, I remember some, some parts of primary school, but those... but I remember, I remember being top of the class in primary school. So, I remember having those sort of educational experiences".</i></p>
	<p><b>Middle:</b></p> <p><b>John's secondary education saw significant shifts in identity and at times, struggles to overcome:</b></p>

	<p><i>"The gap between primary school and high school is actually when I went to a different area was so big - meeting all these new people... So I sort, sort of formed, it was a completely new identity going there, umm, and sort of you shape that as you get older".</i></p> <p><i>"I used to have conflict; so, I think the identities used to cross a lot, so I was quite, I, I was quite naughty growing up in school, so in the earlier years in school. So, say year 7 to probably 11, umm, I was playing up a lot and I think that was a conflict of identity between the two areas".</i></p>
	<p><b>End (Denouement) to the story so far:</b></p> <p><b>A sparked interest in his subject, seeing himself as successful, through his own eyes and the eyes of others, supported John's surer sense of self and success in the classroom:</b></p> <p><i>"I think the key educational experience probably occurred in the GCSE year. Yeah, probably the final GCSE year...Where I sort of started to take things seriously, and that's when I think my Geography teacher came in...because I, I, I remember distinctly having a geography lesson, and that being the first time that I was genuinely interested. Umm, actually interested in what was going on and wanting to read further, so I remember going home that night and reading a news article that the teacher had actually said to read, umm, and I think that was probably a defining moment for me where I thought, Umm, 'I could actually pursue this beyond post 16 and post 18".</i></p>
	<p><b>Future:</b></p> <p><b>John has a strong sense of his roots and is subsequently proud of his working class identity; however, John knows from past experience, that this sense of identity could pose challenges as he looks to enter the potentially "alien" world of HE:</b></p> <p><i>"So, I think that you'd still get, and there'll still be some social circles if I went to the university that I wouldn't feel comfortable mixing in".</i></p>

*"So possibly some of the umm, Eaton boys that maybe hang out together, I wouldn't feel comfortable in those circles, but I think there's those spaces for me there, so I know they've got a boxing gym, so I think I could sort of facilitate my interest through there... and obviously I've got an interest in the subject and I have belief that, that I, I, love my subjects and I'm passionate about my subjects, and I'm confident in my subject. So, I think that, umm, there's, there's sort of that there which would make me comfortable with the identity".*

**John's previous experiences, afforded to him through Widening Participation initiatives, but also through extra-curricular activity, enable John to feel confident that there is a place for him within the institution of HE:**

*"I think the common ground is essential. So, I think, I think the shared subject interest certainly helps, especially in terms of that taster selection day, because, if in doubt, you just speak about the subject and I think everyone could share that passion. I think that would be the same with boxing at university. So, everyone on my Geography course would have a passion for the subject and you could speak about the subject... and of course you'd meet similar people depending on what society you went to and that'd be the same across all universities".*

*"Umm, it's, it's just, different, sort of, norms in the way that you speak rather than... there's no difference in intellect or anything like that. And that, that's where, sort of like, the barrier has been crossed for me".*

**John's own research and the information, advice and guidance (IAG) offered by his Head of Year (previously captured under Criterion 2) has enabled John to make the right decision for him, in his particular situation:**

*"So, there's some universities that I'd say would possibly be off limits by, monetary, so in terms of finance they'd be off limits, so definitely, so X (London based) university, like...like that's the sort of university that I'd love; I love the course there. So in terms of passion of the subject, I've looked at it and I, like I'm in love with the course that they offer there, but just in terms of finances there's absolutely no way I could go there and live comfortably".*

	<p><i>"Umm, which is a lot behind the X university [a Russell Group university] application. So, X University's very cheap to live in. In fact, possibly one of the cheapest universities in the country to live at. So that was a big thing driving the application".</i></p>
<p><b>Criterion 7 –</b> How events and happenings culminate in the story's denouement: emplotment</p>	<p><b>Much of the criterion above feed into this final criterion focused on the overall emplotment of a story. Perhaps most importantly is, John's recognition of his parent's decision to send him to a school out of area; this ultimately supported John to see himself going onto HE and to engage with Air Cadets, which would prove fundamental to his aspirations and confidence in being able to achieve these:</b></p> <p><i>"...that's also helped by the fact that umm, I go to a school that's away from my town... Yeah, so, I thought that sort of helps and there's always been that separation for me from the local context, and then the academic context and those two spaces are kind of separate".</i></p> <p><i>"so, I'm part of the air cadets, so that's been a big opportunity for me... So it's definitely confirmed what I've wanted to do; so going there, I just, it was sort of through a friend that I ended up joining, so I would never have joined, and none of my, none of like, my immediate circle ever did, but it was sort of someone on the periphery at my school, so a more middle class lad in my school just told me, 'oh, you wanna join the RAF? Come and do this...' And I was like, 'OK, I'll come and do it'".</i></p> <p><i>"So, I went there and I actually excelled a lot and that sort of helped me, so I've moved through the ranks quite quickly and sort of issuing positions of leadership... Umm, moved quite quickly through; umm, which has given me massive opportunities. Umm, so I think that it's also helped my confidence and definitely speaking. So obviously something that I was insecure about speaking, but... I think when I initially joined, umm, there was definitely a class barrier - 100%. So, it's a very, very middle class thing to do, very middle class; there's I think nine... so, it's very expensive as well, so I think nine times out of ten it's a very posh kid that's doing it... and I think that was, so none of my friends would do that, but I've actually excelled in that environment".</i></p> <p><i>"I actually watched Top Gun, the new Top Gun with RAF pilots in the cinema at RAF Valley, which is the place where fighter pilots train. Umm, so we all watched that together, which was like sort</i></p>

*of...it was a massively overstimulating experience... I was like shocked - I just couldn't believe that... That I was sitting there".*

**When John struggled in secondary, on account of his conflict of identity, Covid lockdowns, aside from Air Cadets, may have provided the time, space and "separation" that John needed to truly think about his future:**

*"I ended up doing very well at GCSE...umm, and sort of that was COVID as well that helped that and whatever; I sort of had that complete separation from school, umm, which I think helped, and helped my maturity in a way".*

*"...so, a lot of discipline really, and that's from role models; and that's mainly from role models through umm, seeing the online world... So, like in COVID I can remember being exposed to sort of, these new role models".*

*"Umm, in your own mind, trying not to constrain yourself by your, by your background. But it's, it's almost impossible to do that... But I think for me it was more a channelling of my background into different areas? And with, with good help from others".*

**This help from others, including the inspiration sought online, was integral to John imagining a different 'possible self' () for his future, and in mapping how to make this a reality:**

*"Umm, I think that was, that a lot of that was motivation from external sources and self-motivation as well".*

*"But I think it's just that awareness of opportunities as well".*

*"...so, I've sort of have done enough research to know what I have to do to get there".*

**John's research has led to the understanding that attending university is not necessarily an option, and more of a must:**

*"There's sort of this divide... Yeah, that has then, this sort of, this divide where you can't access these things unless you go to university? So, it's this sort of officer's thing where you go and fly and you get to get a sponsorship onto joining the RAF as an officer after. So, that was a sort of a big motivation for me".*

**With this knowledge in mind John works hard to “control” what he can in relation to achieving his goals:**

*"...we're at a disadvantage being from a low socioeconomic background...but I think, sort of, the digital space, how it is helping to bridge that in many ways, and, and just more knowledge as well? Umm, among teachers and especially in the state school setting, I mean plenty of state school schools are starting to improve, especially in my area".*

*"...so, umm, when I found out that I was gonna be sitting an entrance exam for X university, which I am in November, umm, I took the first paper and possibly got about 25%? So, I absolutely was just destroyed and I thought I'm never gonna be able to do this...Umm, so the instant thing that I did was I wrote down a framework of how much you're gonna practice for the test? I thought right let's break it down, how much can I do every day and then how much can that build up over time? How many papers have I got access to? And I thought that's sort of my biggest strength, is my ability to break hard tasks down and long-term tasks down into smaller tasks that can be completed every day and that I think that's sustainable as well over time, rather than just attacking a massive task and, yeah... And I think I approach my work the same way as well, my revision, umm, so I'll never do more than an hour, two hours in a day, but it's all broken down and then consistent over the week. So, I think that's probably my biggest weapon in the arsenal, is the ability to break stuff down and manage it".*

**Again, Widening Participation opportunities further supported John to reconcile his sense of class with a possible sense of belonging within HE:**

*"So, they had ex-students from different state schools, and then it was all nonselective state school kids; and that sort of helped to break down the barrier for me as well, umm, sort of showed another side to the university that possibly you don't see".*

The prior process of emplotment has informed the summary story that follows. Whilst I as researcher am the narrator of this story, John's own words can be found within, as marked using speech marks and italics, but also emboldened.

#### 4.2.2 John's Summarised Story – Flying High!

John hasn't always perceived the sky to be the limit! His current aspirations to be an Officer in the RAF and the positive steps he has, and is taking toward the realisation of this dream, seemed out of reach to the young man battling a **“conflict of identity”** at secondary school. This conflict, triggered, John believes, by his transition to secondary school out of area (which in contrast to his hometown, was **“a very, very middle-class area”**), would be overcome in time and with John's best efforts to **“separate”** these two worlds when and where necessary. Covid lockdowns perhaps supported this separation, whilst John's own developing sense of self gradually enabled him to see how his working-class identity might benefit his academic aspirations and beyond: i.e., John's propensity to **“put in a shift”**, as his Grandparents had done, whilst conversely, not having to feel the pressure of his immediate community's expectation for high academic outcomes.

While community expectations for John seemed low, there were characters within his community that took an interest in his academic endeavours. This interest and seeming investment in John's achievement, like his parent's investment in supporting him to attend a school out of area and engage with extra-curricular activities to support his dreams and development, proved fundamental to facilitating John's higher aspirations and subsequent academic attainment. This attainment coupled with John's aspirations to attend a Russell Group University were further encouraged by key members of school staff who **“always believed”** in him, staff who threw him a



lifeline when he was “**getting in trouble and not really doing any work**” at school. This “**belief carried [John] through**” and meant that GCSE results day would be both a day of celebration for him and a day where continuing his education became possible.

John’s GCSEs would include a grade for the subject which sparked an ongoing interest for John; and where that subject teacher had spurred him on to consider further study within this area. John’s “**passion for [his] subject**” would provide not only a gateway into HE in terms of courses he felt he could apply for and excel at, but also provide “**common ground**”, a “**shared subject interest**”, which he believes will enable him to find a “**space for [himself]**” at university going forward, a space that might previously have felt somewhat “**alien**” to him. John’s sense of being able to fit into this “**alien**” environment is further supported by his experiences in the Air-Cadets – an extra-curricular activity of which he is a part. John’s involvement with the Air-Cadets, something John believes to be “**a very, very middle-class thing to do**”, has enabled him to “**realise that [he] can operate and function and thrive in different environments with different people**”. John’s engagement with a Widening Participation initiative, which enabled him to attend the university he hopes to enrol with, and meet peers, both from similar and different backgrounds, further facilitated John’s reconciliation of his subjective class identity and his ‘possible future self’ (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

John’s possible future self, and the research into how to make this a realisation, was inspired and informed by the internet. Here, John stresses that while “**we’re at a disadvantage being from a low socioeconomic background...the digital space...is helping to bridge that in many ways**”. Access to information, advice and

guidance, beyond that of the Widening Participation programme, has enabled John to set his sights high and map out a flight path for his future.

#### 4.2.3 John's message:

“...you shouldn't be constrained by, and it sounds cliché, and it's not as simple as that, but, umm, in your own mind, trying not to constrain yourself by your background”.

#### **4.3 Matilda's Summarised Story – “to choose what I want to say, when I want to say it”.**

Becoming author of her own story has been all-important for Matilda. Where Matilda previously relied on the recounts of others, including through **'files'** from **'social services'**, to piece her story's start together, she has now taken up the pen in readiness to write her own future. And Matilda's future looks bright; much like Roald Dahl's character from which her pseudonym is taken; ***“She didn't have that brilliant upbringing, and then, she was a smart child, so I think...it was like, a bit like me”.***

Our protagonist's superpowers include a natural propensity to 'care' for others, a 'sympathetic' disposition, and the kind of resilience one only knows when they have faced true adversity; ***“I think my like, my grandparents have taught me to be [resilient], because they're like, we know it's happened but there's nothing we can do, so we might as well just carry on”.*** These values and characteristics have served Matilda well thus far and will continue to serve her in her chosen field of ***“children's mental health nursing”.***

Resilience, for instance, played a significant role in getting Matilda through her primary schooling, where she faced physical barriers to her learning and development,

including repeated absences from school, on account of her **“moving 24 times in 2 years”**, but also in relation to the need for **“operations on [her] ears because [she] couldn’t hear properly”**. Given this tough start, by her own admission, Matilda **“would never have thought [she]’d even get GCSEs, never mind doing A-Levels”**.

Matilda stressed that achieving her GCSEs was **“massive”**, even without the **“extra 2% advantage”** applied due to Covid-19 - that Matilda partially attributes to her success - she can recognise her own part in this achievement: **“I was quite proud of myself. I’m not gonna lie”**.

Whilst Matilda might find herself **“shocked”** by her own achievements at times – those that truly know her, are less surprised: **“[M]y tutor now. He’s like, constantly like, ‘you’re fine. You’ve got this’”**. Matilda states clearly that **“reassurance”** from her circle of support has been integral to where she is today, but equally notes that this circle of support has taken time to build. Matilda recalls that she was made to feel **“different”** on account of her start in life, especially in primary school. However, by the time she entered secondary school, she had **“grown up”**, took charge of her story and who would be privy to it. This provided the **“fresh start”** that Matilda needed, and a chance to feel **“normal”**.

From this position of parity with her peers, Matilda was able, over time, to find **“the people that [she]...wanted to hang around with and...the influence [she] wanted”**. This circle of support would include her **“friends”**, her **“boyfriend”**, select staff from school, and most importantly her Grandparents, who are **“a massive part of it”**.

Whilst Matilda's circle of support provided **"reassurance"**, the school also provided, and continue to provide, practical support to ensure that Matilda is able to realise her potential. This practical support comes in the way of flexibility around **'timetabling'** for examinations, given the **"stress"** that these can cause Matilda, as well as the post-16 bursary to which Matilda is entitled. Funding her studies has always, and continues to be, **"a concern"** for Matilda:

***"Funding's quite weird, cause that's always been like a bit of a concern for me, just because I live with my grandparents, and so the one has umm, his X occupation pension, and obviously all we're technically living off is their pensions? So, it's always been a bit of a worry for me".***

This **"worry"** sees Matilda working a part-time job to assist her studies, and even though this means she's **"busy"**, she sees the benefits, like the **"independence"** and **"confidence"**, that this work (related to her chosen career) brings. Her work and studies alone will not be all that prepares Matilda for her **"end goal"** in nursing; Matilda recognises that her own experiences, alongside those of loved ones sadly **"lost"**, feed into her desire to **"care"** for, and support **'change'** for children in similar situations.

**'Change'** is as important to Matilda as it is to her mother, in whom Matilda has witnessed great change over the recent years. Matilda takes from this a lesson that she believes applies to herself also, that it is possible **"to prove...other people...wrong"**. However, with Matilda's circle of support, motivation to **'give back'** to her Grandparents and having chosen a university that will grant her funding for her studies and to see **"see the place a bit"** (beyond her home community – though **"not too far"**), no one would suppose that Matilda's future should look anything other than **"exciting"**.

#### 4.3.1 Matilda's message:

Matilda had more than one message to share:

"Don't look at the bad stuff and use it as an excuse".  
"Ask for help when you need it".  
"You can't change everything, but what you can is vital".

#### **4.4 Proud's Summarised Story – "*Proud*"**

Whether in the interests of proving non-believers "**wrong**", or her circle of support correct, Proud is set to continue to '**smash**' down any barriers that threaten her aspirations to become "**a primary school teacher**". Proud is determined "**to help others to find their sense of purpose**" and "**ensure that the youngest of children start out with the message that actually dreams are possible... You can do it**".

This is not a message that was always freely available at home for Proud, given the "**barriers**" her own mother had faced and the limitations this placed upon her own academic achievements. Knowledge of her mother's experience always "**pushed [Proud] to do better**"; as first in family set to attend university, Proud hopes to "**do a job that makes [her] happy and get the money on top**", allowing her to one day buy her own home.

Proud has always had to "**rely on [her]self**", given the needs of her siblings, the loss of her father and the associated need for her to take care of herself as much as she can. Whilst Proud is fiercely independent and self-sufficient – not least because she has had to be, she also recognises the undoubtable role her teachers have played in instilling some self-belief and enabling her to "**just stick at it and kind of ignore those [negative] thoughts and...get through it**".

From her very early education in an **“amazing”** primary school, Proud felt that she had the support of **“key adults”** that **“genuinely wanted to be there and that...actually cared”**. These key adults secured in Proud a lifelong love of **“learning by doing”**, that Proud hopes to take forward into her own teaching; and that she is already practicing with the students she supports as a teaching assistant. Through her work Proud knows that she is already **“making that difference”** when she receives **“positive feedback from parents”**, and this is just one example of positive feedback that has **“motivated”** Proud to pursue her **“dream”**.

Throughout secondary school Proud largely enjoyed the encouragement and **‘belief’** of the majority of her teachers, with a few teachers in particular further confirming Proud’s aspirations to teach; these teachers were **“always there to support”** Proud and gave her responsibilities within the classroom, to prove that belief in her. Whilst a few underestimated Proud’s abilities, she still **“smashed it”** when it came to her GCSEs and whilst a Maths A-level challenged Proud on a new level, staff belief and encouragement would again support success for Proud.

Perhaps the biggest show of support and belief in Proud’s potential would be in her sixth form teachers putting her forward for a widening participation program. For Proud this would offer more than the reassurance that they believe in her ability to **“get to that point”**, it would also provide the information, advice and guidance she needed to truly believe that higher education is attainable for her: **“...my barriers can be removed, and I can do it”**.

And of course, Proud will do it. Not least because she has taken a year out to save for the financial undertaking of her studies and at the same time gain experience of working in education; but also because of her forethought in securing a job to come

back to in the holidays to keep those funds topped up. But more than this, Proud is set fair to succeed because everyone is willing her to do so; Proud knows, that despite not always getting **“those messages from home”**, her parents bestowed upon her, something special, something important, and something that showed their belief and pride in her all along – because Proud does indeed have a lot to be proud of!

#### 4.4.1 Proud’s message:

Proud had more than one message to share:

“No matter what others say, you can do it. You can prove them wrong”.

“Keep exploring...there’s always a pathway to get you where you want to go – even if it’s different”.

“There is always help out there...don’t be afraid to ask for it”.

#### **4.5 Timothy’s Summarised Story – The direction of travel...**

Timothy’s story is one of time and space and finding his place. Both historically and presently Timothy’s community context, and its connotations matter; Timothy is acutely aware of his family’s history of **“hard labour”** and **“small”** housing, but also their determination to **“push through”** and make the best of it. This undoubtedly impacts Timothy’s own attitude to future employment, whereby his open vista includes consideration of a few alternative paths if his endeavours into higher education change. Timothy’s **“map reading skills”** and propensity for **“strategic thinking”** undoubtedly help here, allowing Timothy to **“always see maybe, a few options”**.

Timothy’s **“main goal”** concerns itself with him **“finding as many opportunities as possible”**, one of which, and the preferred option presently, pertains to studying at the level of higher education. With Timothy’s love of the environment, **“outdoors”**, in mind, Timothy’s preferred **“choice is to do**

*environmental sciences...even though [he]...might not see the benefits of [his] work...the people in the future, maybe will... It might improve the climate for the better*". This drive to make a difference for future generations, in terms of the environment, speaks further to the thread of time and space that moves throughout Timothy's narrative.

Despite these shifts in time and space within the story, Timothy remains embodied and grounded throughout – the central character in whichever *"environment"* (or scenic backdrop) he finds himself in over time. Timothy sees himself and his interests as ultimately determining his direction; *"I've always just been like...I'll deal with it"*. This is not to say that other characters do not feature, but Timothy's circle of support is, by his own design, *"small to medium size"*. Aside from the unshakable *"support"* of his mother and the encouragement, *"push"*, of his father, Timothy also recognises the role of specific teachers throughout his schooling: whether this speaks to the teacher that recognised and supported his dyslexia at an *"early"* stage; or to his now geography teacher whom aside from sharing a 'passion' for his subject, also shares a dyslexia diagnosis.

Timothy has come to appreciate that his best achievements follow his best efforts, which are undoubtedly linked to his interests and *"passion"*; Timothy will *"[a]lways give...100%"* to those interests, *'passion[s]'* and causes that matter most to him – those things that Timothy deems to be *"worth the time and the money and the effort"*. With this in mind, and also minded to his *"real world skills and understanding about maths"*, Timothy knows that higher education will be an 'investment'. More than this, Timothy is keen to make the most of this opportunity, and even squeeze in a year to *"study abroad"*. Again, this adds up for our mathematically



minded Timothy, who sees that this investment might support him to ***“create[e]...links from around the world...that ties with [his]...wanting to travel”*** in the future.

Arguably, Timothy’s mind for maths and careful consideration of where to invest his ***“time”, “money”*** and ***“effort”***, might speak to his family history and community context, and a seeming subjective sense of class; however, while Timothy recognises these tendencies at times and considers their origins, he also questions his suitability for the study. Timothy’s parent’s forethought and financial planning, and subsequently Timothy’s own saving habits have led him to feel confident that he is prepared to overcome any potential ***“financial barriers”*** one might usually face in enrolling with university and this has caused him to question his socioeconomic status, despite his qualifying for the post-16 bursary fund.

Irrespective of where Timothy sees himself in a man-made class or socioeconomic system, he sees his place in the world, his environment, and is determined to ***“try to make the biggest impact [he] can with anything”*** he does.

#### 4.5.1 Timothy’s message:

Timothy had more than one message to share:

“You can only do what you can do...but what you can do, you should do fully! Give 100%”.

“Even if you’re not good at something you can still try your hardest for other people”.

## **4.6 Similarities and Differences across Stories**

Presented here is a narrative summary of the salient similarities and differences that could be drawn from across all four stories. In line with the research aims and questions, these similarities and differences pertain to the factors these students report to have facilitated their academic achievement to date, their aspirations for HE and those that they think might support them to actualize these aspirations in the future. Again, participant's own words were foregrounded within this process of seeking out similarities and differences, whilst excerpts from the summarized stories are used to support. A tabular synthesis of the raw data (quotes and story excerpts) that equate to the findings in relation to similarities and differences across stories can be found in the appendices (appendix 11). A narrative account of these similarities and differences in relation to the research questions is offered within this section. These findings will be discussed more fully, making links to existing literature, in the discussion chapter (chapter 5) that follows. Structuring the discussion in this way was fulfils Polkinghorne's (1995) requirement for a chapter focusing on the similarities and differences across stories, whilst also serving to answer the research questions and addressing the aims.

## **4.7 A Narrative Summary of the Similarities and Differences across Stories in relation to the Research Questions**

As highlighted within the methodology chapter, specifically section 3.9, “Making comparisons allows incidents within the data to be compared to other incidents in order to group them according to similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)” (Sharpe, 2018, p.134). These categories that highlight the similarities and differences across participant narratives, will be introduced within the sections that follow. These will then be discussed in more depth, and in relation to the literature, within the chapter that follows (Chapter 5 – Discussion).

### ***4.7.1 Similarities across narratives in relation to research question 1: What do post-16 students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds report as facilitative to their academic achievement?***

The sub-sections that follow describe the categories representative of the similarities found across stories. These relate to participant’s experiences, and what facilitative factors appeared to be influential to these (Sharpe, 2018).

#### **4.7.1.i Personal Investment: Grit and Academic Resilience**

Across participant stories, there are clear references to their own investment in their studies in terms of their levels of perseverance and grit. All participants speak to ‘a principle to try hard’ (John) and to ‘always give your one hundred percent’ (Timothy). John and Timothy in particular attribute these effort levels to their working-class history and identity. Each felt that their grandparent’s propensity to ‘put in a shift’ (John) was paramount to their own sense of working-class identity and willingness to ‘graft’. Proud’s mother’s low-SES and the related barriers she faced in education, and subsequently in relation to social mobility, ‘pushed [Proud] to do better’. This motivation and drive - somewhat borne of the struggle, ‘when something bad happens’

(Matilda) - is referenced across participant stories and strongly speaks to their resilience, participants ability to 'just carry on' (Matilda) and 'deal with it' (Timothy) in the face of adversity and challenge. This could be the result of external factors or their own 'negative beliefs' (Timothy):

"I think sometimes you can be your own worst enemy, and if you pick at yourself enough, you will just give up... Umm, but if you just stick at it and kind of ignore those thoughts and you will get through it".

#### 4.7.1.ii Identity and Inspiration

Across participant stories it was apparent that these YP had sought and found inspiration from individuals they felt they identified with in some sense. For Timothy and Proud, they identified with particular teachers. Timothy drew parallels between himself and his geography teacher, with his teacher being 'passionate about the thing [he is] passionate about', as well as similarly identifying as dyslexic. For Timothy this was a 'big' and important 'link'. Proud identified with, and found inspiration in, a teacher, that like her, 'didn't have a plain sailing journey into higher education and teaching either'. Matilda and John also referenced the importance of identifying with someone that could be something of an inspiration for them, albeit finding this through media sources as opposed to in the classroom. For Matilda this inspiration came through the film character on which her pseudonym is based (Roald Dahl's 'Matilda'). Matilda identified with this character on account of the fact, that like her, 'she didn't have that brilliant upbringing', but that 'she was a smart child, so...it was like, a bit like [Matilda]'. Matilda further reflected on seeking out the '*influence* [she] wanted' when she started secondary education, in terms of the friends she would make and the circle of support she would build for herself.

Whilst John identified and found inspiration in certain characters within his community (through his extra-curricular activities in particular), he too references a media personality that had a most significant influence. This media personality is a known Navy SEAL and in John's field of interest in terms of his future career goals. John stressed that he was 'someone, that was a strong, masculine role model, that [he] looked up to, [and who] told [him] to try hard in school'. John reflects that his identification with this person, albeit within 'the digital space', inspired him to envisage his future differently, to not 'constrain [him]self by [his] background'.

#### 4.7.1.iii Teacher Support/Investment

All the participants' stories give credit to a teacher who 'believed' in them, and that championed them at school. Whilst this was largely in relation to their learning and thus, their future potential in education, there was also reference to a more holistic interest in these YP. Proud stresses the positive impact of being supported by staff who 'actually care'. Whilst Matilda speaks to relationships with staff who really know her, who have supported her through 'the highs and lows' in her life, both in and outside of school. Furthermore, Proud and Timothy comment on staff that were 'always kind of there...kind of just like someone you could kind of, go to and talk to for a bit'. This broader interest in these YP, and time spent, speaks to staff investment in these students, which in turn encourages them to invest in their own education:

"[W]hen you start doing well, your teachers, especially when you go from doing poor to doing well, they start to motivate you a lot. Umm, so, I thought that sort of helped" (John).

#### 4.7.1.iv External (Eco)system Support/Investment

All participants spoke to the importance of support within their immediate support network ('circle of support'), be this 'parents [who] have been really supportive' (John),

an uncle who has ‘always been there and showing an interest’ (Timothy), or grandparents who have been ‘a massive part of it’ (Matilda). Proud acknowledges that whilst she did not always get the most positive ‘messages from home’, with regard education, her mother was rooting for her, telling her to ‘go for it’. For Proud, wider support, from friends, her boyfriend, the school community, and the youth club (where she would eventually work), was integral to her achieving all that she has. Proud stresses the importance of having people there, to ‘ask for help when you need it’. She suggests that ‘without like, you know, that support network you wouldn’t get far to be honest’. John too, speaks to the role of key community members, whose perceived investment in him and his life has been ‘integral’ to his success:

“So, one of my friends dad, whose been quite a role model for me, has always seemed to just understand it and understand the benefits and sort of supported me in it; always asking about how I’m doing at school umm, when it’s kind of separate from the culture completely. So, I thought that that’s been quite instrumental really”.

#### 4.7.1.v Independence

All participants made reference to a need to ‘rely on [themselves]’ (Proud) and ‘just deal with it’ (Timothy). For Proud and Matilda this spoke to their financial planning for college and in readiness for university, as well as to their organisation of learning. Proud and Matilda capitalised on this need to earn and save money by securing jobs that also offered them experience, greater knowledge and confidence in their chosen future career:

“I’ve started working at the X [refers to care industry role] now, in September this year. And it’s like I’m completely different, like my independence has like shot up! And I’ve seen it as well like, I’m like, secretly quite proud of it” (Matilda).

Participants, to differing degrees, had committed to a 'pathway'. Even Timothy, more flexible about what his future might look like, had made decisions around subject choices that would enable pursuit of a few possible pathways. This commitment to a particular field, or career path - and the implications for the decisions made at this stage - will be further reflected under findings for research question two. Whatever their subject choices, all participants stipulated a reliance on 'planning ahead' (Proud), 'organisation' (Matilda) and 'pragmatic planning' (John), to help them manage their studies.

#### ***4.7.2 Differences across narratives in relation to research question 1: What do post-16 students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds report as facilitative to their academic achievement?***

The sub-headings within this section outline key differences between participant accounts, highlighting the nuance of these narratives and the journeys of the YP they pertain to.

##### **4.7.2.i 'Other Imposed Prophecies' (Schaedig, 2023; Adler, 2012)**

There were interesting differences between participant stories around the subject of other's perceived opinion of them and their ability/potential, and how this impacted them. For Proud and Matilda there seemed to be something of a motivation around 'prov[ing] other people wrong' (Matilda). Proud felt that some teacher expectations for her were low and stressed that, 'no matter what others say, you can do it...You can prove them wrong'. Conversely, John reflects on the very real threat of internalising other's negative beliefs about you. John tells of how other's pre-conceptions might cause one to behave in a way that gradually lives up to their expectations of them:

"I don't think, I don't think anyone could sit there being put down constantly and could ever make it through. I don't think it's that simple. I think it was

just, I think it was just different, different people giving different responses; and so if you have enough of that doubt, umm, if you have small amounts, there's enough of that doubt, then you can certainly use it as a motivating factor. But of course when we have too much of it then, umm, then you're likely to, umm, sort of derail yourself”.

#### 4.7.2.ii Separation from Local Context

Across stories, participants generally wanted to maintain ‘connections’ with their home community. However, there were also differing feelings about whether their ‘local context...community...held [them] back’ (John). John’s parents had taken the decision to send John to a different state school out of area, in a more ‘middle-class’ area. Whilst Matilda, who attended her home areas local college, chose to ‘go out’ and socialise outside of her community:

“Like from where I am now, when we first moved out it was quite like a safe place you could say, but now it's like definitely got worse as times moved on. I know like, from, there's people that live like, in X [nearby location], but they come down. It's like, like, drug dealing... in the streets drinking alcohol... Stuff like that. The usual really...If I'm going out somewhere, I don't tend to go to X [home location], I go like to X [college location], or X [nearby location]”.

Whilst John felt that his schooling away from his home community and where ‘university’s a bigger push’, will have helped him in his journey, he also felt that there were ‘plenty of state schools...starting to improve, especially in [his] area’. Timothy further spoke to enabling factors in his home location, from being enabled to seek ‘comfort in the outdoors’; to his passion for the area’s ‘history’. Timothy stressed the ‘sentiment’ his home community held for him and spoke about how his community was intrinsically tied to his own story and character.

#### 4.7.2.iii The Role of Covid-19

An interesting difference around the role of Covid-19 arose across participant stories. John felt that Covid-19 had helped him to take a step back and think about



what he wanted his future to look like. Covid-19 physically distanced John from the role he felt had carved out for himself at school as the 'lairy working-class kid':

"I ended up doing very well at GCSE...umm, and sort of that was Covid as well that helped that and whatever; I sort of had that complete separation from school, umm, which I think helped, and helped my maturity in a way".

Matilda also felt that Covid-19 and the related arrangements around teacher assessed grades had supported her success. Whilst conversely, Timothy found it difficult to take pride in his GCSE results awarded using this system:

"I wouldn't say, I feel like my GCSEs, I personally wouldn't say they're a milestone for me because I know it was cos of Covid, and they were teacher assessed grades".

#### ***4.7.3 Similarities across narratives in relation to research question 2: What do post-16 students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds report to have been facilitative in their aspirations of continuation into Higher Education?***

The sub-sections that follow describe the categories representative of similarities found across stories, in relation to what participants found to be facilitative of their aspirations to pursue HE.

##### **4.7.3.i Personal Investment in a Specific Goal/Passion**

Across stories, participants shared a strong commitment to a specific line of work, and/or 'passion for [a] subject' (John). John's passion for, and success in his subject was driving his decision to pursue Geography at university. Though his wider goal 'to join the military' steered his decision-making around which university he needed to go to. John further spoke to the inevitability of university for him given his ultimate career goals:

"There's sort of this divide... Yeah, that has then, this sort of, this divide where you can't access these things unless you go to university? So, it's this sort of officer's thing where you go and fly and you get to get a

sponsorship onto joining the RAF as an officer after. So, that was a sort of, a big motivation for me”.

Matilda too speaks to the inevitability of pursuing HE as the ‘automatic next step’ to becoming a ‘children’s mental health nurse’. Matilda and Proud alike have involved themselves in employment, outside of choosing relevant studies, that will offer them experience and knowledge in their chosen careers. Whilst Timothy appears more flexible around his career options, he has pursued A-Level studies that lend themselves to the various avenues he is considering. In essence, Timothy appears to be ensuring a plan B is in place (a ‘second choice’) in case he does not ‘get into university or suddenly...[does not] feel like going’.

#### 4.7.3.ii Wider Investment through Widening Participation Initiatives

Across stories it was apparent that there was a significant role for Widening Participation Initiatives in enabling these YP to imagine themselves progressing onto HE. Support offered through Widening Participation initiatives differed across participants, but all spoke to financial support and incentives being ‘really helpful’ (Matilda). They stressed how such financial support offset that which would otherwise be a ‘worry’ (Matilda) for them. For John and Matilda, very specific financial incentives informed their decision-making around where they would study:

*“Yeah, if I go to X university they fund for your course as long as you stay within X [location] for like... The next two years after so like employment in X [location], but I feel like if I've done six years, I'll probably end up staying there anyway” (Matilda).*

Another important aspect of Widening Participation initiatives coming through participant narratives, was the role of information, advice and guidance (IAG). All participants spoke to how IAG supported their understanding of the true cost of HE and how ‘it’s definitely worth the investment’ (Timothy). For Proud, it was the IAG she

received through a specific Widening Participation initiative ('HE Plus'), that helped her to believe that her 'barriers can be removed':

"Yeah. So, they gave more information because I think sometimes schools think you know it, even if you don't know it. So this, just because it was just about university, it gave you a lot more pinpointed information. And because it was made by universities it was more tailored as well".

Proud, like John, found the very act of being put forward for a Widening Participation programme, in and of itself, empowering. Proud reflected on the confidence gained just by knowing that staff believed she can 'get to that point'. For John, the opportunity to visit the university he hoped to attend and engage in lectures and other activities, really allowed him to envisage himself in what he worried might feel an 'alien' space:

"Umm, to start when you go so, so when I went to X university open day, I started to meet people, and students, and you with...but then start to realize that the gap is not that, not as big as you think it is...Umm, it's, it's just, different, sort of, norms in the way that you speak rather than... there's no difference in intellect or anything like that. And that, that's where, sort of like, the barrier has been crossed for me".

#### ***4.7.4 Differences across narratives in relation to research question 2: What do post-16 students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds report to have been facilitative in their aspirations of continuation into Higher Education?***

The sub-headings within this section will outline some key differences between participant stories, the denouement they are invested in, and why.

##### **4.7.4.i Motivation to Make a Difference**

In the stories of Matilda, Proud and Timothy, there were clear declarations of a wish to work toward 'mak[ing] that difference' (Proud) in the world. Their narratives were moving toward them 'mak[ing] the biggest impact [they] can' (Timothy). Proud's own passion for education would see her striving to step into teaching, 'to help others

to find their sense of purpose'. Whilst Timothy wanted to 'improve the climate for the better', stressing that 'even if [he does not] get the benefits of it, people in future will'. Matilda's want to become a 'children's mental health nurse' was no less personal, speaking directly to her own story:

"I feel like if it wasn't for the things that happened, then I wouldn't be who I am now? So, it has a lot to do with like what I wanna do, where I wanna go... stuff like that. I feel like it's kind of, it also gives me the motivation, because I know what's happened to me, and I don't want it to happen to other people, so, it's like, that's my way of looking at it".

John does not speak directly to such motivations for pursuing a career as an RAF Officer.

#### 4.7.4.ii Extra-Curricular Activities

An interesting difference emerged across participants storied experiences of engaging in extra-curricular activities. John and Timothy engaged in extra-curricular clubs and activities, such as 'air-cadets' and 'boxing' (John), 'Karate' and 'orienteering' (Timothy). Conversely, Proud and Matilda, through necessity, engaged in paid employment outside of their studies. In both respects, all participants gained valuable 'experience', 'skills' and 'confidence' in relation to these wider activities. John states that his engagement with air-cadets, not only confirmed his desire to be an RAF Officer, but also that it enabled him to feel confident that he 'can operate and function and thrive in different environments with different people'. This is perhaps especially important given that John is set to apply for attendance at a Russell Group University. This acknowledgement is all the more important given that John believes that there can be a 'class barrier' around accessing such clubs and ultimately careers.

***4.7.5 Similarities across narratives in relation to research question 3: What factors do post-16 students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds perceive might continue to support them in realising their aspirations going forward?***

The following sub-sections describe categories representative of the similarities found across stories regarding what these YP think might continue to support them in realising their aspirations.

**4.7.5.i Financial Planning**

Across stories the participants acknowledged that whilst ‘financing is a barrier...it’s one [they have] planned for’ (Timothy). Financial incentives, as part of specific university Widening Participation initiatives, would offer much needed financial support to John and Matilda. John, for instance, is pursuing a place at a university where there is “a lot of financial support, which sort of, umm, would make...life a lot easier”. John further spoke to the cost of living generally in the area to which he was applying, stressing that this was ‘a lot behind the X university (a Russell Group university) application’. John and Timothy both stressed that their prospective university towns were ‘very cheap to live in’ (John). John conversely stressed that there were ‘some universities that [he’d] say would possibly be off limits’ due to the cost of living in the area. Proud and Matilda were already planning for the potential pitfalls of financing their studies, with this being a ‘worry’ (Matilda) for them. Both were already working jobs and saving, with Proud even securing a post to come back to over the university holiday periods:

“And I know that, whatever money I make, I can just put it straight to uni because I’ve already got this job for other things I have to pay for, so I know I can just keep all the money that would come from it”.

#### 4.7.5.ii Personal Investment: Grit and Academic Resilience

Already outlined under section 4.7.1.i these participants own levels of grit, perseverance of effort and academic resilience (alongside more general resilience), were perceived as being potentially facilitative to further ensuring they go on to achieve their aspirations.

#### **4.7.6 Differences across narratives in relation to research question 3: What factors do post-16 students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds perceive might continue to support them in realising their aspirations going forward?**

The following sub-section illuminates one key difference emerging across participant stories regarding factors perceived as possibly supporting them in realising their aspirations going forward.

##### 4.7.6.i Connection

Whilst there was some trepidation for all participants around moving away to university, Timothy stressed most strongly his awareness that the contextual/cultural shift may not be right for him: “I, yeah, really hate the idea of clubbing and stuff like...I just...see it as like, kind of...not worth the time and the money and the effort”. Timothy, by his own admission, is not that ‘social’, though does enjoy close relationships as part of smaller friendship groups sharing his interests. John and Proud conversely spoke to a desire to make ‘new connections’ on moving away. They were considering joining new clubs and societies that would enable them to do this. There was no desire for any of the participants to lose sight of the connections they already enjoyed at home. And John stressed a particular awareness of how new connections would need to be made in order to make the move to university feel less ‘alien’ to him:

“So possibly some of the umm, Eaton boys that maybe hang out together, I wouldn't feel comfortable in those circles, but I think there's those spaces

for me there, so I know they've got a boxing gym, so I think I could sort of facilitate my interest through there... and obviously I've got an interest in the subject and I have belief that, that I, I, love my subjects and I'm passionate about my subjects, and I'm confident in my subject. So, I think that, umm, there's, there's sort of that there which would make me comfortable with the identity".

## **5. CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION:**

### **5.1 Overview**

This chapter, as per Polkinghorne's (1995) narrative analysis approach, is dedicated to discussing the similarities and differences highlighted across the stories shared. These "commonalities and contrasts" (Sharp, 2018, p.143), are reflected upon in relation to the research questions, giving due consideration to existing literature and research. My reflections on the learning from this research and possible recommendations around facilitating the achievement and aspirations of post-16 students from low-SEBs will then be stated. A consideration of the methodological strengths and limitations of this study will be shared, before concluding remarks are offered.

### **5.2 The Similarities and Differences Across Stories in Relation to Research Question 1:**

**Research Question 1:** What do post-16 students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds report as facilitative to their academic achievement?

Here, in line with Polkinghorne's narrative analysis approach, consideration will be given to the similarities and differences highlighted across stories with regard factors supporting participants academic progression to date. The factors highlighted (as taken from Chapter 4 – Findings – Section 4.7) will be considered in conjunction with the existing theory from related research already outlined within the literature review, and where necessary bringing in further research to support.



### 5.2.1 Similarities Across Stories:

#### 5.2.1.i Personal Investment: Grit and Academic Resilience

Similarly, to the research on grit (Lam & Zhou, 2022), this study found that participating post-16 students from a low-SEBs, communicated high levels of *perseverance of effort* in their learning; especially where they had a specific interest in, or passion for, a subject or career goal. It is important to recognise grit in these participants, not in the interests of supporting a meritocratic ideology, whereby effort, and effort alone breeds success, but to challenge the dominant narrative of YPs from low-SEBs as lacking aspiration (Strand, 2021). In contrast to such assumptions, participants' perseverance of effort, or "grit" as John labels it, highlighted in this study, supports the notion that individuals from low-SEBs may even possess higher levels of grit, given their exposure to "multiple experiences of overcoming struggles" (Kwon, 2021, p.3). This aligns with Kraus and Stephens (2012) theory of Contextualism, which would suggest that such experiences and struggles come with the territory for those from lower-SEBs. The overcoming of such struggles calls on an individual's resilience, which is well represented by Matilda's story:

#### **Excerpt from story:**

"...the kind of resilience one only knows when they have faced true adversity; *"I think my like, my grandparents have taught me to be, because they're like, we know it's happened but there's nothing we can do, so we might as well just carry on"*".

Increased academic resilience has been positively associated with students from low-SEBs "beating the odds" (Sinay, 2009, p.2). Factors said to increase

academic resilience are situated across the domains of the school and family as well as residing within the individual themselves (Cui et al., 2022); here attention is given to the role of relationships in fostering intrinsic motivation (Cui et al., 2022). This interaction between the individual and others, and the role of relationships and motivation, are further reflected upon in this chapter, being a fundamental finding from the narratives.

### 5.2.1.ii Identity and Inspiration

Participants' recognition of their socioeconomic roots, complete with acknowledgements of wider family struggle and again *graft*, seemed intrinsically linked to their own readiness to push themselves; thus linking their sense of self with their SEB. This sense of self as related to their SEB, was not perceived to be fixed, but subject to change. Proud in particular articulated how she might be able, with perseverance of effort, to overcome the barriers her mother had faced. However, this change is not always easy, as John acknowledges within his message for others in a similar situation (Section 4.2.2). John and Timothy in particular talked to a subjective sense of a classed identity that sometimes caused an inner conflict or uncertainty for them, when they were confronted with the possibility of new opportunities.

In the case of John and Matilda, inspiration to achieve and strive for opportunities, came not only, or necessarily, from their family, school or community, but also from the world of technology and television. John recognises the potential role for technology in providing that all-important access to IAG for more informed decision-making. This is an important factor to consider given that the decision-making of students from low-SEBs has previously been presented in the literature as being "flawed" (Greenbank, 2006, p.145).

Whether inspiration came from teachers in school (as was the case for Proud and Timothy), from role models in the community (as was partially true for John), or via a TV screen (as was true for Matilda) – all participants benefited from making a “link” (Timothy) between themselves and someone who was “a bit like [them]” (Matilda); someone who had gone on to be a success in their eyes (Mulcare, 2020). This *link* provided a window to their “possible future self” (Markus & Nurius, 1986) irrespective of, or even facilitated by their background (this will be further considered in relation to *aspirations* under research question 2):

“Umm, in your own mind, trying not to constrain yourself by your, by your background. But it’s, it’s almost impossible to do that...But I think for me it was more a channelling my background into different areas” (John).

#### 5.2.1.iii Teacher Support/Investment

Similarly, to the recent research of Janda (2022), Mulcare (2020) and Keane et al., (2018), all participants suggested the integral role of school staff in supporting and believing in them; this is also reflected in the research around academic resilience, whereby relationships with school staff are perceived to be a protective factor for students from low-SEBs (Cui et al., 2022).

Proud’s reference to teachers who “actually cared” speaks to Keane et al’s (2018) research that highlights the need for “care”, “active support” and “encouragement” (Mulcare, 2020, p.50). This active support and encouragement features across stories and are reflected further under the following section that pertains to aspirations and enrolment to widening participation initiatives. As outlined within the literature review, the formation of a reciprocal relationship between staff members and students, is said to be aided by the enablement of pupil voice

(Cunningham et al., 2020). Again, Proud speaks to this, even expressing an allowance to “rant” when she needed to; whilst Timothy stresses the importance of simply having someone there to “go and talk to for a bit”, someone who will listen and show interest.

Teachers showing an interest in the whole child is of further import (Mulcare, 2020) and is again reflected within this research, with Matilda sharing how her Head of Year “*knows the highs and the lows*”, in relation to her life outside of school; and Timothy promoting the importance of teachers trying to meet his individual learning needs on account of his dyslexia diagnosis. Mulcare (2020) stresses that teachers *connecting* with their students and “showing an interest in who they are” (p.51), illustrates a level of investment that serves to engage and motivate them further. John speaks directly to this:

“...when you start doing well, your teachers, especially when you go from doing poor to doing well, they start to motivate you a lot. Umm, so, I thought that sort of helped” (John).

#### 5.2.1.iv External (Eco)Systems Support/Investment

This research further highlights the role for parents and carers in the educational attainment of their children (Reay, 2013; Zhang et al., 2020). Both John and Timothy’s stories speak to the investment of their parents in their education, whether this is through simply *being there*, enabling engagement with extra-curricular activities, or through financial planning and support; these supporting factors could be viewed as going some way to equipping John and Timothy with a little cultural, social, and economic capital to take forward (Bourdieu, 1973-1984). However, it is important to note here that the support of parents/carers is not a sole predictor of student success alone and should not be relied upon to negate the impact of other external

forces, such as “structural and material disadvantage” (Mulcare, 2020, p.52). Crossley (2018) further warns of the dangers of falling into blaming parents of low-SES, for their seeming lack of involvement, when research tells us that parents may simply find it difficult to know how to engage with the world of education (Scanlon et al., 2019). Proud’s story really encapsulates this; whilst Proud’s mother encouraged her to “go for it” in her GCSEs, her mother had faced her own *barriers* in her life, which meant that Proud did not always get “those messages from home”. Importantly here, the support of others, such as her boyfriend, but also importantly the support of teachers (as alluded to above), offset this.

It is important here to recognise systems support beyond the level of ‘family investment’ (Zhang et al., 2020), in the knowledge that ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ (African proverb taken from – Reupert et al., 2022). John’s story speaks to both the constraints of his community context, but also to the support of key community members, that became role models for John. Here, similarly to the perceived investment of teaching staff, John and Timothy share an appreciation of members outside of their direct family taking a wider interest in them as a whole person (Mulcare, 2020):

*“I had a boxing coach that, umm, sort of was always very supportive and that pushed me very hard, but at the end of the session, and I always noticed he was the only coach, at the end of the session he would always ask about external stuff out of boxing... So he’d always asks me how schools going? And different stuff in my life - how the jobs going? And I sort of, thought, that sort of provided a role model and pushed me on...and that’s been a massive driver from that point on really. Umm, Yeah, definitely”.*

### 5.2.1.v Independence

Undoubtedly tied to participants grit and academic resilience is a fierce sense of independence in authoring their own story and ensuring they reach their end goal (Matilda). As Timothy states: *“I’ve always just been like...I’ll deal with it”*. This does not suggest that these YP do not recognise the role of others in supporting them in their journeys; they do and have voiced this clearly as previously shared. However, these students also spoke to a level of independence and responsibility for their learning that has been questioned in wider literature around widening participation in HE. On the contrary to the suggestion that CYP from low-SEBs engage in “flawed educational decision-making” (as captured by Greenbank, 2006, p.145), the participants within this research share stories that highlight their own role in determining their success. All participants reference their own organisation, *pragmatic planning* or application of strategic thinking to organising their time and learning. Timothy, Proud and John further reference taking on their own research into exploring possible *“pathway[s] to get you where you want to go”*. All participants further share that they have made considered decisions around subject choices at post-16, and/or in relation to their extra-curricular activities or part-time employment and volunteering– to ensure relevance to their overall aspirations.

This sense of independence in achieving their goals and the success they have enjoyed so far, might be suggestive of notions of individualism. It is notable that this rejects the sentiment that students from low-SEBs typically rely on interdependence and as such are likely to struggle in the transition to HE: “in which the dominant cultural expectation is one of independence, self-expression, and personal freedom” (Kraus & Stephens, 2012, p.646).

*"I've always kind of created like a chart in my head of, it's like, if I can do it, it doesn't matter... And like, if I can't do it, there's nothing I can do about it anyway" (Timothy).*

## **5.2.2 Differences Across Stories**

### 5.2.2.i 'Other-Imposed Prophecies' (Adler et al., 2012)

In line with Merton's (1948) self-fulfilling prophecy, and more specifically other-imposed prophecies, John warns of the negative impact that teacher's poor opinions can have over time, with students gradually beginning to believe and internalise the messages they receive. This can impact both self-esteem and subsequent behaviour and academic performance. For John this may even have had a part to play in his taking on the role of the "*laury, working class lad*" at secondary school. This touches upon Steele and Aronson's (1995) 'stereotype threat', with the dangers of negative stereotyping and giving leverage to a meritocratic ideology already having been referred to within this chapter.

Conversely however, Matilda and Proud (and I note this is also reflected somewhat in my own story – appendix 12), felt somewhat motivated to grasp opportunities to "prove other's wrong". As Theile et al., (2017) suggests:

"[A]lthough low expectations were a source of frustration and anger to individuals, it may also represent another way that identity – including beliefs about how they are perceived by others – is linked with motivation, and the desire to prove other people wrong" (p.58).

It is of course worth noting, that for both Proud and Matilda (and in the case of the author's story) there was perhaps enough support, investment, and belief from others, to enable us to challenge, rather than accept these other-imposed prophecies.

### 5.2.2.ii Separation from Local Context

Whilst John, who always felt “held back” by his local context, and Matilda, had consciously separated themselves a little from their home community, Timothy felt less of a pull away from his home environment:

*“Like some people in [my home location] are always trying to just like, I guess, trying to escape [it], but I wouldn’t mind living not ...[here] my whole life because there’s places to be, places to see, but...like it’s got some strong underlying sentiment and like the area and its history and stuff”.*

Timothy’s fondness of his home environment is largely attributed to his love of the outdoors: *“Like I probably found comfort in the outdoors, just like the fresh air maybe”*. Timothy makes reference to the “dense greenery” that he can see outside of his window at home, and this might be beneficial to both Timothy’s academic performance and a feeling that his environment enables, rather than holds him back; as suggested by recent research that has found “a link between the abundance of trees and academic performance outside a low-income setting” (Young, 2019).

Broadly, participants did not question the quality of their education, though John hints at the possibility that the quality of provision may historically have differed across postcodes. John could see how his parent’s decision to send him to a state school in an area where “university is a bigger push” ultimately benefited him. Though he also felt that “state school schools [more generally] are starting to improve, especially [with]in [his] own area”. This notion of the possibility of different provision across different postcodes may point to John’s momentary assumption (and something that is later explored under Section 5.3.1.i) that his potential peers from “Eaton” and “St Pauls” would “be more intelligent than [him]”.



It is important to note that all participants had connections with their home and community that they valued and that they would wish to maintain, despite their endeavours to broaden their horizons through HE. Matilda even spoke to wanting to almost replicate “home” in her new university location, not wishing to go anywhere that was “too big” for fear of “*get[ting] lost*”.

### 5.2.2.iii The Role of Covid-19

Whilst John and Matilda could see their own efforts within the teacher assessed grades, they were awarded for their GCSEs during Covid-19, Timothy struggled to take pride in his results. Whilst this provides something of a contrast on the face of it, it also shows, for all three, a tendency to attribute their success, at least partially, to external factors (Manstead, 2018, p.274); again, this is in line with the theory of Contextualism (Kraus & Stephens, 2012), and how individuals from low-SEBs are prone to feelings of not having control over their own life and destiny. Of course, as John’s story suggests, this does not mean that these YP won’t seek such control over their own story.

## **5.3 The Similarities and Differences Across Stories in Relation to Research Question 2:**

**Research Question 2:** What do post-16 students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds report to have been facilitative in their aspirations of continuation into Higher Education?

### **5.3.1 Similarities Across Stories:**

#### 5.3.1.i Personal Investment: Having a Specific Goal/Passion

All four participants had a clear passion for their subject, and/or a specific career goal. Proud’s path was clear and targeted to teaching; similarly Matilda’s move

into HE would simply be *“the automatic next step up for what [she] want[s] to do”*. John also sees university as a non-negotiable, given his own career goals:

*“There's sort of this divide... Yeah, that has then, this sort of, this divide where you can't access these things unless you go to university? So, it's this sort of officer's thing where you go and fly and you get to get a sponsorship onto joining the RAF as an officer after. So, that was a sort of, a big motivation for me”.*

While Timothy may appear less committed to one path in particular, having more than one possible option in mind, he is clear that these are back-up options; *“like, if I don't get into university or suddenly I just don't really feel like going”*. As previously alluded to in relation to these students showing a certain level of independence in their learning and life goals that is not typically associated with YP from low-SEBs (Kraus & Stephens, 2012); these students talked about the decisions they had made in relation to their studies and extra-curricular activities and part-time employment that would give them the best possible chance of achieving what they needed to get to university.

This considered decision-making challenges the usual narrative around students from low-SEBs making “flawed educational decision[s]” (Greenbank, 2006, p.145). It also speaks to the work of Gartland and Smith (2018), which suggests that students from low-SEBs can develop a “degree of confidence and entitlement in relation to academic knowledge” (Reay et al., 2010, p. 109) where they commit to a particular vocational pathway and focus their efforts. This focus enables YP to develop the necessary skills and knowledge in a specific field needed to see themselves as “successful learners” (Gartland & Smith, 2018, p.642). Here students commitment to their interests can also serve to develop their personal intelligence (Kauffman, 2023),

which will further encourage a “sense of entitlement in relation to academic knowledge” (Reay et al., 2010, p. 109). For instance, John spoke to how his being “good at [his] subject” enabled him to realise that he was intellectually equal to those applying for a place at his first choice Russell Group university; thus, breaking down barriers and ensuring his application to HE:

*“Initially I was shocked and initially I, I was sort of taking aback and thought these people must be very highly intellectual and very, very intelligent and once I sort of broke it down, the conversation barrier, I thought, that... possibly they aren't, umm, more intelligent than me? And sort of, we share that interest in the subject. So I think that was the initial culture shock”.*

#### 5.3.1.ii Wider Investment: Widening Participation Initiatives

There were a few aspects that contributed to the impact of different widening participation initiatives for these participants. These aspects include financial support, IAG, exposure to HE environments and experiences, and teacher belief in their potential. Each aspect will be explored a little more under their respective sub-headings below:

##### *Financial Support / Funding*

Matilda and John were both pursuing places at universities that offered a package of financial support and incentives. They emphasized the importance of this in their university choices, given that financing their future studies in HE was a concern for them both. For Matilda this meant a commitment to working in the field of children’s mental health nursing within that location two years post qualification, which she acknowledged was a big commitment but one that offset the otherwise financial “worry” associated with taking on further study. Matilda too spoke about how she was

already benefiting from post-16 bursary funding, which she stated “is really helpful” in facilitating her current studies. Timothy was also benefiting from this post-16 bursary fund, as had Proud when she had completed her A-levels the year prior, before taking a year out to raise funds for university through employment (this will be discussed more under research question 3).

The financial support and incentives associated with both their current, and future studies, is clearly impactful, in line with Robinson and Salvestrini’s (2020) review of Widening Participation initiatives. Similarly to their suggestions however, there is a very mixed picture as to what financial support might look like across these initiatives, with some YP, such as Proud, feeling the need to also secure employment to financially support their studies.

#### *Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)*

Related to financial support, Timothy and John in particular, commented on how a focus on understanding the true financial cost of study at HE, was useful. Timothy, who like his parents, has always been careful with money and considered in his financial decision-making, has been reassured through the IAG he has received that university is an “investment”. Similarly Proud stressed that her engagement with a widening participation programme, and the inherent IAG received, allowed her to feel that her “barriers can be removed”:

*“Yeah. So, they gave more information because I think sometimes schools think you know it, even if you don't know it. So this, just because it was just about university, it gave you a lot more pinpointed information. And because it was made by universities it was more tailored as well”.*

Proud clearly benefited from this input, and this is something that John felt he had, to some extent, to seek out himself, before a specific subject teacher would eventually recognise his *potential* and suggest progression to HE. Here however, John emphasised the role of technology in being enabled to obtain that information. This speaks to the growing research base around how technology can be used to enhance the IAG opportunities available as part of widening participation (Castleman & Page, 2015). Participants appreciation of IAG overall in this study confirms that IAG does matter as Robinson and Salvestrini (2020) suggest.

### *Exposure to the HE Environment and Experiences*

As the only participant looking to progress to a Russell Group university, John had enrolled upon their specific widening participation programme. This programme included visits to the university, beyond those more widely available and as part of the interview process. John commented within his interview on the impact this visit, and making those connections with potential peers had, stressing that what might previously have felt to John like an “alien” space, now seemed more accommodating. These opportunities for John to visit campus and talk to peers and experience lectures, allowed him to realise not only is he cognitively as able as his peers from independent schools, but that also that he has things in common with them. Such opportunities for exposure to the HE space and curriculum, feel really important in not only widening participation for YP who are underrepresented in university, but also in challenging stereotype threats (Steele & Aronson, 1995) and potential ‘self-fulfilling’ (Merton, 1948) and ‘other-imposed’ prophecies (Adler et al., 2012) that might exist for all those attending. Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis could be helpful here; where contact between ingroup and outgroup participants leads to a reduction in negative perceptions that can otherwise shape interactions and behaviour between individuals.

## *Potential*

Given the risks of ‘other-imposed’ self-fulfilling prophecies (Adler et al., 2012), it is not surprising that the participants in this study partially attribute their aspirations for HE, to the belief and encouragement of significant teachers, who stressed that they felt these YP could achieve more. Proud articulates how staff recommending her for enrolment to a widening participation programme enabled her to believe in herself and her potential:

*“Well, because it was an invite only scheme as well. I was like, well, clearly they see that I can... get to that point... Yeah, cos my head of sixth form, applied for it for me... then knowing that she, and because obviously my teachers would have had to have told her... that they all thought that I could... that gave me the motivation to do it”.*

Proud’s quote illustrates the need for a more situated understanding of potential (Gazeley, 2019). It shows that there is a role for others in motivating individuals to see and believe in their own potential and thus feel motivated to take the necessary steps to realise it. I would argue that the same can be said for aspiration; it is not something that we have, or do not have, but rather something that we allow ourselves to give effort to if we believe our aspirations are truly achievable (McCabe et al., 2022).

### **5.3.2 Differences Across Stories**

#### **5.3.2.i Motivation to Make a Difference**

In line with the literature, Matilda, Proud and Timothy’s aspirations could be seen to be illustrative of a tendency toward more empathetic, prosocial behaviour (Kraus & Stephens, 2012; Manstead, 2018). All stated a desire to “make a difference” and help others in their chosen future career. This disposition might be the result of

Contextualism; their own context and lived experiences (Kraus & Stephens, 2012).

This certainly appears true in the case of Matilda:

*"I feel like if it wasn't for the things that happened, then I wouldn't be who I am now? So, it has a lot to do with like what I wanna do, where I wanna go... stuff like that. I feel like it's kind of, it also gives me the motivation, because I know what's happened to me, and I don't want it to happen to other people, so, it's like, that's my way of looking at it".*

Whilst John does not speak to this directly, his goal to become an RAF officer does place him in a service whose business it is to "provide assistance", "prevent conflict" and "protect" (Royal Air Force; RAF, n.d.). Therefore, this may or may not contrast with the other participant's stories, it would depend on John's intrinsic motivation for becoming an officer, and this is something that was not explicitly declared.

### 5.3.2.ii Extra-Curricular Activities

John and Timothy speak clearly to the benefits of engaging with extra-curricular activities. Timothy learnt that he could lead and was able to hone his strategic thinking. While John learned that he was able to *"function and thrive in different environments with different people"*; speaking especially to his involvement with air-cadets, which he feels to be *"a very, very middle-class thing to do"*. In line with Bourdieu (1979; 1984) this engagement with extra-curricular activity, particularly activities that are perceived to be *"a very, very, middle-class thing to do"* (John), might offer these participants both cultural and social capital. John's exposure to a middle-class environment and activity, might enable him to begin to understand and develop the skills to navigate such systems and contexts as well as providing social connections within his field of interest

(Kraus & Stephens, 2012). John himself refers to how his ‘*confidence*’ and ‘*speaking*’ have developed as a result of his engagement with this extra-curricular activity.

Whilst Matilda and Proud could not offer comment on engagement with extra-curricular clubs in the same way, they did talk of their employment, and voluntary activities outside of school that offered similar benefits, and capital within their chosen fields of interest. Again, Matilda in particular stressed how her part-time work not only supported her financially, but also in her learning:

*“I’m working in health and social care, so, it’s literally my job, so I’m able to write like essays on exactly everything...and I’m getting distinctions in like, in the mocks which is brilliant”.*

Whilst working part-time might offer YP from low-SEBs a chance at obtaining capital within their particular vocation, as well as supporting economic capital, literature suggests that this can have consequences for their studies (Lessky & Unger, 2022). This latter point is one that will be returned to under research question 3.

#### **5.4 The Similarities and Differences Across Stories in Relation to Research Question 3:**

**Research Question 3:** What factors do post-16 students from low-socioeconomic background perceive might continue to support them in realising their aspirations going forward?



### **5.4.1 Similarities Across Stories:**

#### **5.4.1.i Financial Planning**

For all four participants, finances were something that they had planned for, given that they knew it would be a concern. Timothy felt that this financial planning in advance now meant that finances were no longer a barrier:

*“...financing is a barrier, but it's one I've planned for...and I know it's coming, so...it's, it's not really a barrier, it's just a thing that I need to get through”.*

Timothy's choice of university, like John and Matilda, factored into this financial planning; where Matilda had chosen a university that would fund her course, John and Timothy had chosen locations where they believed it would be “cheap” to live. John emphasised that there were some universities, such as in London, that were simply “off limits”, on account of how much it would cost to live there; irrespective of how much he might “love the course” that they offer. This illustrates, quite clearly, how one's aspirations might be, at best shaped, and at worst stifled, by the realities of one's material existence and context (McCabe et al., 2022). However, the driven and resourceful YP within this study have chosen to do what they can, with what they have, in terms of financial planning; mapping out the means to achieve their goals.

As part of her financial plan, Proud was taking a year out to work and save money to support her studies going forward and had also lined up work to return to over the university holidays to keep her funds topped up. Again, this shows an incredible work ethic and commitment to achieve that moves us miles away from the stereotypical perceptions around low aspirations. Matilda is similarly already juggling part-time work and her studies, and whilst I know both have incredible grit and resilience, the literature would warn of the possible pitfalls associated with working

whilst studying; including a risk of dropping out of one's studies prematurely, illness and possibly impacting academic performance (Lesky & Unger, 2022). There are of course positives to working whilst studying, as alluded already, and Lesky and Unger (2022) would suggest it is more about getting the balance right in terms of time.

#### 5.4.1.ii Grit and Academic Resilience

Grit and academic resilience has already been highlighted under Section 5.2.1, in relation to research question 1; but it bears further relevance here and will undoubtedly help all of these YP navigate any challenges that present as they look to actualise their aspirations.

#### **5.4.2 Differences Across Stories:**

##### 5.4.2.i Connection

John and Proud both exuded a certain excitement around moving away and making new connections (whilst also speaking to maintaining connections at home). John's story in particular speaks to his consciousness of finding those spaces where he feels he will fit in within the HE environment, that previous research (and John) tells us can feel "alien" for students from low-SEBs (Carruthers-Thomas, 2018):

#### **Excerpt from story:**

"John's *"passion for [his] subject"* would provide not only a gateway into HE in terms of courses he felt he could apply for and excel at, but also provide *"common ground"*, a *"shared subject interest"*, which he believes will enable him to find a *"space for [himself]"* at university going forward, a space that might previously have felt somewhat *"alien"* to him".

John is clearly invested in looking for the commonalities and interests between himself and his peers, to help him interact and achieve a sense of belonging (Rogers, 1951) at university; John refers to how his extra-curricular interests will further support him here. John not only discussed his engagement with the air cadets, but also his boxing, as enjoyed in his home community. As alluded to under Section 5.3.2.ii previously, this extra-curricular activity may offer John some social and cultural capital that he can depend upon to help navigate the HE world and find his place within it (DiMaggio, 1979).

Timothy may wish to similarly lean into his extra-curricular activities, and particularly his love of the outdoors, given that *“one of the things [he’s] not really looking forward to the most, is like the party side of it”*. Timothy thrives with fewer, but closer connections, and as such, does wonder about how he will fit with university life. This may be why Timothy has thought of alternative options and pathways to more than one possible career, where the others have not. This may have less to do with Timothy’s SEB and more to do with his personality and personal preferences. Nonetheless, it further flags the need for HE to be a more open and accommodating space for all individual differences and backgrounds.

## **5.5 Summary of Key Discussion Points**

Whilst the section (Section 5.6) below will reflect upon the strengths and limitations of this research, this section will offer a summary as to what the above discussion of findings means overall and how this might impact educational policy, practice and research going forward.

In answering the research questions above, it is apparent that this research reiterates many key findings from previous research in the field of attainment and

aspirations in relation to one's socioeconomic situation. Be it the benefits of acquiring cultural and social capital via extra-curricular activity (Bourdieu, 1979), or investing in a vocational interest that offers YP a chance to see themselves as "successful learners" (Gartland & Smith, 2018, p.642).

This research strongly supports Robinson and Salvestrini's (2020) findings from their review of widening participation initiatives, in suggesting that these are facilitative in enabling YP from low-SEBs to aspire to HE. However, there are different aspects to this, and I would propose that investment in YP is as much about relational and system support as it is financial. The findings of this research promote the need for a more situated understanding (Gazely, 2019) of the notions of *potential*, *academic resilience* (or *grit*) and *aspiration*. The findings suggest that aspiration, like potential and academic resilience, is cultivated; it is shaped, and susceptible to stifling, by one's context (McCabe et al., 2022). Interactions between the individual and the systems with which they are a part, and especially reciprocal relationships between social actors (i.e., student-teacher relationships), can mediate the risks posed by Contextualism (Kraus & Stephens, 2012). Students' grit and academic resilience, and ultimately their own motivation, is equally fostered through interactions and within relationships where there is a perceived investment and *belief* in them. YP's perception of how others perceive them comes through as incredibly important in helping them both to aspire to HE and achieve in line with what is needed to actualise those aspirations; here the very real risk of unchecked bias, stereotype threat and other imposed prophecies, is to be heeded (Doyle et al., 2023; Adler, 2012; Steele et al, 1995).

Despite this emphasis on relationships and support, one striking finding within this research was participants levels of independence in organising their learning,

planning and decision-making; and how this perhaps spoke to their socioeconomic background and perceived classed identities. Their willingness to “put in a shift” and “just deal with it” on their own, challenges the notion that individuals from low-SEBs are more inclined to interdependence (Manstead, 2018). As emphasised above, this does not suggest that these YP do not need the input and investment of others but gives credit to their own motivation and effort equally. Of course, participant’s motivation will have been further facilitated through key connections and the development of their competence in being able to plan and organise their own learning. This reflects Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory, as promoted by the British Psychological Society’s (BPS; 2021) ‘From Poverty to Flourishing’ briefing paper; as do John’s own words about what has helped him get to where he is today: *“I think...that a lot of that was motivation from external sources and self-motivation as well”*. Here John authentically articulates exactly the concept put forward by Ryan and Deci (2000), that intrinsic motivation depends equally on the input of others and one’s interactions with external systems.

Whilst I note that all YP would benefit from such relational approaches and empowering interactions and supports across systems, it is worth emphasising that for YP from low-SEBs, such efforts may be even more impactful and therefore imperative. The participants within this study spoke to feelings of inferiority at times; whether this was around comparing oneself intellectually to peers of higher-SES, or in relation to their exposure to the limiting beliefs of others at home or in school. In line with Adler’s (2012) other-imposed self-fulfilling prophecy hypothesis, and also leaning into the narrative notion that individual stories are influenced by wider societal and political narratives, it may be that YP’s exposure to the dominant narrative around low-SES and underachievement has become a little internalised. However, and with hope,

these participants conversely illustrate how the opposite can be true, if teachers and parents and wider community members show they “believe” in the YP.

The findings of this research, around what facilitated these YP from low-SEB’s in their academic achievement and with their aspirations for HE, suggest the need for investment at various levels: at the level of the individual YP; from their support network of family, friends and teachers; and at the level of systems. This notion of multi-level investment maps onto Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Model of Human Development (2001), with interactions and influence between systems and individuals being paramount. As per Ryan and Deci’s (2000) SDT, the individual’s motivation, grit, perseverance of effort and academic resilience is supported or stifled by those in the YP’s circle of support: their family members, teachers and key community figures. This support, and perceived investment from those around the CYP counters the otherwise threat of contextualism (Kraus & Stephens, 2012). Where they feel they are championed by parents, carers, teachers and/or have wider community support, YP will aspire to meet the potential that others have recognised in them. They will channel their efforts, invest in a career path, and make thoughtful decisions that support them to plan for their success. They will show independence skills akin to those typically afforded to those of a higher class (Kraus & Stephens, 2012). The threat of contextualism can be further challenged by system change. Investment by way of Widening Participation initiatives and improving standards in schools, irrespective of postcode, can have huge implications in making HE more accessible. Success of these initiatives may be more likely if importance and investment is given to the relationships developed by those involved in delivering the initiatives (as highlighted within the literature review – sections 2.6.2/ 2.6.5). Community level interest and investment in accessible extra-curricular activities for

YP, could offer further capital and impetus for the pursual of HE. Any of these might contribute to a shift in wider ideologies, norms and beliefs at the macrosystems level, challenging the dominant narrative that CYP of low-SEB backgrounds do not aspire to, achieve for, and attend HE.

### ***5.5.1 Implications for Education and Suggestions for Future Research:***

The afore outlined focus on investment across systems is akin to Bronfenbrenner's (2001) Bioecological Systems Model of Human Development. This suggests implications for practice that move beyond the role for educational psychology alone. Though due consideration is given to how broadly we could work as (Trainee) Educational Psychologists (EP's). With the importance of the microsystem in mind, this research emphasises the need for education staff to truly embrace the possibility that all pupils have potential. For staff to consider that they have a key role in facilitating this potential. Reciprocal relationships have emerged to be incredibly important, and the adoption of relational practice in the classroom will facilitate such connections between staff and CYP (Mulcare, 2020). Integral to this, is a greater awareness of, and effort to challenge the dominant narrative around low-SES and academic underachievement. There is a need for all educational professionals, EPs included, to challenge their own subconscious biases and ensure that these are not limiting a CYPs potential and aspirations. At the same time there needs to be a greater understanding of the very real barriers that many students from low-SEBs face, and an appreciation of how Contextualism (Kraus & Stephens, 2012) can impact and impede progress for these students. There may be a role for schools in supporting more material needs, through access to resources here, i.e., the necessary technologies needed to support home learning for instance. It will be important for all schools to maintain high standards and hold high aspirations for their

pupils, irrespective of post-code. There may be wider implications for teacher training and ongoing professional development, directly linked to the purposes of widening participation. EP's can support schools in all these areas, supporting the interaction between the CYP and the immediate school system, or facilitating communication and collaboration between home and school. EP's might offer training around, and the implementation of, more relational practices and policies in school, or in offering advice and guidance around how to support CYP in receipt of FSM and make best use of Pupil Premium (Janda, 2022).

Further considering the impact of interactions between the individual and systems supporting, we must be minded to our own work with CYP within educational psychology. This research has stressed the importance of empowerment for YP through pupil voice, and as such our work should always look to enable this self-advocacy. Here I pull on the recently published research of Janda (2022) in offering coaching and mentoring approaches, motivational interviewing, and I would add the use of narrative therapy talking tools and activities such as that used in this research. The section that follows (Section 5.6) will reflect upon how the participants found the use of a narrative therapy activity “useful” and “enjoyable”, and this may illustrate how much these YP value the opportunity to talk their academic journey through with an educational professional and how empowering this can be for them.

Educational Psychology overall has a role in promoting and enacting the practice proposed in the BPS's ‘from poverty to flourishing’ campaign (2021) as alluded to above and outlined within the literature review. Here we can ensure that this macrosystem thinking within psychology feeds into the systems directly supporting the child. This is essential in challenging the more dominant narrative of low aspiration, attainment and attendance at university for CYP of low-SEB's. The campaign largely



speaks to the suggestions already offered, whereby the systems, and those working within them, recognise their role in facilitating an individual's own motivation for success through: growing their competence in knowledge and skills (there is undoubtedly a role for IAG here); which in turn will offer increased independence/autonomy (further supported through financial/material support); whilst connecting with them as a whole person to ensure they feel valued and supported when needed - as per self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Moving back in from the macro, this research again, reflects that there was further support to be drawn on for these YP within their homes and communities. EPs remit to work across all these systems mean that we are well placed to support YPs, their families, and schools in communities considered disadvantaged. I would argue that EPs are well placed to carry out further research in this area, especially around how whole communities can be better equipped to support and encourage aspirations and academic attainment for CYP from low-SEBs. Whether this might be through more accessible extra-curricular activities or in relation to IAG and inspiration. Whilst this research has succeeded in its aim of giving voice to an underrepresented and seemingly unheard population, and an alternative, positive and powerful new narrative is offered as a result; it is small scale and I would suggest the need for more qualitative research in this area in the future. I would further recommend that future research takes a broader view of aspiration and social mobility enabling a better understanding of the different routes available to YP and consideration of what supports them, when, and in what situations.

Like Robinson and Salvestrini (2020), I would suggest that there is already much that works when it comes to widening participation initiatives, especially in terms of financial support and the provision of IAG. However, some of the above

recommendations for education, or outcomes from research at the level of the community, might need to be embedded within wider widening participation policy to ensure enactment on the ground - ensuring that all-important influential interaction between systems.

## **5.6 Strengths and Limitations of the Research:**

Under this heading, consideration will be given to how the use of narrative methods for the gathering and analysis of data, strengthens or limits the impact and contribution of this research.

### **5.6.1 Strengths:**

#### **5.6.1.1 Participant's Voice**

This research achieved what it set out to do in elevating the voices of post-16 students from low-SEBs. The use of interview, and in particular the supporting tool from narrative therapy (The Mapping the Journey of Life tool – Denborough, 2014), allowed participants to think, and talk freely about their educative and wider experiences that they felt had supported their achievement to date and aspirations for the future. The use of narrative analysis meant that this voice was not lost within the analysis process. Participant's own words were foreground throughout the process of emplotment to help shape the stories that would ultimately be written by myself as the researcher. As the researcher, I relied upon the original maps created in interview together with participants, and checked afterward for validity, to shape and make sense of these stories; thus, staying very close to the original story source. Real immersion in the data, through the process of transcription and analysis, further ensured that participant voice was not lost.

#### 5.6.1.2 Validity:

As alluded to above, the individual maps were each shared with participants and feedback encouraged. Only in one case was there a misinterpretation that needed changing. This *checking out* of the maps with participants, ensured greater validity of the data.

My explicit reflexivity as researcher is another strength of this research, supporting the overall validity of the data. The sharing of my own story (appendix 12) illustrates my own awareness of my positionality within this research and allows the reader to consider the same. My position as a student from a low-SEB (albeit a more mature student) enabled me an insight into what this shared status might mean for others in a similar position and how it can feel; without allowing myself to make assumptions. In the use of active interviewing (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004), and my narration of the stories, I acknowledge my role in shaping the data. I believe that all researchers/interviewers will have this impact on the data collected in their research and hope to increase the validity of the findings from this study, by acknowledging that fact. I would argue that this acknowledgement should be a consideration for all research that situates itself within constructionism.

#### 5.6.1.3 Ethical Considerations:

The most significant methodological reflection for me as researcher of a sensitive topic, with social justice in mind, is how this felt for participants. The use of a narrative therapy tool and activity to facilitate interviews appears to have empowered participants as authors of their own story, in line with the 'Charter of Storytelling Rights' (Denborough, 2014, pp.8-9). These rights speak to individuals being able to define their own stories in "their own words... to have their lives understood in context... and their skills and knowledge acknowledged" (Denborough, 2014, pp.8-9). Table 7 below

shares participant feedback on their experience of being involved in this research, that I believe reflects this.

**Table 7:** Participant feedback following interview:

<p><b>John:</b></p> <p><i>“Thank you very much for the interview, I thoroughly enjoyed it”.</i></p> <p><i>NB. This was emailed post interview.</i></p>	<p><b>Matilda:</b></p> <p><i>“I've enjoyed it. it's been good fun... I'm so like invested in what I've got to do this week, what I've got to do next week. I don't think about what I did last week that was good...so yeah”.</i></p>
<p><b>Proud:</b></p> <p><i>“I've actually really loved doing it because, not always do you get to sit down and actually talk about this, especially all at once... Like you might bring it up occasionally to people, but it's nice to actually sit down and kind of reflect on everything”.</i></p>	<p><b>Timothy:</b></p> <p><i>“I, I think this is really good. I think this has helped me as much as when I talk to my aunts about my dyslexia, it's kind of...Cos I don't really think about what I...oh what, how would you word it, that maybe, not how much I know, but like, think about...I guess it is how much I know...So, it's kind of, helped me kind of consolidate and realise, maybe...what's there...and like...stuff like that”.</i></p>

## **5.6.2 Limitations:**

### **5.6.2.1 Sample:**

The limitations in relation to this research largely speak to issues of the sample. Given the qualitative nature of this research, and the quest for rich, nuanced narratives, it is by default a small-scale study that does not lend itself to generalisation (Liamputtong, 2017). Even where there are commonalities across accounts, it should

be remembered that this commonality exists across four stories only, and thus, these similarities cannot be considered significant in scientific terms. Rather, “(i)information-rich cases offer in-depth understanding and insights into the findings instead of empirical generalisations” (Liamputtong, 2017, p.17).

Furthermore, the nature of the sample, i.e., the diversity of their backgrounds and lived experiences, means that neither representativeness nor transferability can really be claimed. The nuances within individual narratives reflect the uniqueness of these YP, their situations and circumstance. Whilst this offers a rich picture, and opportunity for different readers to possibly relate in different ways to what they are reading, it rejects representativeness, and therefore replicability. As Simon (2019) states: “[a]rguably, the study could not be replicated as the accounts are idiosyncratic in nature and applicable to the individuals at a snapshot in time” (p.53). The notion of ‘a snapshot in time’ feels particularly important given that these YP all spoke to the implications for their education resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. Arguably then, any attempted replication of this study, despite the efforts to offer an explicit and transparent write up of the methodology, would not yield the same results, given that this study reflected education at such a unique time in our history. However, as Simon (2019) also presses, the findings are no less valid because they pertain to individual stories, recalled and reflected upon, in a particular moment in time. As Polkinghorne (1995) suggests, these unique narratives can still “provide greater insight and understanding of the topic” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.20).

A further issue relating to sampling is in relation to the studies inclusion criteria. While this has already been reflected upon to some extent within the literature review (Section 5.6) and methodology (Section 3.10.1), it is worth reiterating here, given that Timothy in particular questioned his subjective sense of class and what it meant if his

socioeconomic situation looked to be changing on account of his fathers 'new job' and his parents diligent saving. This raises interesting questions around differentiating between SES (current economic situation), SEB and social-class; the latter of which these participants appeared to identify with more. As more recent research suggests, I believe both subjective and objective measures around SEB (and/or social class) are important given the impact of one's sense of identity on their lived experience (Thiele et al., 2017).

#### 5.6.2.2 Ethical Considerations:

This reflection relates to the process of writing up and sharing research, rather than my undertaking of the research itself. I was mindful in the writing up of this research that it sparked a sense of dissonance in me; the academic conventions required for writing up doctoral level research, I believe, make this piece of work less accessible to those that would most benefit from reading it. To counter this ethical unease, I will need to be minded as to how else I might choose to disseminate this research going forward.

### **5.7 Concluding remarks**

As reflected within the summary of key discussion points (section 5.5), this research highlights a complex interplay between individuals and systems, but one that can be mediated through reciprocal relationships at the level of home, school and the community. The research findings did appear to show that any one of these systems could step in and offer more support, or investment, where another was absent or lesser available. This offers an important message to educators around the power of the teacher-student relationship, and their role in actualising a YPs potential and growing their aspirations through their own investment in them. This is in line with

Gazeley's (2019) notion of potential and aspirations (McCabe et al., 2022) being situation dependent, impacted by context and mediated by 'caring', nurturing relationships. This alternative way of conceptualising and understanding aspiration and potential feels important as it shares the load between the individual themselves and those around them. This may have important implications for the future of widening participation, where the focus might come earlier and more holistically through general teaching and learning practice, such as the adoption of more relational approaches. Whilst there might be developments for widening participation initiatives, there is a lot that already seems successful, including the availability of financial support and IAG. These supports enable young people a sense of control and autonomy in their educational decision-making, which in line with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), is of equal importance to students feeling a sense of connectedness through the afore outlined relationships, within which YP can flourish, growing in competence and thus seeing themselves as "successful learners" (Gartland & Smith, 2018, p.642). As outlined in the Implications for Practice section (section 5.5.1), there is a clear role for Educational Psychologists (EPs) in supporting these YP, their families and educational settings within their wider communities; at every level, whether supporting the YP themselves or the systems that support them, empowerment through offering an alternative narrative, will be key.

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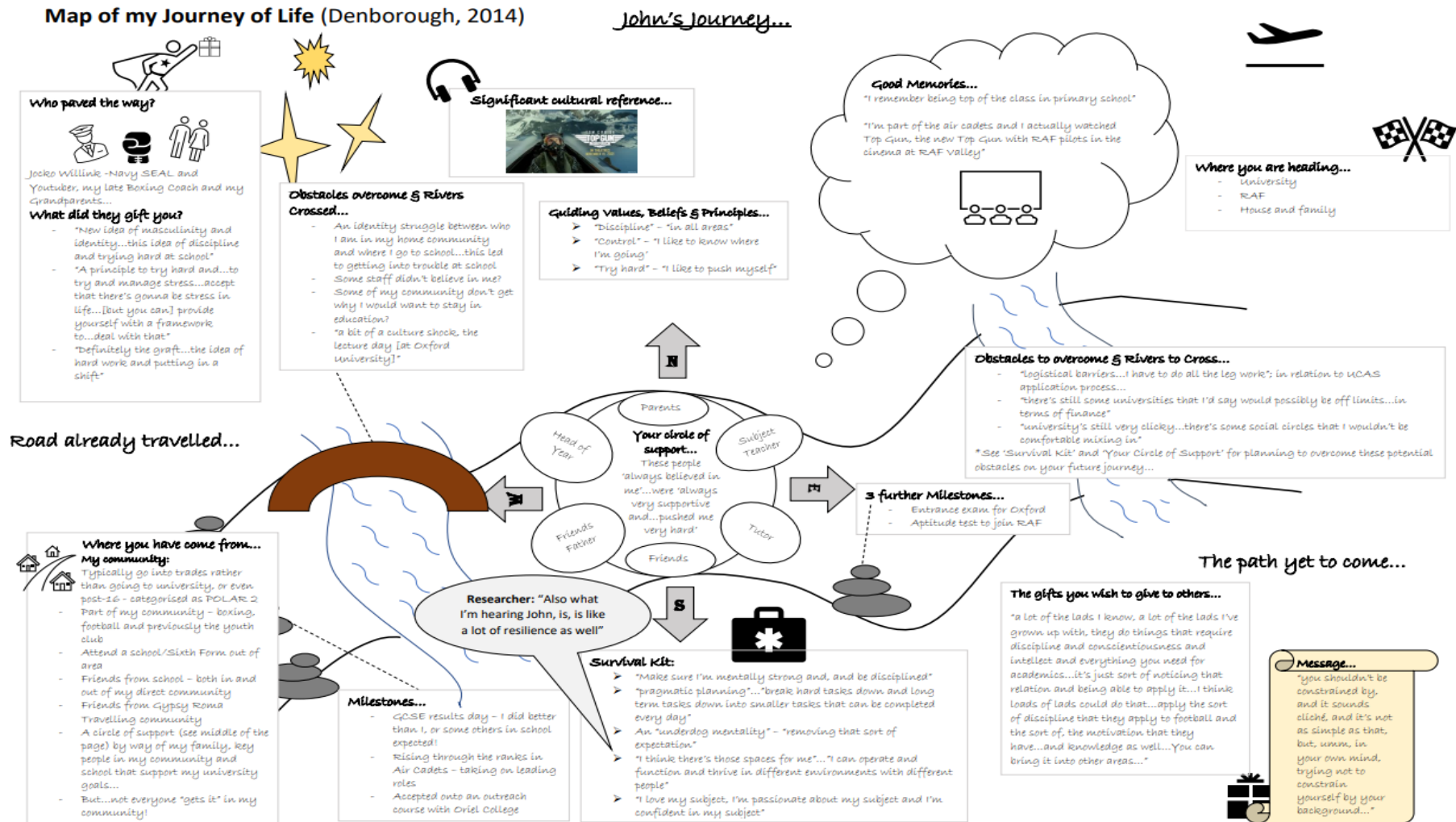
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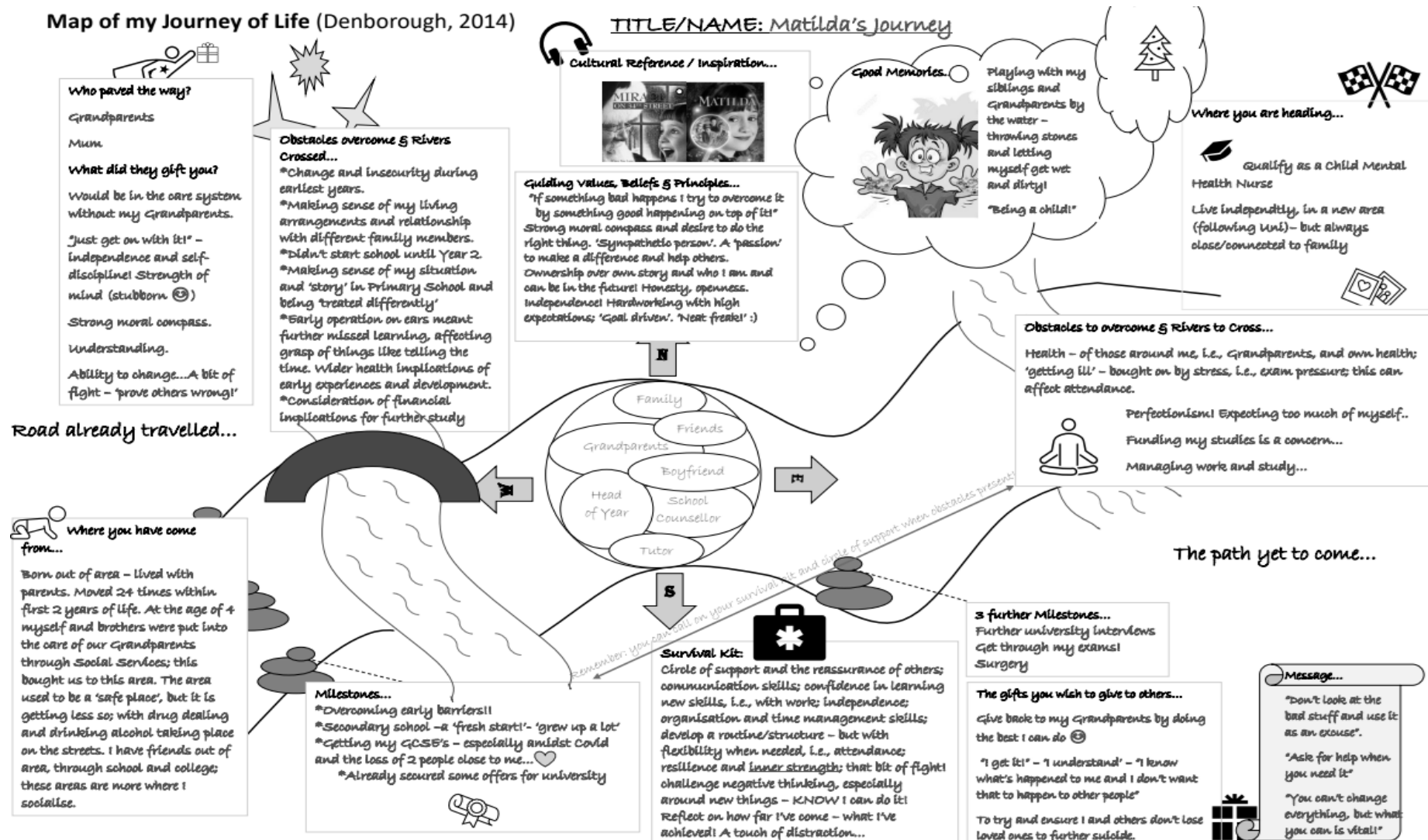
## 7. APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: John's map (adapted from The Mapping the Journey of Life by Deborough; 2014)

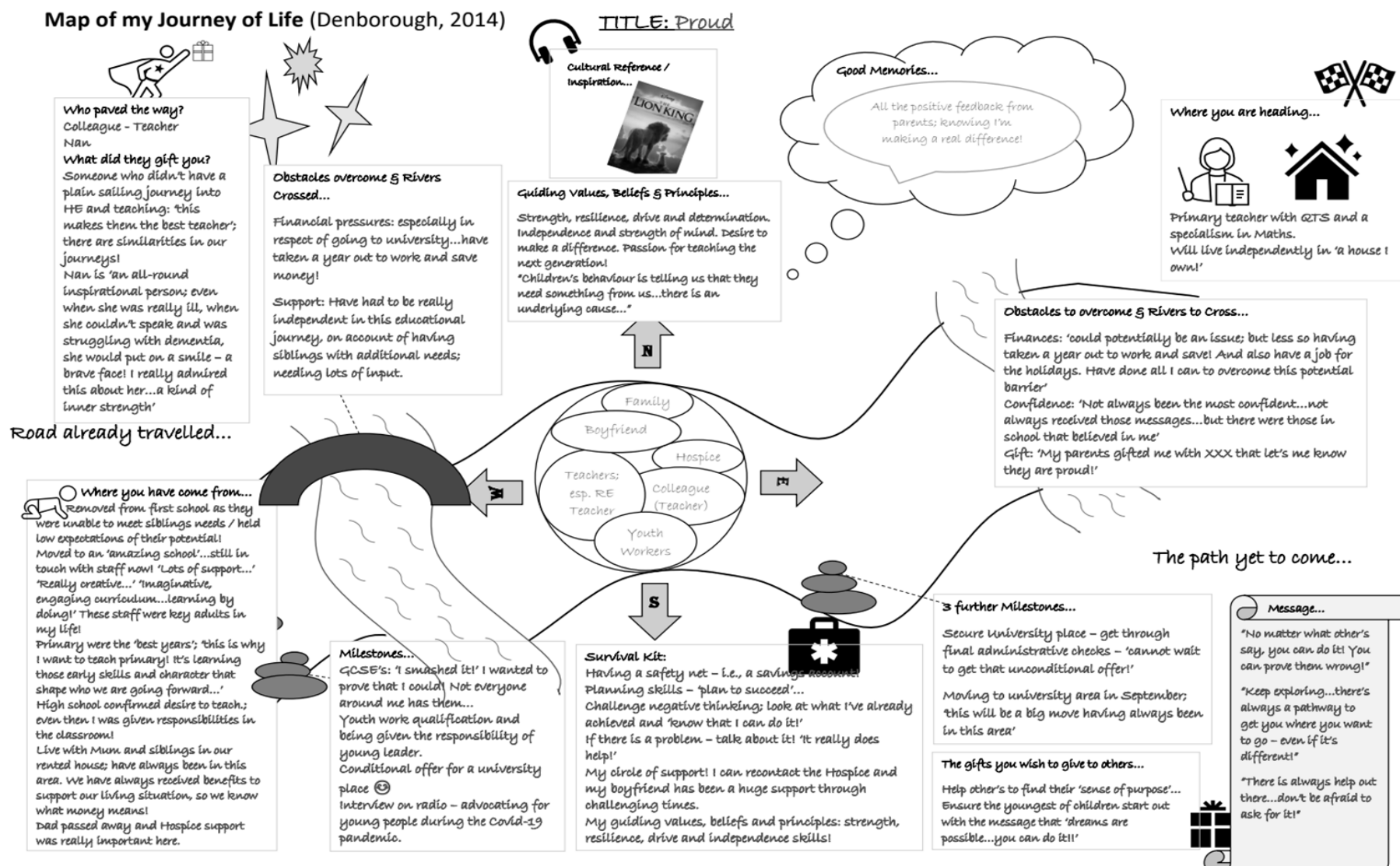




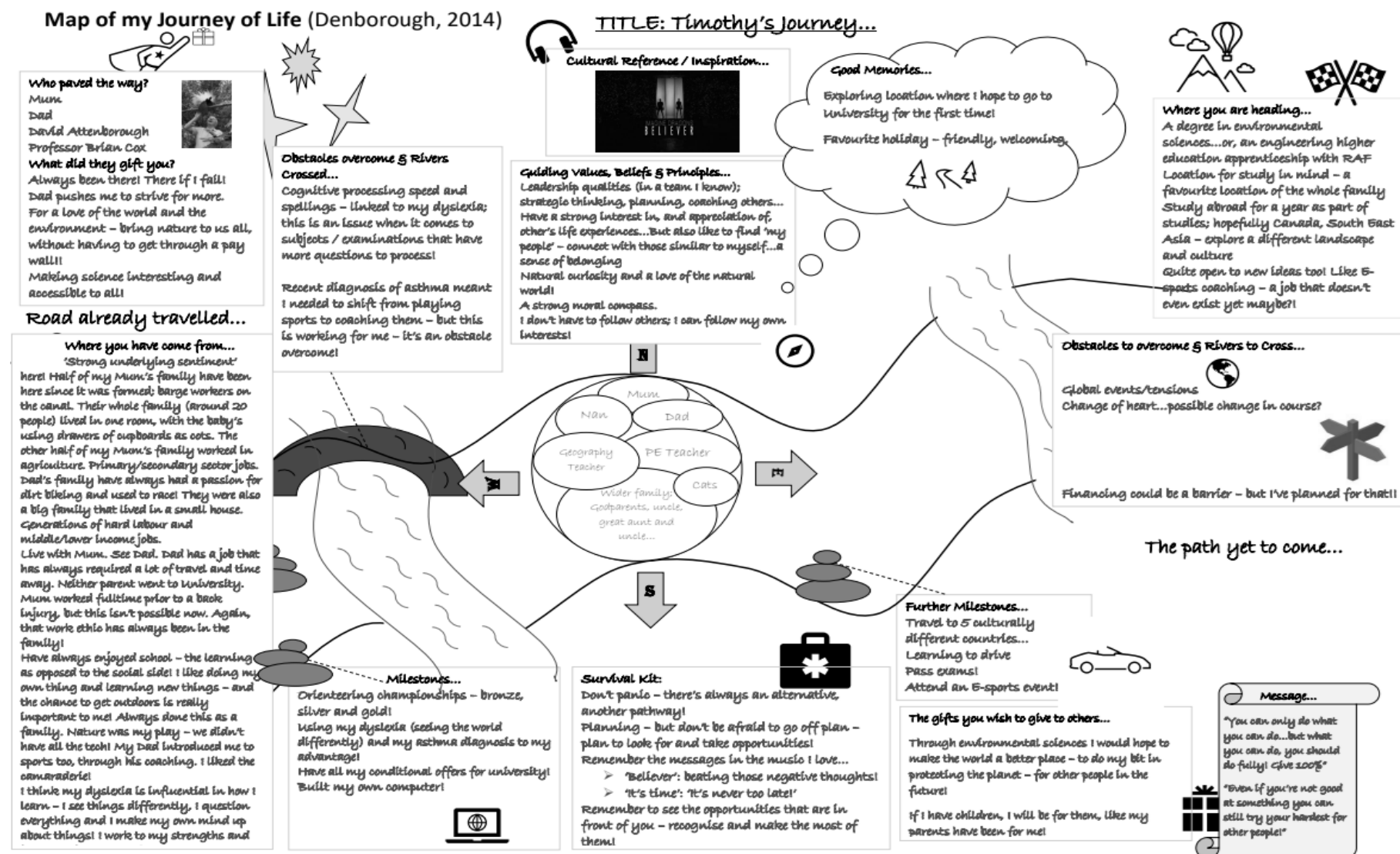
## Appendix 2: Matilda's map (adapted from The Mapping the Journey of Life by Deborah (2014))



### Appendix 3: Proud's map (adapted from The Mapping the Journey of Life by Deborough (2014))



## Appendix 4: Timothy's map (adapted from The Mapping the Journey of Life by Deborough (2014))



**Appendix 5: Copy of Application for Ethical Review (AER) complete with a copy of key paperwork for participants**

# UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

## Application for Ethics Review Form

### Guidance Notes:

#### What is the purpose of this form?

This form should be completed to seek ethics review for research projects to be undertaken by University of Birmingham staff, PGR students or visiting/emeritus researchers who will be carrying out research which will be attributed to the University.

#### Who should complete it?

For a staff project – the lead researcher/Principal Investigator on the project.  
For a PGR student project – the student's academic supervisor, in discussion with the student.

Students undertaking undergraduate projects and taught postgraduate (PGT) students should refer to their Department/School for advice

#### When should it be completed?

After you have completed the University's online ethics self-assessment form (SAF), **IF** the SAF indicates that ethics review is required. You should apply in good time to ensure that you receive a favourable ethics opinion prior to the commencement of the project and it is recommended that you allow at least 60 working days for the ethics process to be completed.

#### How should it be submitted?

An electronic version of the completed form should be submitted to the Research Ethics Officer, at the following email address: aer-ethics@contacts.bham.ac.uk.

#### What should be included with it?

Copies of any relevant supporting information and participant documentation, research tools (e.g. interview topic guides, questionnaires, etc) and where appropriate a health & safety risk assessment for the project (see section 10 of this form for further information about risk assessments).

#### What should applicants read before submitting this form?

Before submitting, you should ensure that you have read and understood the following information and guidance and that you have taken it into account when completing your application:

- The information and guidance provided on the University's ethics webpages (<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/finance/accounting/Research-Support-Group/Research->

[Ethics/Ethical-Review-of-Research.aspx](#))

- The University's Code of Practice for Research  
(<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/university/legal/research.pdf>)
- The guidance on Data Protection for researchers provided by the University's Legal Services team at <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/legal-services/What-we-do/Data-Protection/resources.aspx>.

## Section 1: Basic Project Details

**Project Title:** 'Staking a claim on how high we can aim'; A narrative exploration of the factors enabling Post 16 (P16) students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to access Higher Education (HE)

**Is this project a:**

University of Birmingham Staff Research project ☐

University of Birmingham Postgraduate Research (PGR) Student project ☒

Other (Please specify below) ☐

[Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

**Details of the Principal Investigator or Lead Supervisor (for PGR student projects):**

Title: Dr

First name: Nooreen

Last name: Khan

Position held: Ed. Psy. D Academic and professional Tutor

School/Department School of Education

Telephone: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

Email address:

**Details of any Co-Investigators or Co-Supervisors (for PGR student projects):**

Title: Dr.

First name: Anita

Last name: Soni

Position held: Ed.Psy. D Academic and Professional Tutor

School/Department Disability, Inclusion and Special Needs

Telephone:

Email address:

**Details of the student for PGR student projects:**

Title: Trainee Educational Psychologist

First name: Vicky

Last name: De Cloedt

Course of study: Ap. Ed. And Child Psy. D. FT

Email address:

**Project start and end dates:**

Estimated start date of project: 01/04/2022

Estimated end date of project: 01/06/2023

## Funding:

Sources of funding: N/A

## Section 2: Summary of Project

*Describe the purpose, background rationale for the proposed project, as well as the hypotheses/research questions to be examined and expected outcomes. This description should be in everyday language that is free from jargon - please explain any technical terms or discipline-specific phrases. Please do not provide extensive academic background material or references.*

“Gaps in cognitive development between better-off and disadvantaged children open up early on, with those from the poorest fifth of families on average more than eleven months behind children from middle income families in vocabulary tests when they start school. Over the years that follow, these gaps widen rather than narrow. The overall result is that nearly six out of ten disadvantaged children in England do not achieve a basic set of qualifications compared to only one in three children from more advantaged backgrounds”

(Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014, p. i)

([https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/367461/State of the Nation - summary document.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/367461/State_of_the_Nation_-_summary_document.pdf))

*Recent reports in the mainstream media argue that very little has changed, especially in the onset and wake of a worldwide pandemic (Covid-19), where the divide between those who have, and those who have not, has become even more pronounced, or perhaps simply more public. (Burns, 2019; Burns, 2020; Weale, 2020; Wood, 2020).*

Socioeconomic status is a broad and complex concept, representative of one’s ‘social and economic position’ within society. Those of high socioeconomic status have a greater social and economic standing within society, therefore being granted access to more resources and means to participate in society; to be of a low socioeconomic status places the individual at direct odds with this positionality. Socioeconomic status is typically measured by an assessment of ‘material markers’ such as household income, employment status, educational attainment; or especially when determining the socioeconomic status of a child or young person, a common marker is whether or not they are in receipt of ‘free school meals’

([https://www.publicdefenders.nsw.gov.au/Pages/public\\_defenders\\_research/bar-book/pdf/BBB\\_LowSES\\_chapter-Sep2020.pdf](https://www.publicdefenders.nsw.gov.au/Pages/public_defenders_research/bar-book/pdf/BBB_LowSES_chapter-Sep2020.pdf); <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/demographics/socioeconomic-status/latest>).

The relationship between low socioeconomic status and educational attainment is complex and the existing literature within this field suggests that there are ‘multiple factors’ at play, not least in terms of how it can intersect with social class, ethnicity, gender, disability and age (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/uksectoraccounts/compendium/economicreview/february2020/childpovertyandeducationoutcomesbyethnicity>). According to the literature, these ‘multiple factors’ might be operating at the systemic level, linked to political structures and power, or might be located within the individual (though arguably still influenced by systemic factors), such as identity, aspiration or self-efficacy (Mathers & Parry, 2009; Crawford et al., 2015; Social Mobility Commission, 2016; Jury et al., 2017; Carruthers Thomas, 2018; De Cloedt, 2021).

The gap for most children and young people of low socioeconomic status will only go on to widen over their school career; impacting their educational and employment trajectory, and likely affecting other areas of their lives, such as health and wellbeing too (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014). Whilst the drivers behind the education gap are always up for debate, it exists, and perpetuates and can have a devastating impact on individuals and societies.

Given the bank of existing research, and following conversations with my tutor, supervisors and Principle Educational Psychologist within the service where I am placed; and especially following a presentation by previous students whom both used narrative approaches to tell counter-stories of a phenomenon, I decided to look at the issue of low socioeconomic status and attainment from a different angle:

I want to look at aspects to consider, when seeking to support the journey of young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds into Higher Education, to explore the stories of those young people who are managing to navigate the education system against the seeming odds; I am interested in what they feel the factors are, or were, that enabled them to feel confident, equipped and supported to pursue Higher Education.

Again, this is perhaps particularly pertinent now, as despite rising figures of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds attending University, this still remains far from the norm, and just as the numbers have reportedly risen, there are rumblings and reports that “nearly half of all disadvantaged pupils in England could be prevented from going to university under government plans for a minimum GCSE entry level for higher education” (The Guardian, 2021, <https://www.google.com/amp/s/amp.theguardian.com/education/2021/dec/11/universities-warn-gcse-demand-threat-disadvantaged-pupils>)

Given the remit of my research, I need to speak to Post-16 prospective Higher Education students who have successfully navigated the stages and phases leading up to this point; I wish to draw on that lived experience on which they can reflect and talk around; I want to know how they have reached this crucial point and what they believe has made it possible.

Indeed Crawford et al., (2015) noted, in their Government commissioned report into ‘progress made by high-attaining children from disadvantaged backgrounds’, that ‘further research could usefully explore the drivers that enable some small advantages for state school students from the least deprived backgrounds...[for whom there is a greater] likelihood of enrolling in a high status institution, even after allowing for differences in a range of background characteristics and a rich set of measures of attainment from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 5’ (p.27). These unknown, seemingly unquantifiable ‘drivers’ are what I hope to explore.

### **Section 3: Conduct and location of Project**

#### ***Conduct of project***

***Please give a description of the research methodology that will be used. If more than one methodology or phase will be involved, please separate these out clearly and refer to them consistently throughout the rest of this form.***

“Narrative research is a qualitative research methodology in the narrative inquiry tradition. Narrative inquiries elicit and analyze stories in order to understand people, cultures, and societies. Narrative inquiry emerged from social constructionism and the narrative turn, which attuned narrative researchers to the importance of story and belief that people’s lives are forged through stories. Narrative inquiries can be categorized as narratives of the self, narratives and society, and narratives for/of social justice. They are distinguished by their focus on the author’s story, composition and analysis of narrative within broader cultural and social discourses, and use of critical theories to tell counter-stories of oppressed and marginalized groups”

(Wolgemuth & Agosto, 2019, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333336986-Narrative-Research>).

Given that the task of this research is to elicit the views, perspectives and experiences (narratives) of young people, I will be using qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews. My interview



questions will feed into a known therapeutic approach that I would also like to adopt with participants, given the sensitive nature of discussing one's socioeconomic standing in society; this therapeutic approach is known as 'Mapping the journey of life' (Denborough, 2014). Through this latter therapeutic approach and activity, a great deal of key information, of a life over time, will be elicited; whilst more structured interview questions can ensure that there remains a focus on the young person's educative journey. This method will be piloted first to ensure its suitability and enable alterations, or additions, to questions where deemed appropriate; if any significant problems present a 'Life Story Interview' will instead be used (McAdams, 2007).

The data collected will be analysed in-line with narrative analysis; narrative analysis, as eluded to in the quote above, offers the researcher a way of interpreting the stories participants share, enabling some insight into their personal world whilst also pointing to the cultural influences and experiences that might shape their sensemaking (Denscombe, 2014).

"The outcome of a narrative analysis is a story - for example, a historical account, a case study, a life story, or a storied episode of a person's life. In this type of analysis, the researcher's task is to configure the data elements into a story that unites and gives meaning to the data as contributors to a goal or purpose...Narrative analysis is the procedure through which the researcher organizes the data elements into a coherent developmental account. The process of narrative analysis is actually a synthesizing of the data rather than a separation of it into its constituent parts...Narrative analysis relates events and actions to one another by configuring them as contributors to the advancement of a plot. The story constituted by narrative integration allows for the incorporation of the notions of human purpose and choice as well as chance happenings, dispositions, and environmental presses. The result of a narrative analysis is an explanation that is retrospective, having linked past events together to account for how a final outcome might have come about"

(Polkinghorne, 2006, pp.5-23).

I will pay attention to Polkinghorne's (2006) seven criteria, adapted from Dollard (1935), in developing a narrative, or story, from the original data collected from each individual. Given the in-depth nature of this qualitative research, it will invariably be of a small-scale; recruiting no more than 5 participants. Whilst generalisations cannot be made from qualitative research, in narrative analysis, "a set of case studies is followed by a commentary chapter in which the differences and similarities among the cases is highlighted" (Polkinghorne, 2006, p.21); this will enable further consideration of systemic factors that may, or may not be at play for these individuals who share the 'status' of low socioeconomic standing:

"The stories we tell about ourselves are not created in a vacuum. All too often, the stories we believe about ourselves have been written by others..." (Denborough, 2014, p.8)... "When our lives have been more tragedy than triumph, too often this is because other people have written the stories that influence our lives, or because broader powers such as sexism, violence, racism, or poverty have become the authors of the storylines of our identity" (Denborough, 2014, p.viii).

### **Geographic location of project**

*State the geographic locations where the project and all associated fieldwork will be carried out. If the project will involve travel to areas which may be considered unsafe, either in the UK or overseas, please ensure that the risks of this (or any other non-trivial health and safety risks associated with the research) are addressed by a documented health and safety risk assessment, as described in section 10 of this form.*

Within the University of Birmingham / West Midlands.

## Section 4: Research Participants and Recruitment

### Does the project involve human participants?

*Note: 'Participation' includes both active participation (such as when participants take part in an interview) and cases where participants take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time (for example, in crowd behaviour research).*

Yes ☒

No ☐

*If you have answered NO please go on to Section 8 of this form. If you have answered YES please complete the rest of this section and then continue on to section 5.*

### Who will the participants be?

*Describe the number of participants and important characteristics (such as age, gender, location, affiliation, level of fitness, intellectual ability etc.). Specify any inclusion/exclusion criteria to be used.*

Given that this is to be a qualitative piece of research, it will be small-scale, recruiting just a small sample of 3 - 5 participants. Participants are to be young people (male or female, and of any race or ethnicity) aged 16 – 25-years-old, and applying or considering applying (therefore able to apply – having the relevant qualifications and residential status, etc.) to higher education.

Participants must be of a low socioeconomic status/background; this will have been determined by the University's own inclusion / exclusion criteria for entry onto the 'Access 2 Birmingham (A2B) programme' (<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/teachers/year-12/pathways-to-birmingham/a2b/index.aspx>) negating the need for me to establish such measures within my recruitment procedure. I will be looking to recruit directly from this pool of post-16 students who will have met the universities A2B Programme eligibility as follows:

'Meet at least 3 of the following measures:

- You attend or attended a school or college that performs below the national average at Key Stage 4 or Key Stage 5
- You currently live in a low progression area
- You are the first generation of your immediate family to attend higher education
- Your household income is below the national average (below £42, 875)' <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/teachers/year-12/pathways-to-birmingham/a2b/index.aspx>

**NB.** "The Access to Birmingham (A2B) programme supports applicants to the University of Birmingham, who have little or no experience of higher education, discover what studying at university involves" with students with a background of low socioeconomic status very much encouraged to apply- as above (<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/teachers/year-12/pathways-to-birmingham/a2b/index.aspx>).

### How will the participants be recruited?

*Please state clearly how the participants will be identified, approached and recruited. Include any relationship between the investigator(s) and participant(s) (e.g. instructor-student). Please ensure that you attach a copy of any poster(s), advertisement(s) or letter(s) to be used for recruitment.*

As indicated above I would like to recruit 3 - 5 participants from the students already enrolling onto the A2B programme at the University of Birmingham. As a student of the University, I hope that this will assist in my negotiations of access to, and advertising with, the programme. There will be benefits for the A2B programme given that this research will, to some extent, evaluate the impact of this 'widening participation' initiative.

My role as a post graduate student, as well as a researcher, will hopefully assist me in approaching and building a rapport with potential participants; not least because I am from a low socioeconomic background myself – hopefully this goes some way to addressing any perceived power imbalance that may normally exist between the researcher and the researched, especially in relation to a potentially sensitive subject such as socioeconomic status.

I will firstly approach the administrators of the A2B programme to have permissions to advertise my recruitment campaign. Aside from posters, and email communications (attached), I will also offer a general 1-1 information-give 'briefing' session over the telephone or online using Microsoft Teams or Zoom, whereby I can offer to explain a little about the research, including the rationale and information around the process and time commitment for participants, etc. At this briefing I will talk through the information materials attached and following this share initial consent forms for consideration.

## Section 5: Consent

### **What process will be used to obtain consent?**

*Describe the process that the investigator(s) will be using to obtain valid consent. If consent is not to be obtained explain why. If the participants are under the age of 16 it would usually be necessary to obtain parental consent and the process for this should be described in full, including whether parental consent will be opt-in or opt-out.*

Given that participants for this study will be post-16 (likely nearer age 18 given their applications to University) parental consent will not be required. The Mental Capacity Act will not be applicable. Consent will be sought from the very beginning, with initial consent forms being shared, alongside the participant information sheets, during / after the 'briefing' session outlined above; participants will also be made aware of their right to withdraw within this same initial briefing (please see the initial consent form attached). Consent will continue to be 'checked' at various points throughout the research, including at the point of interview and two weeks after receiving their personalised written record or visual representation of their own interpreted story (or two weeks after final rewriting/drawing of a story if it is revised). These latter checks of continuing consent will be sought verbally and noted down and dated within my research journal. Participants will not be able to withdraw their data after two weeks have lapsed since receiving their final version of their story – be it a written or visual account.

*Please be aware that if the project involves over 16s who lack capacity to consent, separate approval will be required from the Health Research Authority (HRA) in line with the Mental Capacity Act.*

*Please attach a copy of the Participant Information Sheet (if applicable), the Consent Form (if applicable), the content of any telephone script (if applicable) and any other material that will be used in the consent process.*

Note: Guidance from Legal Services on wording relating to the Data Protection Act 2018 can be accessed at <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/legal-services/What-we-do/Data-Protection/resources.aspx>.

### Use of deception?

*Will the participants be deceived in any way about the purpose of the study?*

Yes ☐  
No ☒

*If yes, please describe the nature and extent of the deception involved. Include how and when the deception will be revealed, and the nature of any explanation/debrief will be provided to the participants after the study has taken place.*

Click or tap here to enter text.

## Section 6: Participant compensation, withdrawal and feedback to participants

### What, if any, feedback will be provided to participants?

*Explain any feedback/ information that will be provided to the participants after participation in the research (e.g. a more complete description of the purpose of the research, or access to the results of the research).*

I will share with participants their own story/chapter and/or visual representation of their story that was interpreted from their interviews and accompanying narrative activity, and they will be able to challenge my interpretations. Once participants are happy they will be gifted their own version of their story as interpreted by myself, but co-constructed with them (the story MUST reflect their own narrative, and participants will be encouraged to ensure that this is the case). A closing briefing session will be offered to the participants individually, and here I will verbally share the general findings of the research and take any feedback on this; in the interests of co-production, this feedback, especially any differing opinions, will be acknowledged within my research, though this will not necessarily change my own interpretations shared in the discussion and conclusion. Participants will be offered access to the full thesis online post publication.

### What arrangements will be in place for participant withdrawal?

*Describe how the participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the project, explain any consequences for the participant of withdrawing from the study and indicate what will be done with the participant's data if they withdraw.*

Participants will be made aware of their right to withdraw from the study from the earliest opportunity; this information will be shared both verbally at the introductory briefing session during recruitment, and will feature within the paperwork shared at / following this session (participant information sheet and initial consent form – attached). Participants will be reminded of their right to withdraw at various points throughout the research, including at the point of interview and up to 2 weeks after receiving the write up/ visual account of their own interpreted story/chapter (or two weeks after the final rewriting/drawing of a story if revision is required). Should a participant choose to withdraw at any time prior to this, their data will not be included in the study at all; however, the

data cannot be removed post 2 weeks after receiving the write up/ visual representation of their own interpreted story (or two weeks after the final rewriting/drawing of a story if it is revised); it is at this point too late for participants to withdraw their data from the study. Where a participant withdraws within the proposed timeframe their data will be deleted/destroyed. Participants will not be required to provide a reason as to why they wish to withdraw and there will be no consequences to them in light of their decision to withdraw. Participants can request their withdrawal from the study at any point by contacting me directly, via telephone or email – both of which will be provided on the participant information sheets and initial consent form (attached).

*Please confirm the specific date/timescale to be used as the deadline for participant withdrawal and ensure that this is consistently stated across all participant documentation. This is considered preferable to allowing participants to 'withdraw at any time' as presumably there will be a point beyond which it will not be possible to remove their data from the study (e.g. because analysis has started, the findings have been published, etc).*

Participants will no longer have the right to withdraw two weeks after receiving the write up/ visual representation of their own interpreted story (or two weeks after the final rewriting/drawing of a story if it is revised upon participant request); up until this point participants will have the right to withdraw their data completely.

#### **What arrangements will be in place for participant compensation?**

*Will participants receive compensation for participation?*

Yes ☒

No ☐

*If yes, please provide further information about the nature and value of any compensation and clarify whether it will be financial or non-financial.*

Participants will receive their own 'story' written up or visually represented, i.e. their own 'Map of the Journey of their Life' (Denborough, 2014) for them to keep.

Participants will receive £10 reimbursement for any incurred travel costs as a result of attending interviews face-to-face or to compensate for electricity usage should participants choose to carry interviews out online.

*If participants choose to withdraw, how will you deal with compensation?*

Should participants choose to withdraw, before having received their individual story (be it in a written or visual format), they will not be gifted this; this is due to their withdrawal meaning a deletion of their data.

The £10 gifted to participants to reimburse travel costs or electricity use expenses will not be expected back.

### **Section 7: Confidentiality/anonymity**

#### **Will the identity of the participants be known to the researcher?**

*Will participants be truly anonymous (i.e. their identity will not be known to the researcher)?*

Yes ☐  
No ☒

**In what format will data be stored?**

*Will participants' data be stored in identifiable format, or will it be anonymised or pseudo-anonymised (i.e. an assigned ID code or number will be used instead of the participant's name and a key will be kept allowing the researcher to identify a participant's data)?*

Participants will be offered to choose their own pseudonym for themselves so that they can recognise themselves and their own story within the final write up of the research; this offers them some ownership over their own story also.

Participants will be known to me through my direct work with them; interview and assistive activity (The 'Mapping the Journey of Life' activity - Denborough, 2014). In the interests of confidentiality, participants will be able to choose their own pseudonym that can be used in the transcription of their interview, and in the writing up their story and including their data in the overall research; participants may also suggest pseudonyms for any other 'characters' they mention/ discuss in their interviews, or as a part of their 'Map of the Journey of their Life' (Denborough, 2014). The use of a pseudonym will mean that a participant's data can be identified and taken out of the research should that participant wish to withdraw from the study; only I as researcher will know the true identity attached to that participant, and this will enable me to remove any further data stored about that participant (consent form etc.) A key will be kept by the researcher to enable the identification of a participant's data in the case of using pseudonyms and this will be stored separately from the main data in a password protected file on the UoB BEAR DataShare.

**Will participants' data be treated as confidential?**

*Will participants' data be treated as confidential (i.e. they will not be identified in any outputs from the study and their identity will not be disclosed to any third party)?*

Yes ☒  
No ☐

*If you have answered no to the question above, meaning that participants' data will not be treated as confidential (i.e. their data and/or identities may be revealed in the research outputs or otherwise to third parties), please provide further information and justification for this:*

N/A

## Section 8: Storage, access and disposal of data

**How and where will the data (both paper and electronic) be stored, what arrangements will be in place to keep it secure and who will have access to it?**

*Please note that for long-term storage, data should usually be held on a secure University of Birmingham IT system, for example BEAR (see <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/it/teams/infrastructure/research/bear/index.aspx>).*

Interview and activity data will be recorded using a Dictaphone if carried out in person and this will then be transcribed. If the interview and activity are carried out online, using Microsoft Teams, the option to transcribe data will be used with a back-up recording also being taken using a Dictaphone placed near the computer; this will all be declared to the participant and verbal consent sought and noted at the start of the interview/activity (this will be captured in the transcript and noted in my research journal). The recordings and transcriptions of interviews will be stored securely using the university's software (UoB BEAR DataShare) and only myself, my academic supervisors and examiners will have access to it. For the purposes of backing up data, it will also be stored on my personal password protected laptop in a password protected file. Once transcription is complete, the recordings will be deleted from the Dictaphone, whilst the audio recordings will be transferred and saved to the same university's software (UoB BEAR DataShare) for future reference if needed; again, only myself, my academic supervisors and examiners will have access to it. The Dictaphone and any other data, including supporting paper-based notes, i.e. those captured through the 'Mapping the Journey of Life' (Denborough, 2014) activity, will be secured in my own home office in a locked cabinet until transcription is complete and all paperwork has been scanned into UoB BEAR DataShare. For the purposes of backing up data, it will also be stored on my personal password protected laptop in a password protected file. Once all files have been scanned, physical copies of data will be deleted on the Dictaphone, and paperwork will be destroyed using a shredder.

For each participant, the following data will be stored in a password protected file on the UoB BEAR DataShare and for the purposes of backing up data, it will also be stored on my personal password protected laptop in a password protected file; initial contact details, signed consent form, participant data set and demographic information. A key will be kept by the researcher to enable the identification of a participant's data in the case of using pseudonyms and this will be stored separately from the main data in a password protected file on the UoB BEAR DataShare. Data stored on the UoB BEAR DataShare will be kept securely for ten years following completion of the project in accordance with The University of Birmingham Code of Practice for Research. Data stored on my own laptop (password protected), in a password protected file, will be deleted following final publication of the Thesis.

### Data retention and disposal

*The University usually requires data to be held for a minimum of 10 years to allow for verification. Will you retain your data for at least 10 years?*

Yes ☒  
No ☐

*If data will be held for less than 10 years, please provide further justification:*

Click or tap here to enter text.

*What arrangements will be in place for the secure disposal of data?*



In line with university ethical guidelines, all data (electronic recordings, notes, 'Map of the Journey of their Life' (Denborough, 2014), pictures and typed transcripts) will be kept for ten years in the university's BEAR Data Archive. During this time I as researcher, my supervisors and university examiners can access to the data. A ten year expiry date will be set for the electronic data stored on UoB's DataShare and after this time has passed, all electronic data will be erased.

## Section 9: Other approvals required

**Are you aware of any other national or local approvals required to carry out this research?**

*E.g. clearance from the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS), Local Authority approval for work involving Social Care, local ethics/governance approvals if the work will be carried out overseas, or approval from NOMS or HMPPS for work involving police or prisons? If so, please provide further details:*

DBS clearance is already in place and will be at the time of conducting the study / data collection with Post-16 students.

I will follow any relevant college / university Health and Safety Risk Assessment processes when interacting / meeting with participants.

No other approvals are required beyond University Ethics Approval.

**For projects involving NHS staff, is approval from the Health Research Authority (HRA) needed in addition to University ethics approval?**

*If your project will involve NHS staff, please go to the HRA decision tool at <http://www.hra-decisiontools.org.uk/research/> to establish whether the NHS would consider your project to be research, thus requiring HRA approval in addition to University ethics approval. Is HRA approval required?*

Yes ☐

No ☒

*Please include a print out of the HRA decision tool outcome with your application.*



## Section 10: Risks and benefits/significance

### Benefits/significance of the research

*Outline the potential significance and/or benefits of the research*

There is a wealth of research, Government commissioned and independent, highlighting the many issues children and young people of low SES face in education (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014); with the attainment gap between those who have and those who have not only recently hitting headlines again, in the wake of the pandemic

(<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-53908801>;  
<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/aug/07/levelling-up-school-funding-policy-favours-wealthy-pupils-study>; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-47902642>;  
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/uk-education-attainment-gap-poverty-gcse-coronavirus-a9688681.html>).

Given the input to knowledge already existing around the 'problem', this piece of research will inherently look at the aspects to consider, when seeking to support the journey of young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds into Higher Education; as opposed to further focusing on the issues / barriers. The focus on the factors supporting this progression in education for individuals sets this piece of research apart from previous research in this area and enables some learning around which factors supporting the young person might warrant more attention / resource. The latter might be of interest to young people themselves, parents, schools, community commissioners and to policy makers; the research could yield important insights into how people and systems around the child might practice or interact differently to enable and empower such educational progression. Importantly, the research could both speak to the impact of, and/or have implications for widening participation initiatives going forward.

### Risks of the research

*Outline any potential risks (including risks to research staff, research participants, other individuals not involved in the research, the environment and/or society and the measures that will be taken to minimise any risks and the procedures to be adopted in the event of mishap.) **Please ensure that you include any risks relating to overseas travel and working in overseas locations as part of the study, particularly if the work will involve travel to/working in areas considered unsafe and/or subject to travel warnings from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (see <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice>).** Please also be aware that the University insurer, UMAL, offers access to RiskMonitor Traveller, a service which provides 24/7/365 security advice for all travellers and you are advised to make use of this service (see <https://umal.co.uk/travel/pre-travel-advice/>).*

***The outlining of the risks in this section does not circumvent the need to carry out and document a detailed Health and Safety risk assessment where appropriate – see below.***

The decision to recruit participants from the A2B Programme enables me to ensure inclusion criteria around 'low socioeconomic status' and qualification for University is met; this will have been predetermined by their eligibility for the programme itself.

Participants enrolment on the A2B programme will mean that there is already an awareness and acknowledgement of their socioeconomic standing in society, and this is further indicated by their interest in the research (determined by their consent to participate). I hope to use this self, and socioeconomic situated awareness, to connect with my participants, given that I too am from a low

socioeconomic background. Hopefully, this connection will help participants to feel both comfortable, and also go some way to them considering themselves as co-constructors of the research (story); which is integral to the narrative approach.

As already touched upon in explaining my rationale for this research, there is arguably a somewhat bleak and oppressive narrative shaping the individual and collective stories of those from low socioeconomic backgrounds presently and this needs to be held in mind as I undertake my research; indeed, this consideration has very much determined my decision to use a therapeutic method (The 'Mapping the Journey of Life' activity - Denborough, 2014) in the collection of my data:

Participants will be invited to "take a new look at their own lives and to find a new significance in events often neglected, to find sparkling actions that are often discounted, to find fascination in experiences previously overlooked, and to find solutions to problems and predicaments in landscapes often previously considered bereft...This will provide the [participant] with options in knowing how to go forward"

(Denborough, 2014, p.X).

This seems particularly important given the literature around the challenges of 'belonging' for students of low socioeconomic status in Higher Education and the subsequent 'drop out' rates (Carruthers Thomas, 2018).

Prior to carrying out the 'Mapping the Journey of Life' activity (Denborough, 2014) with participants I will share the "Charter of Storytelling Rights" Drawn up by David Denborough (2014, pp.8-9); this features in Appendix D. within this application.

I myself as a postgraduate student from a low socioeconomic background have struggled at times with issues of identity and belonging and I need to be prepared for questions or reflections to be triggered in myself through this research; I will ensure that I discuss this with my supervisor as appropriate, to ensure it is not affecting either my wellbeing or my work. I will also be completing my own 'Map of the Journey of Life' (Denborough, 2014) prior to doing this with participants, and this will go some way to ensuring I have worked through my own story prior to the commencement of my data-collection.

I do not foresee that there should be any detrimental impact on the environment or wider society. The A2B Programme will not be named in my research (it will be blanked out on this document prior to publishing in the Thesis Appendices); I will instead refer to a generic 'widening participation programme'.

### **University Health & Safety (H&S) risk assessment**

*For projects of more than minimal H&S risk it is essential that a H&S risk assessment is carried out and signed off in accordance with the process in place within your School/College and you must provide a copy of this with your application. The risk may be non-trivial because of travel to, or working in, a potentially unsafe location, or because of the nature of research that will be carried out there. It could also involve (irrespective of location) H&S risks to research participants, or other individuals not involved directly in the research. Further information about the risk assessment process for research can be found at <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/hr/wellbeing/worksafe/policy/Research-Risk-Assessment-and-Mitigation-Plans-RAMPs.aspx>.*

Please note that travel to (or through) 'FCO Red zones' requires approval by the University's Research Travel Approval Panel, and will only be approved in exceptional circumstances where sufficient mitigation of risk can be demonstrated.

## Section 11: Any other issues

**Does the research raise any ethical issues not dealt with elsewhere in this form?**

*If yes, please provide further information:*

NA

**Do you wish to provide any other information about this research not already provided, or to seek the opinion of the Ethics Committee on any particular issue?**

*If yes, please provide further information:*

NA

## Section 12: Peer review

**Has your project received scientific peer review?**

Yes ☐

No ☒

*If yes, please provide further details about the source of the review (e.g. independent peer review as part of the funding process or peer review from supervisors for PGR student projects):*

Click or tap here to enter text.

## Section 13: Nominate an expert reviewer

*For certain types of project, including those of an interventional nature or those involving significant risks, it may be helpful (and you may be asked) to nominate an expert reviewer for your project. If you anticipate that this may apply to your work and you would like to nominate an expert reviewer at this stage, please provide details below.*

Title: Click or tap here to enter text.

First name: Click or tap here to enter text.

Last name: Click or tap here to enter text.

Email address: Click or tap here to enter text.

Phone number: Click or tap here to enter text.

*Brief explanation of reasons for nominating and/or nominee's suitability:*

Click or tap here to enter text.

## Section 14: Document checklist

*Please check that the following documents, where applicable, are attached to your application:*

Recruitment advertisement ☒  
Participant information sheet ☒  
Consent form ☒  
Questionnaire ☐  
Interview/focus group topic guide ☒

*Please proof-read study documentation and ensure that it is appropriate for the intended audience before submission.*

## **Section 15: Applicant declaration**

*Please read the statements below and tick the boxes to indicate your agreement:*

I submit this application on the basis that the information it contains is confidential and will be used by the University of Birmingham for the purposes of ethical review and monitoring of the research project described herein, and to satisfy reporting requirements to regulatory bodies. The information will not be used for any other purpose without my prior consent. ☒

The information in this form together with any accompanying information is complete and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief and I take full responsibility for it. ☒

I undertake to abide by University Code of Practice for Research (<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/university/legal/research.pdf>) alongside any other relevant professional bodies' codes of conduct and/or ethical guidelines. ☒

I will report any changes affecting the ethical aspects of the project to the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Officer. ☒

I will report any adverse or unforeseen events which occur to the relevant Ethics Committee via the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Officer. ☒

**Please now save your completed form and email a copy to the Research Ethics Officer, at [aer-ethics@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:aer-ethics@contacts.bham.ac.uk). As noted above, please do not submit a paper copy.**

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#### **Appendices:**

- **Appendix A: Recruitment Letter/email to Gatekeeper**
- **Appendix B: Recruitment and information letter for potential participants**
- **Appendix C: Consent Form for Participants**
- **Appendix D: Semi-structured Interview Schedule / Questions and assistive Narrative Activity**



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#### **Appendix A. Recruitment letter/email to Gatekeeper**

To Whom it May Concern,

I hope that this communication finds you well.

Please let me start by introducing myself, my name is Vicky De Cloedt and I am a second year Trainee Educational Psychologist and postgraduate student on the Applied Educational and Child Psychology Postgraduate Professional Training course with the University of Birmingham.

As part of my PhD thesis, I am required to complete a research project. Because of my own experience as a student from a low socioeconomic background I am interested in looking at how fellow students of this standing overcame the barriers, so often reported in research around low socioeconomic status and attainment, to access higher education (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014, p. i). My aim is to create an alternative account, a counter narrative, around low socioeconomic status and educational attainment; I hope to do this through interviewing post-16 students considering, or going through, the higher education application process. Through semi-structured interview questions and a supporting narrative therapy activity (The 'Mapping the Journey of Life' activity - Denborough, 2014), I hope to elicit from individuals, the key factors that they believe have been instrumental to their educative success so far; it is possible that a widening participation initiative such as your A2B Programme might feature here of course.

Given the above outline of this research and your remit as a programme, I wondered if you would be able to advertise my research recruitment material (attached); sharing it with potential candidates:

These candidates would be those who are enrolled upon the A2B programme on account their low socioeconomic status (it is my understanding that this is one of your eligibility criteria for the programme). Participants would need to be over the age of 16 years (again, I believe this would naturally be the case if they are enrolled upon your programme).

Your support in identifying potential candidates enrolled upon your programme and sharing the attached information with them would be greatly appreciated. Given your own remit as a widening participation programme, I would be happy to share a summary with you of any significant findings that might be deemed interesting for your own information.

If you have any questions, or would like to discuss this further, please do feel free to contact me on [REDACTED]

My academic supervisor is Nooreen Khan and can be contacted [REDACTED]

Kind regards,

Vicky De Cloedt  
Trainee Educational Psychologist  
University of Birmingham

#### References:

Denborough, D. (2014). *Retelling the Stories of Our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience*. W. W. Norton & Company: New York. London.

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#### **Appendix B. Recruitment and information letter for potential participants**

Dear NAME

Hi! My name is Vicky and I would like to invite you to be involved in my research project that I am doing as part of gaining my PhD in Applied Educational and Child Psychology. The title of my research project is: 'Staking a claim on how high we can aim': A narrative exploration of the factors enabling Post 16 students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to access Higher Education.

#### **Why me?**

You have been identified as a potential participant because of your enrolment on the University of Birmingham's A2B Programme, which helps 'students from underrepresented backgrounds' to access Higher Education.

I am particularly interested in learning more about Post 16 students who applied to, and have been enrolled upon the A2B Programme; for more details of the A2B Programme and eligibility criteria you can follow this link: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/teachers/year-12/pathways-to-birmingham/pathways-to-birmingham-eligibility-criteria.aspx>

### **What exactly is the research about and why does it matter?**

The research is looking to explore how Post 16 students from disadvantaged (also known as 'low-socioeconomic') backgrounds feel they are being supported and enabled to access Higher Education, where disadvantaged students are sometimes underrepresented.

Previous research in this area highlights the potential barriers that can be faced, but this piece of research will look at the aspects to consider, when seeking to support the journey of young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds into Higher Education.

As a student from a low socioeconomic background myself, I am aware of the barriers that can be faced on the journey into Higher Education, but am also mindful of what helped me to overcome these. Where students, such as yourself, are able to consider the option of university too, I would like to find out more about your experiences in education and what you think has helped you to get to the position you are in today; where you can choose to go into Higher Education.

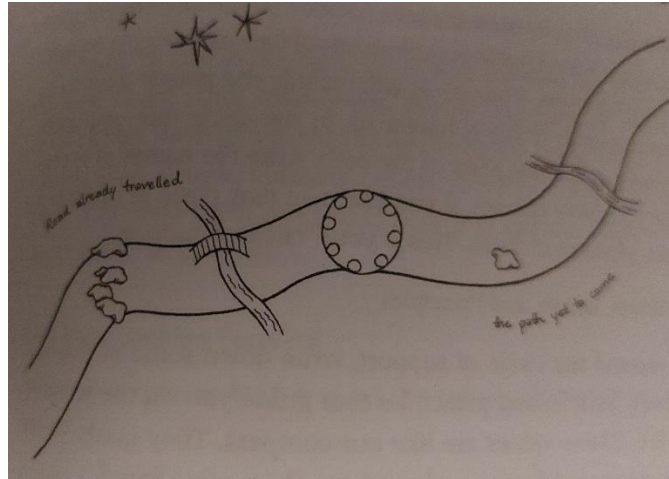
### **What will the research involve?**

Through an interview and narrative activity (The 'Mapping the Journey of Life' activity - Denborough, 2014), we would chat through our experiences, positive and negative, of moving through the education system; thinking about what supported us.

#### **The Interview:**

- Will take place on a 1-1 basis, although you can bring a parent/guardian with you for support if you'd like to.
- We can meet face to face on the University of Birmingham campus if you feel comfortable to do so, or find another space in a public library, council office or community hub, that you feel comfortable with; this space will be public, but the interview itself will take place in a private room. I am happy for you to suggest a space near you.
- If you would prefer it, we could meet online using Microsoft Teams to do the interview.
- Whether we meet in person or over Microsoft Teams, I will give you £10 to reimburse you for your travel / electricity use costs.
- As part of the interview we will create your own 'Map of your Journey of Life' (Denborough, 2014); this is a way of capturing your story so far whilst also beginning to think about your future and you will be gifted your own copy of this no later than a week following our meeting. The 'Mapping the Journey of Life' activity uses a template like the one below... (Please note, you will be able to ask for changes to be made to your Map if you feel anything has been misinterpreted when I share it with you)





*Image taken from: Denborough, 2014, p.133*

- With the use of the creative activity above - our interview will take approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes (but no more).
- If you decide to leave the interview at any point you can do so and do not have to explain your reasons for doing this.
- Interviews can be offered between the hours of 9.00 am and 6.00 pm Monday-Friday; I can be flexible within this to try and meet at a time most convenient for you.
- I hope for Interviews to take place between September and December 2022.

### **Who exactly do I have to share my story with?**

Your true identity will be protected should you choose to take part; a pseudonym of your own choosing would be used in place of your name and in the case of anyone else's names you refer to. This alternative name will still allow you to see yourself and pick out your story in the overall research, without making your identity known to other readers. Information shared will be kept confidential unless a safeguarding concern arises, in which case I would have to share that information with the University's designated safeguarding lead(s).

### **Do I have to take part? And can I change my mind?**

You do not have to take part and can ignore this letter if you are not interested or able to get involved.

If you decide to participate in this research you will have the right to withdraw your data from the project up until 2 weeks after you receive the final version of your 'Map of your Journey of Life'; At this point your data will have been included fully into the study and cannot after that be removed.

Your data will be anonymised.

To withdraw from the study you can contact me on the contact details provided at the close of this letter. If you have already participated in the interview at the time you choose to withdraw you will still receive / not be expected to return the £10 you were remunerated.

### **How will you protect my data?**

Any electronic data (including audio recordings) stored in relation to your participation in this project will be stored in password protected files on my password protected personal laptop, with backup files stored onto a secure password protected University of Birmingham computer system. In accordance with the University of Birmingham's Code of Practice for Research, electronic data submitted to the University's own secure data storage system will be kept for 10 years after which time it will be deleted; data stored to my personal (password protected) laptop will be deleted upon publication of the thesis. All paper documents will be shredded following scanning to password protected files online (as previously described). Only I, and my academic tutors and examiner will have access to any of your identifiable information; this might include: initial contact details, signed consent form, participant data set and demographic information.

#### **What will be published and how can I access this?**

- A copy of your own personal 'Map of your Journey of Life' representative of your own story will be sent directly to you over email.
- An anonymised summary of research findings will be drawn up into a short report that can be shared with the A2B Programme for their information.
- The full thesis will eventually be published online through the University of Birmingham's 'e-thesis repository', should you wish to have a link to access this I can send this to you when it becomes available; please make this request known to me during our interactions or using the contact details at the close of this letter.
- On the accompanying consent form you can indicate whether or not you are happy for your data to be used again. If there are any opportunities for further study or publication in the future, i.e. using the data to create a related journal article.

Whether you choose to take part or not, I would like to congratulate you on your enrolment to the A2B Programme and wish you all the best for your future 😊

If you think you might be interested in taking part, please contact me as soon as possible using the details below; following this I will make contact with you over the phone, to give you the opportunity to ask any questions you may have about the research and your potential participation in it:

Email: [REDACTED] / Mobile: [REDACTED]

Yours faithfully,

*V. M. De Cloedt*

Vicky De Cloedt

Trainee Educational Psychologist - University of Birmingham

Denborough, D. (2014). *Retelling the Stories of Our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience*. W. W. Norton & Company: New York. London.



**Appendix C. Consent Form for Participants**

Please read the Participant Information Sheet before filling in this form.

Please tick to confirm your agreement with the following statements:

Statements:	I agree:
I have read the attached participant information letter and consent to my participation in the following research project: 'Staking a claim on how high we can aim': A narrative exploration of the factors enabling Post 16 students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to access Higher Education.	
I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research and what is required of me as a participant.	
I understand that should I wish to withdraw my data from this research I must do so before 2 weeks have passed following receipt of my own copy of my 'Map of my Journey of Life' (Denborough, 2014). If I request to have my data withdrawn within this time frame my data will be destroyed.	
I agree to taking part in an interview and assistive activity – drawing up 'Map of my Journey of Life' (Denborough, 2014)	
I understand that, and agree to my interview being voice recorded and transcribed for the purposes of data-analysis.	
I agree to my transcript data being used in the researcher's write up of the final project / thesis; I understand that the things I talk about in interview will be written up in a Doctoral Thesis. My name will not be used so readers will not know who said what. Extracts from my transcript may be lifted and used as quotations in the wider research write up in order to illustrate certain points.	
I consent to my data being stored in a password protected file on the researcher's (Vicky De Cloedt) password protected laptop until final publication of the thesis.	
I consent to my data being stored in a password protected file, on the University of Birmingham's own secure computer system for the duration of 10 years post publication – please note this will only be accessible to the researcher (Vicky De Cloedt), their academic supervisors and examiners of the thesis (should the latter request to see this)	
I consent that the researcher (Vicky De Cloedt) may contact me in the future if there is a chance to publish the data further, i.e. in a related journal article, or if the data-set could prove useful for answering further research questions in the future.	
I understand that I will be anonymous in the final submission and publication of the research.	

Signed (**participant** signature) \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Print name: \_\_\_\_\_

Countersigned by **Researcher:** \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Print name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix D. Semi-structured Interview Schedule / Questions and assistive Narrative Activity**

Getting to know you / rapport building questions  <i>NB. I will share similar information about myself and my story throughout in the interests of Active Interviewing.</i>	How old are you? In which area do you live? What's it like? What do you like about it? Is there anything you don't like about it? Do you have any hobbies? What are they? What do you like to do in your spare time? What would you normally be doing if you weren't here with me right now?
Environmental Questions / Information	Are you comfortable? (Too hot? Too cold? Have the refreshments you need?) Share any fire safety information known for the venue. Ensure the participant understands that they are free to take phonecalls or leave the room for a break of any sort. Explain where the nearest restroom facilities are and reiterate a rough idea of how long the interview and activity might last (this will have already been broached through the recruitment process). Reiterate the participants right to leave, stop the process, and /or withdraw from the study; check consent to continue.

Following initial questions/ conversation, reiterate the purpose of the study and explain the narrative activity (The 'Mapping the Journey of Life' activity - Denborough, 2014) that will be undertaken, supported by some interview questions. If the participant feels it would be of benefit, I, the researcher, can share my own, pre-completed Map and talk through it to introduce the activity; alternatively, I can show a blank template (though emphasise participants can indeed draw their own Map) and explain the purpose and process of the activity.

It will be emphasised that the 'Mapping the Journey of Life' activity is a tool used in Narrative Therapy and I will explain its function in collecting a narrative over their lifetime so far, with a focus also on thinking forward to the future. I will make clear that the use of this tool does not suggest a need for therapy, but rather enables us to talk sensitively and openly about a sensitive subject; that of low socioeconomic status. I will emphasise its alignment with the aims of the research study; to emancipate us from the narratives that "other people have written...that influence our lives, ...[the] broader powers such as sexism, violence, racism, or poverty [that] have become the authors of the storylines of our identity" (Denborough, 2014, p.viii). I will share the "Charter of Storytelling Rights" (Denborough, 2014, pp.8-9) with participants and emphasise the importance of them having the 'rights' to their own 'story' (Please see Figure 1).

I will emphasise that the ‘Mapping the Journey of Life’ activity, will, in this instance, be used a little differently, focusing mainly on the individual’s educational journey; this will be facilitated by the use of additional interview questions (Please see Figure 2). However, the participant will be able to discuss anything they believe bears relevance to that journey; the narrative activity and interview questions will encourage exploration of the individuals experiences within a complex ‘ecological system’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

**Figure 1:** “Charter of Storytelling Rights” (Taken directly from Denborough, 2014, pp.8-9)

- Article 1. Everyone has the right to define their experiences and problems in their own words and terms.
- Article 2. Everyone has the right to have their life understood in the context of what they have been through and in the context of their relationships with others.
- Article 3. Everyone has the right to invite others who are important to them to be involved in the process of reclaiming their life from the effects of hardship.
- Article 4. Everyone has the right not to have problems caused by trauma and injustice located inside them, internally, as if there were some deficit in them. The person is not the problem; the problem is the problem.
- Article 5. Everyone has the right to have their responses to hard times acknowledged. No one is a passive recipient of hardship. People always respond. People always protest injustice.
- Article 6. Everyone has the right to have their skills and knowledge of survival respected, honoured, and acknowledged.
- Article 7. Everyone has the right to know and experience that what they have learned through hard times can make a contribution to the lives of others in similar situations.

**Figure 2:** Narrative Activity and Interview Questions:

**Additional interview questions:**

- Tell me more about where you grew up? What’s the community like? Do you feel you are a part of a community? (Use information shared in initial questions for building rapport to facilitate the discussion...)
- What do you consider to have been your first key educational experience? What role has this played in your life?

***Image and guiding information quoted below, is taken directly from Denborough, 2014, pp. 133-135***

**Part One: Looking Back**

**8. Where You Have Come From**

At the starting point of the path, note where you have come from. Include such things as places, ancestors, culture, language, and/or spirituality...

- Who travelled first to make it possible for you to start this journey?
  - What are the gifts that they gave you that you are carrying with you on this journey?
9. Your circle of support  
Who are your companions on this journey (alive or in your heart)? These might be individuals, or they might be groups, communities, or organisations...In the circle that you drew initially at the midpoint of the path, write the names of everyone you have chosen. If you like, you may paste in photos or draw pictures of them. This is your “circle of support”.
  10. Values, Beliefs, and Principles  
Around the circle of support, write down some of the key values, beliefs, and principles that guide you on the journey of life. These values are like our compass. They guide us on our journey. Where or whom have they come from?
  11. Favourite Places  
Along the road that you have already travelled, draw or list some of the favourite places you have been on your journey so far?
  12. Milestones  
Along the road already travelled, what are some the key things you have already accomplished on this journey? Draw two of these. How were these things accomplished? Who played a part?
  13. Obstacles Overcome and Rivers Crossed  
Along the road already travelled, draw rocks (or a mountain) and a river to symbolise two obstacles that you (or you and your circle of support) have *already* overcome on your journey of life. Indicate how you overcame, avoided, or got around the obstacles and how you crossed the river. How did you do this? Who helped?
  14. Survival Kit  
Toward the top of the page, draw your survival kit. Within it, write down what helped you during difficult times. What things have you turned to for strength? These could be values, skills, people, customs, beliefs, proverbs, songs, and so forth.

**(Taken directly from Denborough, 2014, pp.133-135)**

***Image and guiding information quoted below, is taken directly from Denborough, 2014, pp. 133-135***

**Reference:** Denborough, D. (2014). *Retelling the Stories of Our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience*. W. W. Norton & Company: New York. London.

**Additional interview questions:**

- Tell me more about your hopes, dreams and wishes...What role might education play?
- Does your history, path already travelled, determine/affect your path going forward? How? Why?
- What part might education have to play in your future / path not yet travelled?

***Image and guiding information quoted below, is taken directly from Denborough, 2014, pp. 133-137***

**Part Two: Looking Forward**

Now it is time to look toward the future-the “path yet to come.”

15. Where You Are Heading

Toward the end of the path yet to come, write down some of your hopes, dreams and wishes. These might be for yourself, your friends, your community, or the next generation. How long have you had these hopes, dreams and wishes? How have you held onto them? Who has helped?

16. Places you wish to see

Along the path yet to come, name some places you (or other people in your circle of support) wish to see on the rest of your journey of life. These might also be places you wish to show others.

17. Things You Wish to Make Happen

Look back at some of the milestones you have already achieved and then, along the path yet to come, mark three future milestones you and your circle of support are aiming for. These should be achievable steps-things you wish to make happen. Include one in relation to your own life, one for your community, and one for the next generation.

18. Gifts You Wish to Give Others

Look back to some of the gifts you identified as having been given to you and then mark on your future path some gifts you wish to give or share with others. Alternatively, perhaps there are things that you were not given in your life that you would like to pass on to others.

19. Obstacles to Overcome and Rivers to Cross

Along the path yet to come, draw a rock (or mountain) to symbolise one obstacle that you (or others you care about) may face in the future and one river that you may have to cross. How will you be able to tell when these obstacles are coming up? How will you and your circle of support try to avoid, get around or overcome these difficulties? (refer back to survival kit for ideas...)

20. Travelling Songs

What songs will you/ your circle of support be singing or playing as you travel forward? Mark along the side of your path the songs you will be taking with you. Why these particular songs? What do they mean to you?

(Taken directly from Denborough, 2014, pp.135-137)

***Image and guiding information quoted below, is taken directly from Denborough, 2014, pp. 133-137***

**Reference:** Denborough, D. (2014). *Retelling the Stories of Our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience*. W. W. Norton & Company: New York. London.

**Additional interview questions/prompts:**

- Pull out educational/school memories as well as memories pertaining to their wider context...

***Image and guiding information quoted below, is taken directly from Denborough, 2014, pp. 133-137***

**Part Three: Looking Down at Your Journey (Like and Eagle)**

21. Good Memories

As you move along the path yet to come, what are some good memories that you will take with you into the future? Draw these as stars along your journey. Describe these good memories. Include the sounds, sights, tastes, touches, or smells they are associated with. Who played a part in these memories? How and when do you remember these times? Why is each of these memories important to you? What does it offer to you and your circle of support? What will it continue to offer in the future?

22. Naming your Journey

Give your path a name to symbolise what this Journey of Life means to you.

23. A Message to Others

Look back over everything that you have spoken about. If you were to share a message, a proverb, a story, or a song to a younger person just starting out on their journey, what would it be? What is one lesson you have learned that you would like to pass on to others?

**(Taken directly from Denborough, 2014, p.137)**

**Reference:** Denborough, D. (2014). *Retelling the Stories of Our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience*. W. W. Norton & Company: New York. London.

References:

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Denborough, D. (2014). *Retelling the Stories of Our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience*. W. W. Norton & Company: New York. London.



## AER Amendment:

### UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL REVIEW – REQUEST FOR AMENDMENTS

#### Who should use this form:

- This form is to be completed by PIs or supervisors (for PGR student research) who are requesting ethical approval for amendments to research projects that have previously received ethical approval from the University of Birmingham.

**Please be aware that all new research projects undertaken by postgraduate research (PGR) students first registered as from 1st September 2008 will be subject to the University's Ethical Review Process. PGR students first registered before 1<sup>st</sup> September 2008 should refer to their Department/School/College for further advice.**

- What constitutes an amendment?

Amendments requiring approval may include, but are not limited to, additions to the research protocol, study population, recruitment of participants, access to personal records, research instruments, or participant information and consent documentation. Amendments must be approved before they are implemented.

#### NOTES:

- Answers to questions must be entered in the space provided
- An electronic version of the completed form should be submitted to the Research Ethics Officer, at the following email address: [aer-ethics@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:aer-ethics@contacts.bham.ac.uk). Please **do not** submit paper copies.
- If, in any section, you find that you have insufficient space, or you wish to supply additional material not specifically requested by the form, please submit it in a separate file, clearly marked and attached to the submission email.
- If you have any queries about the form, please address them to the [Research Ethics Team](#).

**UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM  
APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL REVIEW -  
REQUEST FOR AMENDMENTS**

*OFFICE USE ONLY:*  
Application No:  
Date Received:

**1. TITLE OF PROJECT**

'Staking a claim on how high we can aim'; A narrative exploration of the factors enabling Post 16 (P16) students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to access Higher Education (HE)

**2. APPROVAL DETAILS**

What is the Ethical Review Number (ERN) for the project?

22\_0187

**3. THIS PROJECT IS:**

University of Birmingham Staff Research project ☐

University of Birmingham Postgraduate Research (PGR) student project ☒

Other ☐ (Please specify):

**4. INVESTIGATORS**

**a) PLEASE GIVE DETAILS OF THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS OR SUPERVISORS (FOR PGR STUDENT PROJECTS)**

Name: Title / first name / family name	Mrs Vicky De Cloedt
Highest qualification & position held:	Masters – PGR Student
School/Department	Disability, Inclusion and Special Needs
Telephone:	
Email address:	

Name: Title / first name / family name	Dr. Nooreen Khan
Highest qualification & position held:	PhD
School/Department	Disability, Inclusion and Special Needs
Telephone:	
Email address:	

**b) PLEASE GIVE DETAILS OF ANY CO-INVESTIGATORS OR CO-SUPERVISORS (FOR PGR STUDENT PROJECTS)**

Name: Title / first name / family name	Dr. Anita Soni
Highest qualification & position held:	PhD
School/Department	Disability, Inclusion and Special Needs
Telephone:	
Email address:	

**c) In the case of PGR student projects, please give details of the student**

Name of student:	Vicky De Cloedt	Student No:	
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Course of study:	Ap. Ed. And Child Psy. D. FT	
Principal supervisor:	Dr. Nooreen Khan	

Name of student:		Student No:	
Course of study:			
Principal supervisor:			

**5. ESTIMATED START OF PROJECT**

Date:

**ESTIMATED END OF PROJECT**

Date:

## 6. ORIGINAL APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL REVIEW AND ANY SUBSEQUENT APPROVED AMENDMENTS:

Please complete the table below for the original application and any subsequent amendments submitted

'Staking a claim on how high we can aim'; A narrative exploration of the factors enabling Post 16 (P16) students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to access Higher Education (HE) (Working title)	Key points of application and/or changes made by amendment (include: aims of study, participant details, how participants were recruited and methodology)	Ethical considerations arising from these key points (e.g. gaining consent, risks to participants and/or researcher, points raised by Ethical Review Committee during review)	How were the ethical considerations addressed? (e.g. consent form, participant information, adhering to relevant procedures/clearance required)
<p><i>Please see original application- ERN 22_0187</i></p>	<p><u>Study aims:</u> <b>UNCHANGED</b> A narrative exploration of which factors have/are enabling P16 students from low SES backgrounds to access HE.</p> <p><u>Participants:</u> <b>UNCHANGED</b>  P16 students from low SES backgrounds applying/or thinking about (and therefore in a position in terms of academic achievement) to apply for HE.</p> <p><u>Recruitment:</u> <b>AMENDED</b> Participants to be recruited via Birmingham University's own A2B (Access to Birmingham) Widening Participation Programme.</p> <p><u>Methodology:</u> <b>UNCHANGED</b> 1-1 face-to-face or online (via Microsoft Teams Video Conferencing Software) Semi-structured interviews supported by a narrative activity: The 'Mapping the Journey of Life' (Denborough, 2014). Interviews to be sound recorded and transcribed.</p>	<p><u>Consent:</u> <b>UNCHANGED</b> - Administrative changes to consent form to include a checklist and researcher counter signature.</p> <p><u>Risks to participants and/or researcher:</u> <b>UNCHANGED</b> - Location of interview and travel cost implications considered. - Right to withdraw indicated as 2 weeks post receipt of 'Map of their Journey of Life' (a record of their story) (as per Ethics Committee recommendations)</p> <p><u>Feedback provided to participants</u> <b>UNCHANGED</b> - Participants to be given a visual representation of information shared during interview using the 'Mapping the Journey of Life' (Denborough 2014) framework.</p> <p><u>Data storage &amp; Access to data</u> <b>UNCHANGED</b> - Dictaphone/ Microsoft Teams recordings which will be transcribed stored using the UoB BEAR</p>	<p><u>Consent:</u> <b>UNCHANGED</b> - Checklist included on consent and counter signature included.</p> <p><u>Risks to participants and/or researcher - UNCHANGED</u> - Location agreed with participant, or an online option offered. - Researcher offered a small reimbursement to cover travel/electricity/time costs to all participants (self funded). - The 'right to withdraw' timescale is 2 weeks following receiving their visual/ written feedback (Map of their Journey of Life') (post interview).</p> <p><u>Sharing of Findings</u> - Findings from this small-scale study will be shared with participants if offer to receive this is accepted.</p> <p><u>Data storage &amp; Access to data</u> - Plans and steps to be taken were amended to be in line with ethical committee recommendations and</p>

		datashare software and password protected laptop in a password protected file. Laptop stored in a locked cabinet.	guidelines.
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<p><b>Subsequent amendment 1</b></p>	<p><u>Participant Recruitment:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Initially I had hoped to recruit via a UoB widening participation programme (A2B); however due to complete lack of response from A2B (over a period of 2 months of efforts by the researcher), and the limitations of using just one route to access participants who met the inclusion criteria, it was deemed necessary to 'cast the net wider' in order to recruit appropriate participants who met my research inclusion criteria. Other Widening Participation Initiatives who share the same aim of promoting access to HE/FE for P16 YP who are considered to be under-represented or at a disadvantage, including due to low socioeconomic status/ background were then explored.</li> <li>- Educational settings who teach a post 16 curriculum within the region where I am currently on placement (as part of my AECPD doctorate) were approached. Only YP who were eligible to and were known (by their setting) to be accessing widening participation programmes/ initiatives (and who meet my research inclusion criteria) were approached by their setting staff initially with my information and consent form with</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ethical considerations of this amendment to recruitment was carefully considered within reflective and critical supervision with my academic tutor and my placement supervisors.</li> <li>- This amendment was not considered to raise any new/ additional ethical considerations. No changes were made to the methodology originally planned. All widening participation initiatives considered as part of this research have similar aims of promoting access to HE/FE for P16 YP who are considered to be under-represented or at a disadvantage including due to low socioeconomic status/ background.</li> </ul>	<p>N/A.</p>
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	the offer to discuss their participation should they wish to participate.		
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7. **DETAILS OF PROPOSED NEW AMENDMENT**

Provide details of the proposed new amendment, and clearly and explicitly state how the proposed new amendment will differ from the details of the study as already approved (see Q6 above).

Recruitment: Unfortunately, I have been unable to get a response from the A2B UoB widening participation programme. Routes 2 Professions (R2P), another University Widening Participation Programme, did respond, but could only enable me to speak to past students, outside of the P16 age range; this was not suitable given the aims of my research and inclusion criteria for my participants. Due to these challenges with recruitment of appropriate participants I had to consider a different route to participant recruitment. Hence the need to update/amend my ethics committee application. I intend to and have been able to recruit P16 YP who meet my eligibility criteria via their educational settings. The P16 settings are based within the region within which I am currently on placement as part of my AECPD. These educational settings offer access to widening participation programmes/ initiatives for their students and only those YP known by the educational setting to be eligible to (and accessing) such initiatives were approached by their educational setting staff. As such the participants are already familiar with the idea of being considered as a YP with low socioeconomic background/ status. All widening participation initiatives have similar eligibility criteria and the same intention to widen participation by young people currently underrepresented in HE; this includes those from low socio-economic status/ backgrounds. Upon critical supervision and reflective discussion it was thought that such an amendment would not create any additional risk to the participants or raise any new ethical considerations from those included in my original AER application (approval received in Sep 22).

8. **JUSTIFICATION FOR PROPOSED NEW AMENDMENT**

Due to unsuccessful attempts to recruit participants through original avenues planned. These challenges to recruitment of participants who met my research inclusion criteria required me to review and amend my participant recruitment routes.



9. **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

What ethical considerations, if any, are raised by the proposed new amendment?

This amendment does not raise any new/additional ethical considerations. All widening participation initiatives have similar eligibility criteria and the same intention to widen participation of young people currently underrepresented in HE; this includes those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Participants will continue to have knowledge of their socioeconomic status given their enrolment on a widening participation initiative.

## 10. DECLARATION BY APPLICANTS

I make this application on the basis that the information it contains is confidential and will be used by the University of Birmingham for the purposes of ethical review and monitoring of the research project described herein, and to satisfy reporting requirements to regulatory bodies. The information will not be used for any other purpose without my prior consent.

I declare that:

- The information in this form together with any accompanying information is complete and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief and I take full responsibility for it.
- I undertake to abide by University Code of Conduct for Research (<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/university/legal/research.pdf>) alongside any other relevant professional bodies' codes of conduct and/or ethical guidelines.
- I will report any changes affecting the ethical aspects of the project to the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Officer.
- I will report any adverse or unforeseen events which occur to the relevant Ethics Committee project to the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Officer.

**Signature of Principal investigator/project supervisor:**

**Date:**

V. M. De Cloedt

Dr Nooreen Khan (PI)

Academic Tutor

Applied Educational and Child Psychology

Doctorate (AECPD) - School of Education

06.02.23

## References:

Denborough, D. (2014). Retelling the Stories of Our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience. W. W. Norton & Company: New York. London.

## Appendix 6: Participant Information and Consent



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

To

Hi! My name is Vicky and I would like to invite you to be involved in my research project that I am doing as part of gaining my PhD in Applied Educational and Child Psychology. The title of my research project is: 'Staking a claim on how high we can aim': A narrative exploration of the factors enabling Post 16 students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to access Higher Education.

### **Why me?**

You have been identified as a potential participant because of your enrolment on a widening participation scheme and/or receipt of the Education and Skills Funding (EFSA) 16-19 Bursary, which helps 'students from underrepresented backgrounds' to access Further and Higher Education.

### **What exactly is the research about and why does it matter?**

The research is looking to explore how Post 16 students from disadvantaged (also known as 'low-socioeconomic') backgrounds feel they are being supported and enabled to access Higher Education, where disadvantaged students are sometimes underrepresented.

Previous research in this area highlights the potential barriers that can be faced, but this piece of research will look at the aspects to consider, when seeking to support the journey of young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds into Higher Education.

As a student from a low socioeconomic background myself, I am aware of the barriers that can be faced on the journey into Higher Education, but am also mindful of what helped me to overcome these. Where students, such as yourself, are able to consider the option of university too, I would like to find out more about your experiences in education and what you think has helped you to get to the position you are in today; where you can choose to go into Higher Education.

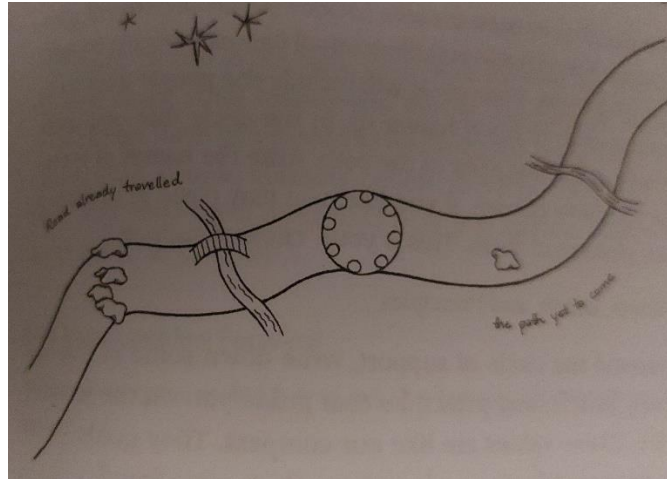
### **What will the research involve?**

Through an interview and narrative activity (The 'Mapping the Journey of Life' activity - Denborough, 2014), we would chat through our experiences, positive and negative, of moving through the education system; thinking about what supported us.

### **The Interview:**

- Will take place on a 1-1 basis, although you can bring a parent/guardian with you for support if you'd like to.
- We can meet face to face on the University of Birmingham campus or within your current educational setting if you feel comfortable to do so, or find another space in a public library, council office or community hub, that you feel comfortable with; this space will be public, but the interview itself will take place in a private room. I am happy for you to suggest a space near you.
- If you would prefer it, we could meet online using Microsoft Teams to do the interview.

- Whether we meet in person or over Microsoft Teams, I will give you £10 to reimburse you for your travel / electricity use costs / time.
- As part of the interview we will create your own 'Map of your Journey of Life' (Denborough, 2014); this is a way of capturing your story so far whilst also beginning to think about your future and you will be gifted your own copy of this no later than a week following our meeting. The 'Mapping the Journey of Life' activity uses a template like the one below... (Please note, you will be able to ask for changes to be made to your Map if you feel anything has been misinterpreted when I share it with you)



*Image taken from: Denborough, 2014, p.133*

- With the use of the creative activity above - our interview will take approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes (but no more).
- If you decide to leave the interview at any point you can do so and do not have to explain your reasons for doing this.
- Interviews can be offered between the hours of 9.00 am and 6.00 pm Monday-Friday; I can be flexible within this to try and meet at a time most convenient for you.
- I hope for Interviews to take place between November and December 2022.

#### **Who exactly do I have to share my story with?**

Your true identity will be protected should you choose to take part; a pseudonym of your own choosing would be used in place of your name and in the case of anyone else's names you refer to. This alternative name will still allow you to see yourself and pick out your story in the overall research, without making your identity known to other readers. Information shared will be kept confidential unless a safeguarding concern arises, in which case I would have to share that information with the University's designated safeguarding lead(s).

#### **Do I have to take part? And can I change my mind?**

You do not have to take part and can ignore this letter if you are not interested or able to get involved.

If you decide to participate in this research you will have the right to withdraw your data from the project up until 2 weeks after you receive the final version of your 'Map of your Journey of Life'; At this point your data will have been included fully into the study and cannot after that be removed.

Your data will be anonymised.

To withdraw from the study you can contact me on the contact details provided at the close of this letter. If you have already participated in the interview at the time you choose to withdraw you will still receive / not be expected to return the £10 you were remunerated.

### **How will you protect my data?**

Any electronic data (including audio recordings) stored in relation to your participation in this project will be stored in password protected files on my password protected personal laptop, with backup files stored onto a secure password protected University of Birmingham computer system. In accordance with the University of Birmingham's Code of Practice for Research, electronic data submitted to the University's own secure data storage system will be kept for 10 years after which time it will be deleted; data stored to my personal (password protected) laptop will be deleted upon publication of the thesis. All paper documents will be shredded following scanning to password protected files online (as previously described). Only I, and my academic tutors and examiner will have access to any of your identifiable information; this might include: initial contact details, signed consent form, participant data set and demographic information.

### **What will be published and how can I access this?**

- A copy of your own personal 'Map of your Journey of Life' representative of your own story will be sent directly to you over email.
- The full thesis will eventually be published online through the University of Birmingham's 'e-thesis repository', should you wish to have a link to access this I can send this to you when it becomes available; please make this request known to me during our interactions or using the contact details at the close of this letter.
- On the accompanying consent form you can indicate whether or not you are happy for your data to be used again. If there are any opportunities for further study or publication in the future, i.e. using the data to create a related journal article.

Whether you choose to take part or not, I would like to congratulate you on your enrolment to the Widening Participation Programme and/or your accessing the ESFA 16-19 Bursary to continue your educational career and wish you all the best for your future 😊

If you think you might be interested in taking part, please contact me as soon as possible using the details below; following this I will make contact with you over the phone, to give you the opportunity to ask any questions you may have about the research and your potential participation in it:

Email: [REDACTED] / Mobile: [REDACTED]

Yours faithfully,

*V. M. De Cloedt*

Vicky De Cloedt

Trainee Educational Psychologist - University of Birmingham

Denborough, D. (2014). *Retelling the Stories of Our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience*. W. W. Norton & Company: New York. London.



**Consent Form for Participants**

Please read the Participant Information Sheet before filling in this form.

Please tick to confirm your agreement with the following statements:

Statements:	I agree:
I have read the attached participant information letter and consent to my participation in the following research project: 'Staking a claim on how high we can aim': A narrative exploration of the factors enabling Post 16 students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to access Higher Education.	
I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research and what is required of me as a participant.	
I understand that should I wish to withdraw my data from this research I must do so before 2 weeks have passed following receipt of my own copy of my 'Map of my Journey of Life' (Denborough, 2014). If I request to have my data withdrawn within this time frame my data will be destroyed.	
I agree to taking part in an interview and assistive activity – drawing up 'Map of my Journey of Life' (Denborough, 2014)	
I understand that, and agree to, my interview being voice recorded and transcribed for the purposes of data-analysis.	
I agree to my transcript data being used in the researcher's write up of the final project / thesis; I understand that the things I talk about in interview will be written up in a Doctoral Thesis. My name will not be used so readers will not know who said what. Extracts from my transcript may be lifted and used as quotations in the wider research write up in order to illustrate certain points.	
I consent to my data being stored in a password protected file on the researcher's (Vicky De Cloedt) password protected laptop until final publication of the thesis.	
I consent to my data being stored in a password protected file, on the University of Birmingham's own secure computer system for the duration of 10 years post publication – please note this will only be accessible to the researcher (Vicky De Cloedt), their academic supervisors and examiners of the thesis (should the latter request to see this)	
I consent that the researcher (Vicky De Cloedt) may contact me in the future if there is a chance to publish the data further, i.e. in a related journal article, or if the data-set could prove useful for answering further research questions in the future.	
I understand that I will be anonymous in the final submission and publication of the research.	

Signed (**participant** signature) \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Print name: \_\_\_\_\_

Countersigned by **Researcher:** \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Print name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix 7: The Charter of Story Telling Rights (Denborough, 2014)**

**“Charter of Storytelling Rights”** (Taken directly from Denborough, 2014, pp.8-9)

- **Article 1.** Everyone has the right to define their experiences and problems in their own words and terms.
- **Article 2.** Everyone has the right to have their life understood in the context of what they have been through and in the context of their relationships with others.
- **Article 3.** Everyone has the right to invite others who are important to them to be involved in the process of reclaiming their life from the effects of hardship.
- **Article 4.** Everyone has the right not to have problems caused by trauma and injustice located inside them, internally, as if there were some deficit in them. The person is not the problem; the problem is the problem.
- **Article 5.** Everyone has the right to have their responses to hard times acknowledged. No one is a passive recipient of hardship. People always respond. People always protest injustice.
- **Article 6.** Everyone has the right to have their skills and knowledge of survival respected, honoured, and acknowledged.
- **Article 7.** Everyone has the right to know and experience that what they have learned through hard times can make a contribution to the lives of others in similar situations.



**Appendix 8:** Direct script taken from Matilda's interview and narrative activity (demarcated by italics and speech marks) as it pertains to Polkinghorne's (1995) Seven Criteria

<p><b>Criterion 1 –</b> Cultural / Social Context</p>	<p><b>Matilda began her story by looking back at her earliest years:</b></p> <p><i>"I think it was 4, I wanna say...I ended up living with my Grandparents. Like through social services. And with my brothers as well"</i></p> <p><i>"I don't remember it, cause I was like 5, but when we moved into our house that we live in now, apparently I said to my nan, 'are we bringing all my toys with me?', because I thought we were leaving them behind, and she was like, 'of course we are'...yeah, it's really cute now, yeah...I feel like I was up-rooted that many times, I just thought it always stayed behind me and I wouldn't bring it with me, but yeah"</i></p> <p><b>Matilda recalled that she "moved 24 times in two years" whilst in the sole care of her Mother and before moving into the care of her Grandparents, with whom she has lived "for 13 years now".</b></p> <p><b>Matilda reflected that the move to her Grandparents home allowed her to "have that experience of like, a childhood":</b></p> <p><i>"I think...It's like, really little stuff, so I remember like, the first couple of years when we were in the caravan site and like it was really little stuff...Like, my Nan, she, really, this is gonna sound so stupid, but she doesn't care about like, washing stuff up? So, as kids she's like, you can get as dirty as like, chuck it in the washing machine, job done. Where my mum was very like... 'You have to keep your clothes clean', because we didn't change very often, so it was kind of, you had to get it done... and I remember, me and my brother, my older brother, going down to the river and we were like looking at the river, like just looking at it, and my granddad comes in behind us and like throws a massive stone in and it went all over...and it was just like a realization then, it was like, I don't care, just get yourself dirty...Like, get, like, and we didn't have like, that opportunity to play properly until we got like, with them"</i></p> <p><b>As Matilda has "grown up" and "changed", she has also witnessed changes in her local community:</b></p> <p><i>"Like from where I am now, when we first moved out it was quite like a safe place you could say, but now it's like definitely got worse as times moved on. I know like, from, there's people that live like, in NEARBY LOCATION, but they come down. It's like, like, drug dealing... in the streets drinking alcohol... Stuff like that. The usual really"</i></p> <p><b>Socially Matilda has somewhat distanced herself from this immediate community:</b></p> <p><i>"Like I don't go, like, cause where we live it's mainly like, not older people, but older than me, like I'm one of the younger ones, so I don't, if I'm going out somewhere, I don't tend to go to CURRENT LOCATION, I go like to COLLEGE's LOCATION, or NEARBY LOCATION..."</i></p>
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	<p><b>Matilda acknowledges the role of her sixth forms widening participation initiative, by way of a post-16 bursary in supporting her continuation to college, where she also enjoys these connections outside of her immediate community:</b></p> <p><i>“Fundings quite weird, cause that's always been like a bit of a concern for me, just because I live with my grandparents, and so the one has umm, his OCCUPATION pension, and obviously all we're technically living off is their pensions? So, it's always been a bit of a worry for me...But because of the situation, I get more money because of it, so, it's like, and then obviously I have the bursary at the moment which I get. Which is really helpful”</i></p>
<p><b>Criterion 2 –</b> Information about the subject of the story and their embodied experience</p>	<p><b>In line with Polkinghorne's (1995) notion of embodiment, Matilda explains how her earliest experiences within her home environment (prior to moving under her Grandparents care) impacted both her 'physical and cognitive development':</b></p> <p><i>“And it's like things like that, like the milestones that we didn't reach physically and stuff like that. Yeah, and like, our health was definitely like a massive part, especially mine. I had like, operations on my ears because I couldn't hear properly, like, my health was like, declining and my brothers as well, because we were classed as malnourished when we first like, lived. So yeah, yeah. But I'm still having problems now with my health because of like, things that happened when I was younger”</i></p> <p><i>“Because I didn't eat properly and stuff like that, I still struggled with like eating. I've had to have like, I'm still waiting to have operations on my feet because they're deformed...things like, because we didn't have shoes that fit properly...Yeah, so my feet are like curved in, yeah, so I'm waiting to have operations on that, like all sorts, but when I'm older, I see those barriers... When I was younger, they were just there and I didn't see them”</i></p> <p><b>These ongoing health implications have continued to have an impact at times during Matilda's educational journey:</b></p> <p><i>“And my health is always a big one, because, when I have like, well, I don't class them as stressful experiences, but other people would...I get ill from it, like I start to like, have like, stomach problems and things like that and I struggled to come in and my attendance has been low since like year 8 because of it”</i></p> <p><b>And Matilda acknowledges that this might continue to be the case; though she does not let this phase her:</b></p> <p><i>“The operations don't bother me. I'm like, that's fine, whatever... like any of that. I'm like, yeah...I think cause, I'm more concerned about every, someone else's health, than my own half the time. So that's always like a big thing for me but, yeah...”</i></p> <p><b>Matilda has been similarly determined to overcome the challenges posed to her cognitive development through missed education in her earliest years:</b></p>

	<p><i>"Like I went from... I know my first primary school that I went to, cause I've been to two primaries...And the first one I went to, with my grandparents, I used to do those like extra one-to-one sessions cause my ability academically was shot...I didn't have any, to even, think that I got like, a GCSE...Was yeah, incredible!"</i></p> <p><i>"So, I definitely like missed out on stuff, like, it's like really basic stuff, like telling the time, times tables, stuff like that...that I still struggle with now. Yeah, so you know, I know like all the complicated stuff and that for A levels and all that, but like I can't do like the really simple stuff... Yeah, it's part of life, yeah"</i></p>
<p><b>Criterion 3 –</b> Central character's relationship to / with others</p>	<p><b>While I would surmise that much of Matilda's success so far must be attributed to her being "goal driven" and having the "motivation" and "passion" to achieve her aspirations to "help" others who "have been through" what she's been through. Matilda would also insist that the role of others, and her relationship to them, is equally important:</b></p> <p><i>"I think, ask for help for when you need it, because without like, you know, that support network you wouldn't get far to be honest...because you, you just need it... otherwise you're not gonna go far"</i></p> <p><i>"I feel like I like a lot of reassurance as well"</i></p> <p><b>Matilda has not always found it easy to reach out to others:</b></p> <p><i>"I know, like my, my really close friend, she only actually found out about why I live with my grandparents last year. So, like she didn't know...For five years...why I was the way I was"</i></p> <p><i>"I'm just like not one of those people that wants to sit there and talk about it and feel sorry for myself"</i></p> <p><b>And for good reason, is careful about who she shares her story with:</b></p> <p><i>"It's like at school now [referring to sixth form], like teacher wise, it's very limited, in terms of teachers who actually know the full story... Yeah, because I just don't want people knowing it like, it's just not something I want..."</i></p> <p><b>For Matilda this sense of privacy is protective, following her earlier experiences and interactions in primary school:</b></p> <p><i>"I guess cause, like, I'm kind of, one of those people that wants to forget about what happened... Like I don't wanna know... So, when I came to secondary school, it was a complete fresh start, so I didn't have to tell anyone anything, like it was like, like I could say, what I...wanted to say? ...And it was quite nice because I was able to choose what I want to say, when I want to say it; when in primary school it's very, like, you just blurt it out because you don't really know any different like"</i></p> <p><i>"So yeah, but in primary school, obviously there's that whole procedure...Every single teacher knows and like, it just makes things ten times worse in my opinion... Yeah! I feel like, in my opinion, especially at primary, I found like people treat you</i></p>

*different because they knew what happened. Whereas, in secondary school, because they didn't know, I was just like any normal child."*

*"So yeah, yeah, it was nice to get that fresh start, to start again. Yeah, find like the people that I...want to hang around with and like the influence I wanted?"*

**Whilst Matilda has found comfort in not having to disclose everything to everyone, she has chosen to share her story with some key connections, and this has proven instrumental to Matilda's academic achievement:**

*"I see it as my own problem, so I'm like, it doesn't really matter... But I remember my tutor, like last year, actually he was brilliant; like I remember last year I was on the way to like, an exam and I was in the middle of the stairs and HEAD OF YEAR was at the bottom and TUTOR was at the top and they wouldn't let me go anywhere until they'd spoke to me...so, like, 'we need to talk to you...' So I would like chill about my exams, so yeah".*

*"I feel like, to be fair, like teaching wise, like, cause I've had like, appointments to school counsellors and stuff like that and they're quite good and HEAD OF YEAR is brilliant as well. The head of the year. I feel like, because it takes me a while to build relationships with people, like, that's not family and friends... And then once I do, I'm quite happy to like, confide in them. Like HEAD OF YEAR knows the highs and the lows... yeah. He's seen it all with me, but, yeah, yeah".*

*"I remember in year 12 I, I had COVID and, then I got really ill afterwards, and I basically like, refused to come to school for a month and HEAD OF YEAR was like, ringing up, like, 'come to school, come to school', and eventually I came back. But if it wasn't for like, him ringing up and you know, school ringing up and all that, I probably wouldn't have come back to school".*

*"As well, reassurance comes in a little bit. I know my tutor now. He's like constantly like 'you're fine. You've got this' like..."*

*"Yeah, definitely. And like HEAD OF YEAR is the one that like sorted like my counselling for me when I needed it".*

*"And there's like, the school's quite good, because when I had my exams last year, because I know that I get ill from stress, I only came in for the exam? I didn't come in for like, the lesson beforehand if that makes sense...so I wasn't sat in school stressing about it, which made things ten times easier".*

**Beyond the influence of school staff Matilda foregrounds the integral role of her Grandparents:**

*"I think my like, my grandparents have taught me to be [resilient], because they're like, we know it's happened but there's nothing we can do, so we might as well just carry on".*

*"They're massive! It was like, when I was younger, I didn't have a brilliant relationship with them, because technically I blamed them for what*

	<p><i>happened...But as I got older, I actually realised what they did for me, and our relationship is very, very, close”.</i></p> <p><i>“You know, like, if it wasn't for them, like, I know when you look at the file, they say that if I'd, if like, my grandparents didn't, like, become my legal guardians, then I would have been in the care system so I don't know where I would have even been right now, like, so yeah...They're a massive part of it, yeah”.</i></p> <p><b>Whilst much of Matilda’s early story is pieced together through the records and perspectives of others:</b></p> <p><i>“Yeah, yeah. It was quite interesting to actually see those files because I was only four, so I don't remember it, so it was quite interesting actually to see like from other people's perspectives. Yeah, yeah, definitely yeah”.</i></p> <p><i>“Yeah, it's just kind of like putting those pieces together as well, because like you hear different things from different people...Yeah definitely, especially for me as like a big part, was actually reading those folders and hearing what like social services said about me, and my teachers...Stuff like that, because it's like, it didn't quite hit me until I realized, I was ‘Oh my God’, but...That's what they actually thought like”</i></p> <p><b>Later chapters in Matilda’s story are narrated from her own experience and sensemaking – offering that all-important ownership over her own story (Denborough, 2014):</b></p> <p><i>“I'd say, like my parents are a bit of a weird one to be honest, like it's a bit strange, like, I talk to both of them...I don't particularly get on with my dad...But I get on well with my mum. My mum went to, it was like, it was a religious like, kind of adult social care setting for a couple of years, because one of the reasons why we went into, like live with my grandparents, was because of her mental health. Yeah, so she went into that, and then I think it was like three or four years later she started like visiting us... Like phone calls a week, so I've had a quite, a good relationship with my mum. Like we...Built that up, yeah...But then I also think that's because I've grown up to be quite a sympathetic person...Yeah, so I understand that it wasn't my mum's...fault necessarily”.</i></p>
<p><b>Criterion 4 –</b> Central character’s choices and actions toward goal denouement</p>	<p><b>As alluded to above, Matilda’s ‘passion’, ‘motivation’ and ‘drive’ have undoubtedly been key factors in facilitating her success so far, and in her aspirations for the future; for Matilda there is no question as to whether she will pursue HE:</b></p> <p><i>“I feel like it's like, the automatic next step up for what you want to do, like I can't really imagine doing anything else really”.</i></p> <p><b>With her “end goal”...“to become a child mental health nurse” in mind, Matilda thought hard about which subjects and qualifications she would pick up at post-16:</b></p> <p><i>“Yeah, yeah, I tried to make them as relevant as possible when I did it, yeah”.</i></p>

**Aside from her subject choices, Matilda also engages in outside employment that is relevant to her field of interest. This work provides not only relevant experience for Matilda, but also much needed financial support:**

*"I've started working at the CARE INDUSTRY ROLE now, in September this year. And it's like I'm completely different, like my independence has like shot up! And I've seen it as well like, I'm like, secretly quite proud of it..."*

*"And my job is probably one of the things that keeps me going because I'm on a good wage".*

**Matilda undoubtedly works hard juggling her study and employment:**

*"But then I end up doing like 40 some weeks, cause I just go into work and like, go and do it, yeah...It was really weird, cause at the start, they used to put me on a 6 hour, and a 6 hour, at the weekend...yeah, which was fine because it meant I had that afternoon...to myself, to do work...And then in my free's at school. But now because, I'm, it sounds a bit cocky, because I've got better at my job, they want me in more. Yeah, which is fine because it's nice to get the wage back at the end of the month. Yeah".*

*"I've also found a word though, like I'm also one of those people that, I don't wanna say 'no' if it means it's helping someone... so she'll ring me up and ask me to do a load of shifts and I'm like 'yeah, yeah, sure, yeah', but then it gets to that week and I'm like 'oh...I'm working everyday!' Like, I just don't realise, I just don't realise? At work...they're like, you need to say 'no' sometimes...Like you can say 'no'! And this year I'm working like Christmas Day and New Year's Day. Yeah, yeah... It's not too bad though, cause we get triple hourly rate for those days, so I'm like, 'well I'm not gonna complain because it's a good wage', so yeah".*

**This mindedness to money and funding studies is also present in Matilda's decision making for the future with regard her choices for HE:**

*"It kind of like it depends because FIRST CHOICE UNIVERSITY is my top choice. Yeah, if I go to FIRST CHOICE UNIVERSITY they fund for your course as long as you stay within LOCATION for like... The next two years after so like employment in LOCATION, but I feel like if I've done six years and years, I'll probably end up staying there anyway".*

**For Matilda, neither finances nor past problems faced will alter her aspirations (in fact, we will see under criterion 5 how past experiences have shaped Matilda's motivation for tackling those issues she believes to be "a concern in society"):**

*"I feel like when something bad happens, I'll try to overcome it by something good happening on top of it"*

*"[W]hen I got to secondary school, I was like, more grown up. So I realized...Why I was in that situation... So yeah, yeah, it was nice to get that fresh start, to start again"*

<p><b>Criterion 5 –</b> How past experiences influence our main character going forward / their learning / sensemaking</p> <p>Including aspirations for the future</p>	<p><b>Matilda is not the only one to recognise a change in herself:</b></p> <p><i>"I've gone through, through like, so many like, phases in my life...As I've changed like...That, so much has happened..."</i></p> <p><i>"Yeah, I think, I remember like, talking to other people, they always say that over the past year like, I'm a completely different person to what I used to be...Yeah, and a lot of them actually say it's because of everything that's happened, especially like last year with like...Losing people. And stuff like that"</i></p> <p><b>Whilst this 'change' that Matilda refers to speaks to contextual factors, and one particular experience that would prove central to her decision making in relation to her chosen field of work; Matilda also gives weight to the role of genetics in shaping the person and their experiences:</b></p> <p><i>"I think there's so much, like the reason why I wanna do what I wanna do, yeah...I know last year when I spoke about the two people passing away, my CONNECTION took his own life, so that's one of the reasons, why I did mental health medicine. Because, in my head...The, one of the, not, not the, not the sole reason, but one of the reasons why he did what he did was because of the way he was brought up... Yeah, and I feel like those experiences have made, helped him to make the decision that he made, and that's kind of one of the reasons that motivated me to do it, because I don't want to have to lose another CONNECTION for that reason, and I don't, I know what it's like to lose someone from that...So, I feel like I can understand not just like you know the patient, but the family as well because I get it, like, I've, I've been through that experience. Yeah, yeah"</i></p> <p><i>"Like, personally I have that opinion that a lot of the ways things happen is like, from genetics, so my mum's adopted and she didn't have a brilliant, like, childhood either. So, I always find it really like, kind of fascinating, how she didn't, and then I didn't, but we both managed to get the way we are like... I think that's quite an interesting point... I think we're both kind of like, we like to prove each other's, other people... Wrong...who think it's not gonna be alright"</i></p> <p><b>For Matilda genetics do not rule out the possibility of 'change':</b></p> <p><i>"I think the difference in my parents is that with my mum, she's prepared to change like...She went and got herself a job. She got herself a house, so don't get me wrong, like, some things haven't been the way it should have been, but she's changed"</i></p> <p><b>And new experiences and subsequent successes can create a new blueprint for the future:</b></p> <p><i>"Yeah, I feel like, cause, once I started all that work experience and like, you know, GCSE's and my mocks and stuff like that...All the confidence has like, allowed me to do better at other stuff because, until like, when I start something new, I'm like, quite like, a nervous person...Yeah, like even, like, the thought of like, coming to six form scared me...even though I'd been there for like five years... Six years, at the high school... like, I knew all the people and everything, but it still scared me, yeah".</i></p>
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*"Yeah, like, it's really silly stuff, like a year ago I would never have rang the doctor's up and like booked an appointment, but I'll do it without even thinking about it now. And I know that sounds really silly, but like it's silly things like that, that like, yeah... Yeah, like, it sounds so stupid, but like I wouldn't have done it before, like, yeah it's like, my, my work as well like, school work... I'm always really like negative. Like 'I should have got this'... and then this year it all kind of like, just went together and everything just went right".*

*"Yeah, like I, in year seven I would never have thought I'd even get GCSE's, never mind doing A-Levels... Yeah, it's like that, that shocks me sometimes".*

**Indeed, Matilda attributes some of her developing values, guiding principles and characteristics to her early experiences, above and beyond genetics alone:**

*"I, I wouldn't say like I grew up like, in a strict house... I definitely wouldn't say that, but like living with my grandparents, obviously, they... They've had quite a strict household, like, like my great grandparents, they would have grown up with like, that strict values of doing this this way. So, they've like, a little bit of that's kind of gone into my grandparents, that I live with... so, that's gone into me. So, it's like gone down the family a little bit".*

*"I know that's, that's probably like, nowadays, I'm an absolute neat freak, like everything stays exactly where it is, so I know that it's there, and it's probably to do with my past, why I'm probably like, 'that needs to stay there'... But I'm also like, most people, cause my house, like when I lived with my parents, it used to be like an absolute mess, and that's one of the reasons why they moved us... I feel like, I like that order and that tidiness, like it keeps my mind at rest".*

*"Yeah, it's all to do with like organization, like timetables. Yeah, yeah, yeah".*

*"So, we do like theory and stuff and it's like, I look back and like, that makes so much sense... So, what happened there to now, you can really see it, yeah".*

**This notion of change and growth is important for Matilda given her own story and how she hopes to empower others to equally author change in their stories:**

*"I think as well like, it's, it'd be quite easy to look at all the bad stuff that happened and use that as an excuse, and I, I just, I mean, I personally can't, cause I just think, it is what shaped me..."*

*"I feel like if it wasn't for the things that happened, then I wouldn't be who I am now? So, it has a lot to do with like what I wanna do, where I wanna go... stuff like that. I feel like it's kind of, it also gives me the motivation, because I know what's happened to me, and I don't want it to happen to other people, so, it's like, that's my way of looking at it".*

*"And everyone says I'm a really goal driven person... I feel like that is to do with the fact that I've got that like passion to do it, because I know what it's like".*



	<p><b>Indeed, the pseudonym Matilda was chosen because</b> <i>"She didn't have that brilliant upbringing and then she was a smart child so I think I like enjoyed it because it was like, a bit like me, like, liked it for that reason, yeah"</i></p> <p><b>As modest as Matilda presented throughout our active interview, stressing that she does not wish to be "cocky", she is right to recognize this potential in herself, and acknowledges that she must strive to fulfil her potential, if only for her Grandparents:</b></p> <p><i>"I feel like now as well like, like I don't think it's on purpose, but I feel like it's my way of giving back to them, because they like, grew me up and did everything they needed to do"</i></p>
<p><b>Criterion 6 –</b> Temporal aspects of the story including the denouement and in this case, thoughts around the future also</p>	<p><b>Beginning:</b> <b>The problem with primary school...</b></p> <p><i>"OK. I think it's like been such a weird experience like, because at primary school I did not get on with school at all. I didn't start my education properly until I was in year 2. So because I was moving around a lot and stuff like that, I didn't really get a chance to settle down like with primary school. Yeah, and then I had to have an operation on my ears, so it meant that I was off school even longer".</i></p> <p><b>This absence from early education had implications for Matilda's academic attainment at that time...and still sometimes today:</b></p> <p><i>"So, I definitely like missed out on stuff, like, it's like really basic stuff, like telling the time, times tables, stuff like that...that I still struggle with now. Yeah, so you know, I know like all the complicated stuff and that for A levels and all that, but like I can't do like the really simple stuff..."</i></p> <p><b>It was not absences alone that contributed to a lesser sense of belonging for Matilda:</b></p> <p><i>"And like, for me as well, when I was living with my grandparents it took me like ages to kind of like, accept the fact that they weren't my parents, like, it was... because I used to go to primary school and obviously, at primary school, everyone compares, like, each other, with each other... and I was like, straight away, obviously, we knew we were like different to other people... and umm, I think it was a case, it took me ages and I was like... At school I was like that perfect child, but then at home I was such a pain for my, my grandparents, like, I'd like, cause so much trouble. And it was just purely for the fact I didn't quite understand what... What was going on"</i></p> <p><b>Middle:</b> <b>More secure in secondary...</b></p> <p><i>"But then when I got to secondary school, I was like, more grown up. So I realized... Why I was in that situation? ...[Secondary school] was massive for me. Yeah, definitely. Like, at primary school I didn't have many friends, but then when I like, got to secondary school there was like a big group of us as well. Yeah, that was a big stage. Definitely yeah yeah"</i></p>

**Secondary school provided the chance for Matilda to make “a complete fresh start” and to take ownership over her story:**

*“I guess cause, like, I’m kind of, one of those people that wants to forget about what happened... Like I don’t wanna know... So, when I came to secondary school, it was a complete fresh start, so I didn’t have to tell anyone anything, like it was like, like I could say, what I...wanted to say? ...And it was quite nice because I was able to choose what I want to say, when I want to say it; when in primary school it’s very like, you just blurt it out because you don’t really know any different like. So yeah, yeah, it was nice to get that fresh start, to start again. Yeah, find like the people that I...want to hang around with and like, the influence I wanted?”*

**With an increased sense of belonging, and taking up the pen to truly author her own story, Matilda also began to enjoy academic success and see what she was truly capable of; even when she faced further struggles outside of school:**

*“Uh, GCSE’s is a massive thing for me, and when, obviously COVID pandemic was a nightmare for everyone... but yeah, I think for me because I had, so May was when we did our exams and I lost two people...At the same time in May, so my whole world was like, this is not going well... And yet I still managed to get nearly all my GCSE’s. So I was quite proud of myself I’m not gonna lie! I know the school applied for me to get like, my extra 2% advantage on my grades, which did definitely help. But yeah, yeah”*

**End (Denouement) to the story so far:  
From self-doubt to celebrations!**

*“Yeah, like I, in year seven I would never have thought I’d even get GCSE’s, never mind doing A-Levels... Yeah, it’s like that, that shocks me sometimes”.*

*“When it comes to academic, I’m not an exam person, but then it’s really weird, this year, cause like last year I was like freaking out the whole entire time and then I got merits... Which is fine. There’s nothing wrong with a merit. Don’t get me wrong. But it’s not what I wanted...And then this year... And this year, because of my job and, and the exam we’re doing as I’m working in health and social care? So, it’s literally my job, so I’m able to write like essays on exactly everything...and I’m getting distinctions in like, in the mocks which is brilliant. Like, I remember literally last week my teacher gave me my mock back for Unit 2 and she put a distinction star on it and I was like shocked. I was speechless. I was like ‘what?’ But yeah, it was, it was like a bit of like an amazing thing to look back and be like, ‘Oh my God’, like I never would have thought I would have got that in an exam, and it was like, I’m like, I used to be one of those people that would just scrape the pass because it was an exam...Yeah, so it was really nice. But exams have always been like a problem, because I just freak out in them because like in my head, it’s like, it’s all down to this one little thing like...”*

**Future:  
Making a difference!**

	<p><i>"I think it's like, I always wanted to do nursing because I'm just one of those people that likes to care".</i></p> <p><b>Matilda acknowledges that her own life experiences play a big part in her aspirations to ensure that</b> <i>"what's happened to [her]...[doesn't] happen to other people"...</i></p> <p><b>Matilda's aspirations for university will potentially result in a significant move away from her home community:</b></p> <p><i>"Well, I've, I've already applied to university, and a lot of mine are in OUT OF AREA LOCATION. Yeah, I want to like go somewhere that's like, far enough I can become independent, but not too far that like, if I had like, a serious problem I could come home...And see the place a bit; I've been living in CURRENT LOCATION for the past 13 years, yeah... (laughs)"</i></p> <p><b>Financial incentives offered by Matilda's first choice university also have a part to play in Matilda's decision making here:</b></p> <p><i>"It kind of like it depends because FIRST CHOICE UNIVERSITY is my top choice. Yeah, if I go to FIRST CHOICE UNIVERSITY they fund for your course as long as you stay within LOCATION for like... The next two years after so like employment in LOCATION, but I feel like if I've done six years and years, I'll probably end up staying there anyway"</i></p> <p><b>Whilst Matilda might have to cut ties with her home community, she clearly values and seeks to be a part of a community wherever she goes:</b></p> <p><i>"Yeah, it's nice. It is one of my lower ones, but I do like it. Yeah, I think it's like a bit too big for me, so I feel like I'd get lost in it a little bit. Whereas MID CHOICE UNIVERSITY and FIRST CHOICE UNIVERSITY are a bit smaller, so I feel like I'd be a bit more at home"</i></p>
<p><b>Criterion 7 –</b> How events and happenings culminate in the story's denouement: emplotment</p>	<p><b>Much of the criterion above feed into this final criterion focused on the overall emplotment of a story.</b></p> <p><b>For Matilda whilst her earliest years and experiences proved challenging, they also 'shaped' who she is today, 'what she wants to do, and where she wants to go'...that, and a want to</b> <i>"to prove...other people...wrong"!</i></p> <p><b>From no place in education, to no sense of belonging as she 'blurt out' information about her story that she was still trying to make sense of herself; Matilda's primary years were problematic and plagued by a feeling of being 'different'.</b></p> <p><b>As Matilda 'grew up' and started secondary school, she created for herself a 'fresh start' and the chance to share her story only when, and how, she wished to.</b></p>

	<p>The records and recall of those around Matilda were important here in offering Matilda some sense of her earliest inserts, so that she could begin to make sense of the story she might share with a select few.</p> <p>For those that Matilda chose to <i>'confide in'</i>, they have played an important part in her success; Matilda acknowledges that <i>"without like, you know, that support network you wouldn't get far to be honest"</i>.</p> <p>Without a doubt, Matilda's Grandparents form the foundations of her circle of support. Though school staff too have had their roles to play; be this through the provision of talking support or putting in place practical measures that can assist, i.e., <i>"the school's quite good, because when I had my exams last year, because I know that I get ill from stress, I only came in for the exam? I didn't come in for like, the lesson beforehand...so I wasn't sat in school stressing about it, which made things ten times easier"</i>.</p> <p>Prior to this, Matilda also took confidence from the assessment results she gained at GCSE amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic; <i>"GCSE's is a massive thing for me"</i>. While Matilda partially attributes these results to the application of a <i>"2% advantage on [her] grades"</i> she does recognize that these results were awarded because her teachers genuinely feel that they reflect her true potential. Here, an otherwise incredibly modest Matilda, has allowed herself to be <i>"quite proud of [her]self"</i>.</p> <p>One of the greatest practical forms of support her sixth form could put in place was the provision of a post-16 bursary, that, alongside paid part-time (although sometimes working fulltime hours) employment, would enable Matilda to continue her education.</p> <p>Given Matilda's commitment to <i>"child mental health nursing"</i>, on account of her own experiences and those close to her and <i>"lost"</i> - as well as her natural propensity to <i>'care'</i> and <i>'sympathise'</i> - Matilda has been able to choose subjects and employment experience that lend themselves to this career.</p> <p>Matilda's <i>"school work"</i> has benefited from her paid <i>"work experience"</i> and her <i>"confidence"</i> has grown as a result.</p> <p>With Matilda's <i>"end goal"</i> in mind, university is <i>"the automatic next step"</i>. And whilst <i>"Fundings quite weird, cause that's always been like a bit of a concern for [Matilda]"</i>, she has been able to make an application to a university that <i>"fund for your course"</i>.</p>
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**Appendix 9:** Direct script taken from Proud’s interview and narrative activity (demarcated by italics and speech marks) as it pertains to Polkinghorne’s (1995) Seven Criteria

**Table 11:** Direct script taken from Proud’s interview and narrative activity as it pertains to Polkinghorne’s (1995) ‘seven criteria for judging a life history’ (p.16):

<p><b>Criterion 1 –</b> Cultural / Social Context</p>	<p><b>Proud’s story begins at home, with her parents and 3 siblings:</b></p> <p><i>“We did... we did live in a Council house before... But we managed to get a more suitable rented house”.</i></p> <p><b>Proud shared that she is acutely aware of the challenges that come with renting a home and as such she is keen to own her own house one day:</b></p> <p><i>“Mum sort of said the same, that actually, it's really hard once you get into that, into renting, it's hard to get your own [home]...”</i></p> <p><b>Proud stressed that her “parents were in receipt of benefits”, as long as she can remember. This was true of Proud’s father until he sadly “passed away a few years ago”.</b></p> <p><b>Proud has always been mindful of the financial pressures her and her family face and of the ‘barriers’ that she might come up against in trying to be ‘first in family to university’:</b></p> <p><i>“Yes. So even last year I didn't think I was gonna move away because I didn't think I would be able to afford it. And I was gonna go to the local university just so I could live here and not have to pay for anything extra. But then I thought, well, it's a once in a lifetime experience...Like, I'll find the money somehow...Umm, so I'd rather just do it”</i></p> <p><i>“I think just like, even when Mum's wanted to do stuff, she just can't because of all the barriers there...”</i></p> <p><b>Proud doesn’t deny that moving away from the area and her support network might be hard, but also recognises that she has always been relatively independent, because she has had to be; Proud’s 3 siblings have additional needs in the form an Autism Spectrum Condition diagnosis, and Proud understands that this has required a lot of her mother’s input:</b></p> <p><i>“[T]his is gonna be a big move having always been in the area”...</i></p> <p><i>“I think just knowing that even if you don't want to like, doing cooking and stuff, like, if you prove you can, then... You can just keep going... and at work, even when stuff gets a bit annoying, like today, like, you can get through it, so...”</i></p> <p><i>“Yeah, I just think, having to rely on myself for, like, now I have to drive myself everywhere, and umm, cooking things and having like, if I want stuff, I'll have to buy it myself, so just planning ahead so I know what I've got and what I have to do”</i></p>
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<p><b>Criterion 2 –</b> Information about the subject of the story and their embodied experience</p>	<p><b>In line with Polkinghorne’s (1995) notion of embodiment, Proud reflected upon how her educational experiences impacted her ‘cognitive and physical development’:</b></p> <p><b>Proud reflected on how, for her, her academic achievement was enabled by the physical opportunities to engage with her learning, be it ‘marching on the field like a Roman’ or ‘burying a time capsule’, Proud appreciated the ‘imaginative’ and ‘creative’ curriculum adopted by her ‘amazing’ primary school, and ‘learning by doing’.</b></p> <p><b>As Proud moved through school, she notes how her engagement with different subjects changed; but also how she always rose to the cognitive challenge:</b></p> <p><i>“Yes. So, I actually did better at English GCSE than I did at Maths, but then I did a Maths A-Level and I got a B there, and so... I hated it at A Level... Well, I, I clearly did alright, but like I was getting to the point where I’d sit and look at an equation and actually cry... but now doing it again from year seven, it’s my favourite subject and I absolutely love it”. Here Proud refers to how she is now supporting other children in the subject as a Teaching Assistant...</i></p> <p><i>“Yeah, I like using the counters with them and things like that. It’s just nice to be able to actually use your hands”. In her role as Teaching Assistant, Proud enjoys making the learning hands-on like she enjoyed at school.</i></p> <p><b>Whilst hands-on learning has been instrumental to Proud realising her academic potential, she also emphasises how important it has been to have a voice, and how important it has been to use it to try and create change where change is needed for young people:</b></p> <p><i>“I know that not everyone can speak up for themselves...So, I quite like to... be, well, I would never talk for them, but be able to give a voice and hope that they can relate to it”.</i></p> <p><b>Here Proud speaks about featuring on the radio to talk about how the Covid-19 lockdowns were affecting young people. We thought about Proud’s readiness to take on the role of advocate for other young people and wondered where that might come from:</b></p> <p><i>“I’m not sure... My Dad, umm, used to do like pantomimes and stuff like that, and be on the stage, umm, and he was quite like if he didn’t agree with something, even though most of the time he was wrong (laughs)... But if he didn’t agree with something you would know about it and he’d like to stand up for himself, so...”</i></p> <p><b>Where a voice is quietened Proud believes in looking closely at the behaviour of the children and young people she supports – be it through her work as a Teaching Assistant or work as a Youth Worker:</b></p> <p><i>‘My approach to working with children is that children’s behaviour is telling us that they need something from us’ and, and, and ‘there’s an underlying cause’.</i></p>
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	<p>For Proud then, the body and mind, what's going on inside, and what presents on the outside, is all intrinsically linked.</p>
<p><b>Criterion 3 –</b> Central character's relationship to / with others</p>	<p><b>For Proud, the support of staff throughout school has been paramount. Proud celebrates that even now, she is still in touch with staff from her primary school:</b></p> <p><i>"Like, all the adults were like, key adults in my life...I know all of them by name. And when I saw them, I'd know who they were".</i></p> <p><i>"Umm, you could just tell that they genuinely wanted to be there and that they actually cared... They weren't just listening because they were being paid to... They actually cared".</i></p> <p><b>Here Proud speaks to the power of feeling valued and genuinely cared about by those supporting her in school – both at primary and secondary. Proud refers to there always being 'people at school who believed in me':</b></p> <p><i>"Yeah, there was always someone there...there to give me, like, a kind of boost, like, 'you're being silly'"; this mattered to Proud given that she did not always 'receive those messages from home'.</i></p> <p><b>Proud shared that, even though such messages of confidence were not always afforded freely at home, her parents had gifted her something very special at birth, that allowed Proud to always appreciate their evident pride in her (this cannot be named in the interests of protecting Proud's true identity).</b></p> <p><b>Proud was mindful that her mother did not achieve GCSEs herself, due to the 'barriers' she faced; we thought about the importance of Proud being able to speak to her teachers about how she herself would navigate her exams.</b></p> <p><b>Proud stressed that her mother did encourage her to get her GCSEs if she could:</b></p> <p><i>"Yeah, she said she would have been happy with whatever I got, but she was like, if you can get them and you can do well, then go for it".</i></p> <p><b>In recounting her time at secondary school, Proud clearly valued the open-door policy adopted by her history teacher, who also played a big part in Proud's ultimate aspirations to become a teacher herself, as he entrusted her to set his classroom for afternoon lessons:</b></p> <p><i>"Umm, well, especially in the winter, it got really cold and then we didn't wanna sit outside, and so I think we would have been in your ten, the one time, when we said, 'can we sit in your, your room so we can be warm? And we'll help you out'... And then every day since it happened (laughs)"..."Yeah, because he was my History teacher, the one that we were with most of the time was my history teacher, so it was quite nice"</i></p> <p><b>Proud also reflected on the ongoing support she receives from another key teacher in school and the adjoining sixth form, and even now as she supports other children in the school that she herself was educated in:</b></p>

*"[H]e's always there to support... even now"... "particularly inspirational because actually he didn't have a plain sailing journey into higher education and teaching either"... "Yeah, he's very engaging cause he knows... How he would have wanted to have been taught so he's able to engage everyone else".*

**As positive as Proud's school experience was, she can recall that not all teachers held the same belief in her ability:**

*"Umm, so, for a lot of high school...although fives a pass in English, they said, 'you're probably gonna get a five'... like, I was in top set because they were like, 'your knowledge is there', 'but from every test you've done so far, you probably are gonna get a five'... And then, because obviously I didn't do GCSEs, but the tests I did do just before we finished, were what I got my grades from, and I got eight's in both English...so..." ... "Yeah. So, I proved them wrong".*

**Proud faced more challenges than most as she moved through her secondary schooling, with the loss of her father and nan amidst the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. Outside support around these experiences would prove important:**

*"Dad passed away a few years ago, and the Hospice support was, was really important".*

*"Umm, well I don't know if he'd be happy with me saying this, but, my boyfriend...we've been together three and a half years now, and so he was with me when Dad passed away and when my nan passed away, and it was Covid time, so, like, he had to support me through it all when I couldn't really see anyone else".*

**Proud's nan had been a real source of inspiration for her:**

*"she's just an all-round inspirational person, even when she was really ill and couldn't speak and was struggling with dementia, she would put a smile on her face"... "really brave"... "really admired that about her, and that kind of inner strength".*

**And this inner strength is something I recognised in Proud herself and that Proud was able to recognise in herself also. As well as attributing this inner strength to her inspirational grandmother, Proud again recognised the role that educational staff continued to play in instilling some confidence and self-belief in her; noting in particular the recognition of her potential and subsequently signing her up for a widening participation programme:**

*"Yeah. Well, because it was an invite only scheme as well. I was like, well, clearly they see that I can... get to that point"*

*"Yeah, cos my head of sixth form. Applied for it for me because I don't think you had to just come from the same background, but, there was a variety of ways you could get into it, but then knowing that she, and because obviously my teachers would have had to have told her... That they all thought that I could... that gave me the motivation to do it".*



<p><b>Criterion 4 –</b> Central character's choices and actions toward goal denouement</p>	<p><b>Enrolment to the HE Plus Programme proved fundamental for Proud believing that higher education might really be a viable option for her:</b></p> <p><i>"Yeah. So, they gave more information because I think sometimes schools think you know it, even if you don't know it. So this, just because it was just about university, it gave you a lot more pinpointed information. And because it was made by universities it was more tailored as well".</i></p> <p><i>"Umm, like my mum would just go for a job because she needs the money, but then teachers were like, 'but you can do whatever you want... You don't have to just be in a job to get the money... You can do a job that makes you happy and get the money on top', which is an added like, added bonus"</i></p> <p><i>"...my barriers can be removed, and I can do it, [so] I'd rather just do it. Umm, just because I can".</i></p> <p><b>This ready access to information, advice and guidance (IAG) was imperative for Proud realising that "there's always a pathway to get you where you want to go, even if it's different to, sort of other people's path". A message Proud wants to promote through the sharing of her story as part of this research.</b></p> <p><b>Aside from IAG, Proud has taken her own proactive steps to ensure that she can stay financially afloat whilst at university, through taking a year out to work and save and also securing paid youth work for when she returns home over the holidays:</b></p> <p><i>"And I know that, whatever money I make, I can just put it straight to uni because I've already got this job for other things I have to pay for, so I know I can just keep all the money that would come from it".</i></p> <p><b>The opportunity to work throughout her studies has meant that Proud can look forward to moving away to complete her qualification:</b></p> <p><i>"Yes. So even last year I didn't think I was gonna move away because I didn't think I would be able to afford it. And I was gonna go to LOCAL UNIVERSITY just so I could live here and not have to pay for anything extra. But then I thought, well, it's a once in a lifetime experience...Like, I'll find the money somehow...Umm, so I'd rather just do it".</i></p> <p><b>Proud's independence, resilience and self-reliance are evident in her forethought and planning for success at HE:</b></p> <p><i>"Yeah, I just think, having to rely on myself for, like, now I have to drive myself everywhere, and umm, cooking things and having like, if I want stuff, I'll have to buy it myself, so just planning ahead so I know what I've got and what I have to do".</i></p>
<p><b>Criterion 5 –</b> How past experiences influence our</p>	<p><b>For Proud there is a very clear link between the support she has received at school and her own aspirations to teach and the way she wants to teach:</b></p>

<p>main character going forward / their learning / sensemaking</p> <p>Including aspirations for the future</p>	<p><i>"I think that's the most...I know that teaching is important, but actually addressing everyone's needs is more important than the teaching itself".</i></p> <p><b>Proud knows this from her own experience and wants to be like the supporting adults that always had an open door for her:</b></p> <p><i>"[I]f there's a problem, talk about it... It really does help"... "Yeah, most of the things I've dealt with, I've dealt with it through, even if the teacher just sits there... I just rant at them..."</i></p> <p><i>'[T]here is always help out there... Don't be afraid to ask for it'.</i></p> <p><b>Proud has not only learnt to go to others in times of need, but she has also learnt that she herself is incredibly resilient and strong:</b></p> <p><i>"I think just knowing that even if you don't want to like, doing cooking and stuff, like, if you prove you can, then... You can just keep going... and at work, even when stuff gets a bit annoying, like today, like, you can get through it, so..."</i></p> <p><i>"You just keep going".</i></p> <p><i>'[N]o matter what others say, you can do it... You can prove them wrong'.</i></p> <p><b>Proud is honest about the fact that doubt and negative thinking can sometimes try to creep in, but stresses that she does not let it take hold:</b></p> <p><i>"I think sometimes you can be your own worst enemy, and if you pick at yourself enough, you will give up... Umm, but if you just stick at it and kind of ignore those thoughts and you will get through it"</i></p> <p><b>Proud acknowledged that feedback from others is helpful here and thought about how the 'positive feedback from parents' she receives in her job presently allows her to believe and feel motivated by the fact that she is 'making that difference'. This belief and motivation is again, key to Proud's aspirations going forward.</b></p> <p><b>Proud's aspirations are also to do things differently, to overcome the struggles she has had to see her family face at times, whether in respect of securing a home of her own or obtaining employment:</b></p> <p><i>"Mum sort of said the same, that actually, it's really hard once you get into that, into renting, it's hard to get your own [home]..."</i></p> <p><i>"Umm, like my mum would just go for a job because she needs the money, but then teachers were like, 'but you can do whatever you want... You don't have to just be in a job to get the money... You can do a job that makes you happy and get the money on top', which is an added like, added bonus".</i></p> <p><i>"...my barriers can be removed, and I can do it, [so] I'd rather just do it. Umm, just because I can".</i></p>
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<p><b>Criterion 6 –</b> Temporal aspects of the story including the denouement and in this case, thoughts around the future also</p>	<p><b>Beginning:</b> <b>Early inspiration in education:</b></p> <p><b>Following being pulled out of her first primary school on account of their belief that they could not meet the needs of her siblings, Proud moved to an ‘amazing school’; here she enjoyed ‘lots of support’ and ‘learning by doing’ through a ‘creative and imaginative and a really engaging curriculum’.</b></p> <p><b>Proud describes the staff from this school as ‘key adults in [her] life’ and celebrated that she is ‘still touch with them’.</b></p> <p><b>Proud describes her years in primary school as ‘the best years’ and attributes her aspiration to ‘teach primary’ to this.</b></p>
	<p><b>Middle:</b> <b>Securing success:</b></p> <p><b>Proud stressed that her time in secondary school confirmed her aspirations to teach, as she begun to take on responsibilities in her history teachers classroom and get a taste for what the job might entail, by ‘help[ing] them set up for the next lesson and organise everything’.</b></p> <p><b>Proud recalls many of her teachers in secondary with fondness, singling out the unwavering support of two in particular. These teachers ‘belief’ in her further enabled her to secure an incredibly impressive set of GCSE results – though this achievement cannot be attributed to anyone more than Proud herself – and Proud knows it: “I smashed it’.</b></p> <p><b>Achieving her GCSEs was important given that Proud’s Mum had not been able to reach this milestone for herself – “Yeah, it definitely pushed me to do better”. And Proud did indeed ‘out do’ the expectations of some of her teachers even:</b></p> <p><i>“Umm, so, for a lot of high school...although fives a pass in English, they said, ‘you’re probably gonna get a five’... like, I was in top set because they were like, ‘your knowledge is there’, ‘but from every test you’ve done so far, you probably are gonna get a five’... And then, because obviously I didn’t do GCSEs, but the tests I did do just before we finished, were what I got my grades from, and I got eight’s in both English...so...” ... “Yeah. So, I proved them wrong”.</i></p>
	<p><b>End (Denouement) to the story so far:</b> <b>A-LEVEL of support to level the playing field:</b></p> <p><b>Proud showed great resilience in the achievement of challenging A-levels and this potential was recognised by staff in sixth form, who would go on to encourage Proud to enrol upon a widening participation programme:</b></p> <p><i>“Yes. So, I actually did better at English GCSE than I did at Maths, but then I did a Maths A-level and I got a B there, and so... I hated it at A Level... Well, I, I clearly did alright, but like I was getting to the point where I’d sit and look at an equation and actually cry... but now doing it again from year seven, it’s my favourite subject and I absolutely love it”</i></p>

*"Yeah, cos my head of sixth form. Applied for it for me because I don't think you had to just come from the same background, but, there was a variety of ways you could get into it, but then knowing that she, and because obviously my teachers would have had to have told her... That they all thought that I could... that gave me the motivation to do it".*

**This programme and Proud's job as a teaching assistant not only confirmed her desire to teach, but also helped her to believe it was a viable option for her, despite her concerns around finances:**

*"[M]y barriers can be removed and I can do it, I'd rather just do it. Umm, just because I can".*

**Future:  
Making a difference!**

**Whilst Proud has a passion for her current work with young people, through her work as a teaching assistant and youth worker, where she knows she is 'making that difference'...she wants to take the next step and take ownership of her own classroom, where she feels she can have the most impact. Proud wishes 'to help others to find their sense of purpose' ... 'ensure that the youngest of children start out with the message that actually dreams are possible... You can do it'. Without a doubt this speaks to Proud's own story which she is determined to share through this research.**

**Proud shared her reflections of partaking in this research:**

*"I've actually really loved doing it because, not always do you get to sit down and actually talk about this, especially all at once... Like you might bring it up occasionally to people, but it's nice to actually sit down and kind of reflect on everything".*

**It is no wonder that Proud has not had time to do this previously; Proud works incredibly hard juggling two jobs, in an effort to save for university and fund her future aspirations. Proud will even maintain the youth work whilst she studies:**

*"Well, also what's happened since we last met, was they offered me a position of bank staff, so that... I can work with them whenever they need me or when I need them, yeah"... "Yes. Well, they said because I'd be bank staff, it'd be like a zero hour contract. So, when I come back from uni, and all the holidays - cause they run quite a lot in the holidays - they said 'well, you can come and get paid for all of it', so..."*

**This financial security is important for Proud, who prides herself on being self-sufficient already:**

*"And I know that, whatever money I make, I can just put it straight to uni because I've already got this job for other things I have to pay for, so I know I can just keep all the money that would come from it".*

	<p>Despite her obvious independence and ability to take care of herself, Proud knows the importance of having a circle of support, and is mindful of this going forward – but of course optimistic also:</p> <p><i>“[T]his is gonna be a big move having always been in the area” ... “I think because I’ve got, like everyone at the youth club and I’ve got all my colleagues and all my friends, leaving all of that, well, they’re not left because they’re still here and I can still come to them whenever I need, but not having them there all the time will be a bit strange... But then there’s gonna be things like that where I move, so I’ll just have to make those new connections”.</i></p> <p>Proud knows that these new connections will be additional to, rather than replace her existing circle of support; not least her supportive boyfriend:</p> <p><i>“Yeah. He said that no matter what, we’d make it work somehow”.</i></p>
<p><b>Criterion 7 –</b> How events and happenings culminate in the story’s denouement: emplotment</p>	<p>There is no doubt that Proud’s earliest educational experiences were fundamental to the development of a lifelong love of learning; in both the support of ‘key adults’ and through a curriculum that enabled ‘learning by doing’.</p> <p>Secondary experiences confirmed Proud’s aspirations to inspire others through teaching, in the way that she herself had been inspired. In secondary school Proud would enjoy the support and ‘belief’ of many teachers, and ‘prove wrong’ those that didn’t believe, by ‘smash[ing] it’ in relation to her GCSEs.</p> <p>GCSEs were an important milestone for Proud, given that her mother had not been able to secure these for herself; this ‘pushed [Proud] to do better’, which her mother had encouraged also.</p> <p>The messages from home were not always so positive around Proud’s education, but teachers unwavering ‘belief’ and being there helped balance this out. And ultimately, a gift bestowed upon Proud at birth would confirm that her parent’s belief in her, underlying and sense of pride, had always been there really.</p> <p>In recognition of this belief from others, Proud is determined to ‘do a job that makes [her] happy and get the money on top’, <b>avoiding benefits and falling ‘into renting’ if she can. This choice and possibility were further flagged through a widening participation programme and the subsequent IAG that Proud received as a result of taking part. Being put forward for this programme - that recognition of her potential, would further serve to allow her to believe that she ‘can do it’.</b></p> <p><b>Feeling ‘motivated’ by this sign up to the HE Plus Programme, Proud committed to taking a year out to save in readiness for university, given that she knows this will not be financially easy. More than this, Proud has secured work that she can return to in the holidays, to continue to fund her studies as she goes. This kind of planning and forethought is not new to Proud who has always had to ‘rely on [her]self’, given the needs of her siblings, the loss of her father and the associated need for her to take care of herself as much as she can.</b></p>

	<p><b><i>Proud's independence and self-sufficiency will undoubtedly take her a long way; whilst she will always appreciate and promote the inevitable role of others in ensuring success for children and young people:</i></b></p>
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	<p><i>'[T]here is always help out there... Don't be afraid to ask for it'.</i></p>
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**Appendix 10:** Direct script taken from Timothy's interview and narrative activity (demarcated by italics and speech marks) as it pertains to Polkinghorne's (1995) Seven Criteria

**Table 12:** Direct script taken from Timothy's interview and narrative activity as it pertains to Polkinghorne's (1995) 'seven criteria for judging a life history' (p.16):

<p><b>Criterion 1 –</b> Cultural / Social Context</p>	<p><b>For Timothy, his own history cannot be separated from that of his wider family and their community context:</b></p> <p><i>"I'll start with my mum's side I guess. So half of my mum's side came, well have been in HOME LOCATION for their, well I don't really, since the 17, when, when HOME LOCATION was formed, really. So, I know...Umm, they used to be barge workers on like, the canals and stuff...just like...Hard Labour, I guess"</i></p> <p><i>"I was talking to my great uncle actually about this, over Christmas, but uhh, cos we were in by the docks in HOME LOCATION and they said their whole family...used to live in a single room in one of the sides and they'd have babies in drawers of cupboards with, as their little cots"</i></p> <p><i>"And then my other half of my mum's family is up from LOCATION and they...my grandma and her mum, used to own the greenhouse centre or like a, yeah, garden centre and stuff"</i></p> <p><i>"And so it's kind of the same with my dad's family...So, my granddad used to be a lorry driver and...they were also in like a three bedroom house with the six of them. So it's kind of small...maybe, smaller houses than for, necessarily the family that was kind of, there"</i></p> <p><i>"My nan was...[a C]ook, not a chef...[at the] College or university"</i></p> <p><b>Given his studies maths and geography and his developing interest in the environmental sciences, Timothy is acutely aware of what his family and community context means in economic terms:</b></p> <p><i>"So like, I guess you say, middle slash lower income jobs"</i></p> <p><i>"That's all kind of, umm, what do they call it in geography? First... primary sector and secondary sector kind of jobs, I guess"</i></p> <p><b>Whilst he recognises the economic challenges his community face currently and historically, Timothy feels positively connected to this community:</b></p> <p><i>"Like some people in HOME LOCATION are always trying to just like, I guess, trying to escape HOME LOCATION, but I wouldn't mind living not in HOME LOCATION my whole life because there's places to be, places to see, but...like it's got some strong underlying sentiment and like the area and its history and stuff"</i></p> <p><b>This history and context is important to Timothy, who appears to have sense of a classed identity; when comparing himself, and his position, to others from another country he recently visited, Timothy shared:</b></p>
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*"I loved it so much. It's like because, it's not like, it's a European nation...So it's not like poor...Super, super poor... But their kind of economic standpoint, like, their middle class, which is where like, the place that I middle lower class of the went to, their middle kind of, upper class is a bit like the lower ... so it's roughly the same economic standpoint...I fitted in... like people were trying their hardest, for themselves and for others. So, it kind of felt like, people weren't throwing away...they jump on opportunities..."*

**This subjective sense of class, and a consciousness about his families economic status, threads through Timothy's narrative around his relationship with his local environment and those that populate it:**

*"Didn't have access to kind of like the Nickelodeon or whatever, those other kids... I was CBeebies - all that stuff. I was CBeebies and nature programmes. That was my childhood, I guess. And the little DS" ... "Yeah, I didn't have, because there's all the kids that have like the PS4, PS, Xbox 360s, or whatever. When they were like younger, like, 8, 9, 10. I never had, like, we had a Wii, like the old Wii as a family. From when we were kids, but we'd share that for everybody. But I never got, like, my first console was a PlayStation, and that wasn't until year 9. So, that was... Yeah, 13, 14, so I wouldn't, I had like my first gaming console, maybe four or five years later than most kids my age had. Or from this area anyway"*

*"It gave me more time than sitting in front of a screen, I guess"*

*"Like I probably found comfort in the outdoors, just like the fresh air maybe"*

*"In a way within not having technology, I wasn't able to, maybe that influenced my social... Maybe if I did have the technology earlier on, I would be wanting to go to uni for the social partying aspect, but because I never really got in touch with people, except, outside of my family, until I was maybe 12...Umm, I never had that. So, I didn't feel reliant on that social kind of boost"*

*"I, I live in the middle of HOME LOCATION, but, I'm kind of lucky because behind my house there's a XXXX factory, but because the XXXX factory is one of the main plants, they need a lake for water cooling... Yeah, so behind my house is a little forest...in that forest there's a lake in the middle...I've always had, because my windows face the back, I've always been able to look out my window, and even though I'm in the middle of a town, just have, like a kind of dense...greenery"*

*"I guess because I never used to enjoy kind of like, the hustle and bustle, areas of like, big cities when we would go out as like a family on day trips, we would only go to like, the only costs would be maybe parking or like a little cafe. So, I guess the finances never really influenced our...Ability to go places because we would always, or I would always, want to go to maybe the hills or outdoors like I enjoyed LOCATION"*

*"Like, just like, what we enjoyed kind of naturally kind of...Didn't bring forth any barriers I guess"*

*"also enjoying the outdoors, also tied into our ability to go on like holidays abroad for a week every year. So I guess, that we wouldn't do big like activities throughout*



*the year, like to cities, cause we never enjoyed them... but that also gave us the ability to go abroad I guess...whereas we just wouldn't do any of the kind of the weekend holidays unless we were going to like a town, we would just have one big holiday"*

**The families planning and financial decisions sometimes see Timothy perceiving himself as somewhat privileged and even questioning his entitlement to be involved in this research:**

*"Maybe, that's why, I wouldn't say I don't fit into like the lower economic...Kind of thingy, but I guess, I, from like the outside point of view, I don't appear as a lower economic background, because...I've never had like, well, as I said, I've never, we've never spent money on like weekend trips and stuff...We've always either put it to one side and I guess, from like, I guess, I'll, it's up to my parents, but from when I was born, I had a 18 year, 18 year fund, I guess, so... Like when I was younger, half of my birthday and Christmas money went into it...And then every month, like a tiny bit of my parents spare earnings would go into my sister's and mine funds, and it would build up and it's built up substantially over the years..."*

*"[T]hat's another thing that maybe, I feel like I don't, fit into this study...like, I do and I don't, because I'd say, the, my first car is my dad's old car, and it's...I would say a very nice car for a first car...but the only reason I've got it...because I was going to have like, use my little funds from when I was younger, to get like...just one of those...what do you call it...Scrapbox cars... but...my dad got a new car when he got his new job, because he needed to travel more" ... "But I'm having it now because it worked out...cheaper than getting a new car and insuring that" ... "From an outside perspective, I feel like someone wouldn't maybe think I would fit into this...But then from like the reasons behind it all, I guess it's just a bunch of things that have happened at the right time and the right place, I've kind of, I kind of benefited from, I guess you could say"*

**Timothy lives with his mother and sister and qualifies for the post-16 bursary fund to support his current studies in sixth form as part of a widening participation programme. Timothy has contact with his father, and enjoys holidays with him, when his father is not away travelling with work:**

*"[M]y mum has always been kind of, she used to work five days a week...But after, because she had me and my sister, and she's also damaged, slipped a disc in her back as well. So, she's been, she's only been working maybe 2-3 days a week since, for about the last 20 years"*

*"Dad's got quite a good job. Which he's built up over the years"*

*"Umm, but my dad is...Umm, it sounds quite posh and extravagant, but he's...He used to be a, he used to work in the LOCATION music group so, before that disappeared, but he rose up the ranks...I guess you could call it, but he used to be their, global sales manager, or European sales manager into global sales manager... So, he'd always be travelling I guess"*

	<p><i>"And now, with his new job, he's a...kind of, private contractor, but does the same role as global sales management for...So he kind of has a, I guess you'd say, quite a decent job"</i></p> <p><i>"But yeah, neither of my parents went to uni, uhh, my dad did a...I think it was a one or two year course in a College in Birmingham for business something-or-other, but that was like a kind of like an A-Level, level. So... and my mum didn't do any further education. She went straight into a job after getting out of high school. So... Which was I think she worked at the EMPLOYER NAME or Bank in HOME LOCATION, so..."</i></p> <p><i>"The bursary fund - Yes, I do. And even though, like my dad earns a fair bit, there's never really like, the reason why I'm on the bursary is because I live with my mum. She's working two days a week. She's like, even though my dad kind of, pays my mum, I bet it's still...a bit more than the average wage... It's still, it's, because there's two households and it's not, it still brings it down"</i></p> <p><b>Sharing home with Timothy and his mother are his sister and a rescue cat, that Timothy stresses has had a role to play in providing some comfort and consistency:</b></p> <p><i>"Yeah, I've got one younger sister...I would say, she's always sort of, looked up to me, I guess. You could say she's always been interested in the stuff I've been interested in to, but she's, I would say, very, completely different contrast with school... like I've always enjoyed school, always tried to make my attendance best as possible, whereas she absolutely hates school"</i></p> <p><b>Timothy's sister is "three years younger than me"</b></p> <p><i>"Because I, we never as a family had a pet until, like we've got a cat now, but they're a rescue cat. We've had them for two years. So, as I, as I grew up, I never had maybe that comfort of like, a pet...to be there... So I maybe, that's another thing from like...like a lower economic background, there's maybe there's sometimes, you don't have...the money for a pet because they do add a significant expense" ... "So just like that one comfort, you can always, that's always going to be there as well"</i></p>
<p><b>Criterion 2 –</b> Information about the subject of the story and their embodied experience</p>	<p><b>In line with Polkinghorne's (1995) notion of embodiment, Timothy makes reference, within his narrative, to both his 'physical and cognitive development' over time and how it might determine his different 'possible selves' (Markus &amp; Nurius, 1986) in the future:</b></p> <p><i>"About this time last year, actually I, two things at once happened to me...it's like, just before Christmas, in November, I got diagnosed with asthma...because I noticed tight chestedness when I was playing. I could only play for maybe 3 or 4 minutes without getting out of breath"</i></p> <p><i>"I used to play basketball. I coach basketball now"</i></p> <p><i>"I would have been, so, 16 when I got my asthma. So, it kind of took me about a month or two to...Because my coach came to me and he was like, 'would you feel</i></p>

	<p><i>comfortable coaching the younger ones?’ And I gave it a shot...” ... “and it’s...Kind of a good obstacle I like I overcame... like filling the void of not...So, I’ve always enjoyed sport and like, stuff, and it kind of filled that void of not doing any sport”</i></p> <p><b>Just as Timothy does not dismiss sport altogether as a result of this recent diagnosis, neither does he rule out the role that it could potentially play in his future:</b></p> <p><i>“As like a coach, maybe transferring my coaching skills from actual sport to maybe the online sport...So as a coaching management role” in the world of E-Sports.</i></p> <p><b>Timothy similarly considers how a dyslexia diagnosis has ‘influenced’ his ‘perception’ and ‘life’, and how the education system might better support his needs:</b></p> <p><i>“I would like, just like, to learn about everything I could... And because I’m dyslexic, I like, I... With, over Christmas I went to my great aunt’s house and we had a four-hour conversation on, like my perception... so, we had a like a four-hour discussion on like, how dyslexia’s influenced my life and stuff”</i></p> <p><i>“The way my brain worked is that I filter information out that I don’t deem as, kind of, useful...Yeah. So, like, it’s like some things I’ll just completely forget happening, like, what some, like, I could probably have a conversation with someone about what they did on the weekend...and then forget what they did on the weekend like an hour or two later because...I don’t think I need it”</i></p> <p><i>“Whereas I can remember...Directions of places I’ve been to. Like I, I’ve, because we went to Spain, twice to Valencia when I was younger, I could probably walk around Valencia without getting lost. Because I just like, I think I remember directions really... and like layouts really well so...t’s, I guess, it’s like different cognitive processes and stuff, because some people remember, I’m terrible for names, but some people remember names like (clicks fingers) like that...I guess it’s just different how your brain influences your character or whatever”</i></p> <p><i>“Umm, but yes, it’s just like because my dyslexia is...It’s not really reading, my reading age, I did when I was 15 was 19 and a half, so reading wasn’t any problem, but it was processing speed and...Spelling... it’s like...”</i></p> <p><i>“I think the things that governments don’t really do or understand about dyslexia is the processing speed side... because...It’s like geography tests and chemistry tests are different. It’s like geography tests you have maybe 3 or 4 big questions... And I’ve only gotta process 3, 3 or 4 questions...whereas chemistry is 11 broken up into 3, so I’ve got to spend the same amount of time...maybe, 2 or 3 minutes per question in geography processing it, per question... But that’s only three questions. Whereas in chemistry, I’ve got 1 or 2 minutes of processing every question in chemistry... so I always take longer in a chemistry test than I do geography”</i></p>
<b>Criterion 3 – Central character’s relationship</b>	<p><b>Whilst Timothy’s parents are ‘separated’, he enjoys a close relationship with both, and recognises them first and foremost as core characters in circle of support:</b></p>

to / with others	<p><i>"It's obviously going to be have to be my mum and my dad"</i></p> <p><i>"My mum's always been kind of, she, she's not the curious type, but she's always been kind of like there, I guess. she's never...Kind of like, really pushed me to do something, but she's always been there, if I kind of fail"</i></p> <p><i>"Whereas my dad's like, because of his travels... has been the opposite. He's always there for maybe...Like, maybe half the time, but he's always pushed me, but maybe not there when I'm kind of slumping...I guess"</i></p> <p><i>"So, I guess my parents kind of work, kind of, in, yeah, union"</i></p> <p><b>As already eluded to against criterion one, Timothy's sense of self spans as far as his extended family, who clearly have an important part to play in his life:</b></p> <p><i>"Definitely my Nan from my dad's side as well because at times when my mum and my dad were at work she would pick me up from school, I would stay at her house for a bit...She's always been there in the background"</i></p> <p><i>"And then I think, great, great uncle and great aunt...they're the ones that I've had that big, the big conversations with, but they've always been there...Not in like the, necessarily like, the family, family support way. But they've always been someone I can talk to. But not about like the, kind of classic, 'how you feeling?' way, it's more of like...Like the world, I can talk about the world to them"</i></p> <p><i>"Also, another kind of, not family member, because he's not related, but umm, and we don't really see him often, but my dad's sister was married to my Godfather... Was he my Godfather...my sister's godfather... They were married, but she passed away when she was, like, 26. But he's always stayed like close to family...and that's the like, the uncle, I go to the air shows with, so he's always been like, I, I only see him maybe three or four times a year. Yeah, he's always been there and showing an interest in what I'm interested in too"</i></p> <p><b>This interest and investment is fundamental given that Timothy does not otherwise</b> <i>"really know...any people that are kind of, interested in what [he's] interested in, especially in like the local area".</i></p> <p><b>Other than kinship connections within his immediate and wider family, Timothy has sought something of a sense of belonging within various sporting activities:</b></p> <p><i>"My dad used to be a coach, at the HOME LOCATION Rugby Club. So, and I used to be a player... (because my dad was coach, I got rugby sessions for free). I didn't enjoy the contact, but I enjoyed kind of, the team side... Probably from the age of...5 to about 8 or 9, I played Tag Rugby in HOME LOCATION and my dad would be the one of the coaches. So, that kind of... Introduced me to sport, I guess...I kind of stepped away from rugby about the age of 8 or 9"</i></p> <p><i>"And also my, one of my mates, umm, he's a black belt in karate. So, I joined their karate at the club as well. So, I've been doing that for about a year now as well, and that's been like, brought some more community kind of, social into my life."</i></p>
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*But I feel like, I kind of lended myself to karate a bit more because...I'll say this, this is maybe something more general, but it might just be club specific, but I feel like the people...I'll generalise here... who maybe start karate and, maybe the people themselves that aren't feeling comfortable in their environment...So they need something... maybe they're getting bullied...maybe they're...Just looking for something new... but they're not like...The popular, social, super type... So, I kind of like, that kind of helped because...I, I don't know how to say...A bit like me, yeah"*

**'Orienteering' is another activity in which Timothy has excelled and been able to consider himself taking on different roles within a group set-up:**

*"I like working as a team, but I always, I kind of feel myself as, not a...born leader, but I kind of, understand... I, I would say I have a greater understanding than most people about stuff... So, it kind of helps me make...In, better informed decisions"*

*"It's kind of, my two kind of, personalities clash in that way, because I enjoy leading...but I don't enjoy socialising, so it's a bit of like...I can... I'll lead, but only with the people I'm comfortable... So, it's a bit weird in that way, it's like, if it's like a random group of people, I could give it a shot, but I wouldn't be as comfortable and maybe perform as well as if, I'm maybe, would, familiar... not my friends...Like people I kind of know"*

**It is not only the extent to which Timothy knows his peers that impacts his levels of confidence in taking up those leadership roles, but perhaps also group size:**

*"But I always kind of kept my friend group small to medium size"*

*"Yeah. I, I, I enjoy gaming with others, but I don't...necessarily game with that many people. So, it's, I enjoy playing on my own, but I do enjoy playing with others"*

**Whilst Timothy values the connections and interactions that he does enjoy, he is equally quite content in his own company:**

*"I've always been like...I would rather be out, and I'll either be on my own doing something in my room or like, in the like kitchen...Than maybe going out with my friends or something"*

*"I didn't mind it really because I had, I kind of just talked to my specific group of people I talked to and...then just ,not ignored, but I wouldn't make it...wouldn't try and talk to the others really. But I, I would enjoy talking to the teachers and I would enjoy talking to my specific friend group"*

**In terms of school support, Timothy felt that he connected with a few teachers in particular:**

*"Some of the, some teachers have understood more than others, but, my, all the teachers I have now understand it really well and what my, my geography teachers dyslexic as well... So that helps a lot. So..."*

	<p><i>"Primary school... my PE teacher. I didn't...not a, I guess, not a...role model, but he was always kind of there for everybody. But he was just like a happy character and whatnot... So, he was kind of just like someone you could kind of, go to and talk to for a bit and whatnot"</i></p> <p><i>"And then, definitely now, my geography teacher is a big...umm, kind of, not role m... like, I guess, like, whatever you want to call it... but, yeah. Because he's, sort of, got dyslexia...But he's also passionate about the thing I'm passionate about... So it's, I feel a big link to him as well"</i></p> <p><b>Just as Timothy stresses that these significant persons do not constitute a 'role model' as such, Timothy is very much his own judge and maker of decisions:</b></p> <p><i>"The more informed I am...In an earlier age, the better decision I can make for myself and maybe for others as I go forward. And I guess maybe later, later in life, if I do have children, I kind of want to be a bit like...My parents in a way...Kind of, I don't want to give them like, the full like, super, super support...because I don't like when people kind of go to me, maybe like, 'oh come on, you got this' you can do it', it's like, 'I know I can...it's just...', I don't, maybe, like the encouragement part. I do...it's like nice sometimes...but yeah it...Gets too much"</i></p> <p><b>In making decisions Timothy is not led by others, he lives only by his own moral compass and what he feels is the right thing to do:</b></p> <p><i>"Yes, I'd say like another reason why, it's, I've not enjoyed being like, socialising with other people is...like, I hate doing...like wrong things like... Yeah, even if I'm not gonna get caught, I feel bad and I just can't really do it"</i></p>
<p><b>Criterion 4 –</b> Central character's choices and actions toward goal denouement</p>	<p><b>Whilst Timothy is open as to what the future might hold, he has also taken decisions that will lend themselves to the possible paths in HE and beyond, that he is interested in:</b></p> <p><i>"I, last year I was doing geography, chemistry and B-Tech psychology, but I dropped B-Tech psychology at the end of year 12 because it was just I wasn't really enjoying the kind of, coursework side, so I dropped that and picked up funnily enough, another coursework subject, but I could do that on...Kind of... I kind of focus on something I like, passion, was passionate about. Yeah. So, that was EPQ, and then like, you pick up core maths as a subsidy as well... But I feel like...That umm, benefited me because it gave me more real world skills and understanding about maths. So, like, because you learn about taxes and insurance and stuff. It's quite useful, yeah"</i></p> <p><b>For his EPQ (Extended Project Qualification), Timothy has chosen to focus on a project related to his interest, and possible alternative HE pathway, in engineering in the RAF:</b></p> <p><i>"the other pathway I'm looking at...which isn't a university pathway...but as another pathway, like, if I don't get into university or suddenly I just don't really feel like going, is I'm looking at an engineering apprenticeship in the RAF. So, that's on like, the, probably, second choice really"... "Yeah. So, I think so. Hmm. I don't</i></p>

know what the levels are, but it's like just a bit higher than A-Level - level, but, but apprenticeship"

**As Timothy states, this is very much a 'second choice really', with his first choice being to undertake a degree in environmental sciences, but that also incorporates the opportunity to study abroad:**

*"I'm just like, kind of seeing how it comes...cos at uni, the one thing I'm kind of pushing for and excited for and saving for, I guess, is in, I'm gonna take an extended year and like, the, study abroad, I guess. So, I'm looking at umm, maybe a study abroad in Canada or a work placement somewhere in...anywhere else in the world. Yeah, just to see kind of, just might as well travel, I guess if you can"*

**Whilst Timothy is conscious of the additional costs this might bring, he has leaned upon his core math knowledge to reassure himself that this would be an 'investment' in his future:**

*"Four years...So, a bit more on the loan, because that's the kind of route that I'm planning for...but...umm...It doesn't, like, the way we learn about it, because I do core maths as well is that, cause, the loan is what's, get directly correlated to your earnings...and you don't pay. You won't be, pay any more per month... It just might take a bit longer to pay off, which I'm willing to accept really. So...It's definitely worth the investment"*

*"And I also might be able to create links...At where I've been so, yeah"*

**Timothy stresses that he has always 'enjoyed the outdoors' and 'always wanted to do outdoorsy stuff'; however, Timothy shared that he "never really thought of any jobs", other than maybe "working at the LOCALITY being like a like a, what's called River Trust, or like, Forestry Trust kind of worker. Or maybe like working in the hills, like a rescue...like Hill Rescue".**

**Perhaps given his uncertainty about what outdoor jobs might be available and not really beginning to think "about university until about year nine, year ten", Timothy is still considering a good many options; another of which also further considers his skill-set from his engagement in sports and also his interests in gaming:**

*"I wasn't necessarily like the team captain, I was always kind of explaining and like, kind of leading in a way. So, I've always enjoyed leading"*

**In sports and gaming Timothy recognises that he has "always enjoyed the strategy"; "I always enjoy thinking about it as like...even if it's not a strategy kind of game, I always think of like the best strategies you could use"**

*"I enjoyed switching to being a coach in basketball instead of a player, so I could focus more on...The umm, actually, how the game functions, I guess, in basketball and how to teach instead of...Just being pack bang in the action...And not having time to really think"*

**Timothy wonders if there could be a future in him amalgamating his coaching and gaming skills – if he does not pursue a HE route:**

*“As like a coach, maybe transferring my coaching skills from actual sport to maybe the online sport...So as a coaching management role in there”*

**Timothy stresses that he is flexible and not heavily wedded to any path in particular; this is true of Timothy’s take on the work of his ancestors also:**

*“How do you word this, I think it's...Nice to know, yeah...but I personally don't feel like...I don't really feel tied to any of the jobs”*

**Timothy is guided by his own interests as he recognises that this is where he performs his best:**

*“I wouldn't say, I feel like my GCSEs, I personally wouldn't say they're a milestone for me because I know it was cos of COVID, and they were teacher assessed grades. I know I could have pushed myself more and I know I could have done more, but I also could have pushed myself less, so I feel it's just like a thing that I did. I'm kind of proud of it, but I'm not...Super proud of like, I dedicated XYZ time to this... like you got the highest score I could. Like it's more like, I tried, in the things I enjoyed and... I just didn't care about, like Spanish...I'm surprised I even passed Spanish” ... “just didn't appeal to me when I was doing it, so I kind of just like did the bare minimum and just kind of brushed it aside, whereas like geography...Science and in a way, IT”*

**To “100% focus on what you want to”, gets the best out of Timothy.**

**And where the passion is there, Timothy will ‘push through’ no matter how ‘hard’.**

**Timothy’s passion for IT is based on ‘the bits [he] enjoy[s]’, and following his interests, Timothy challenged himself to build his own computer to support his chosen studies:**

*“I built my first, ohh my, my computer, my like big... which I've been saving up for, for like 2 and half, three years, of birthday and Christmas money...” ... “...and I guess that's kind of maybe what elevated my education a tiny bit as well”*

**Timothy’s academic accomplishments perhaps point to HE and a future career that incorporates his hopes to ‘make difference’ to the planet; however, if Timothy chooses an alternative path, it will no doubt still be linked to his interests and skill-set and certainly see him make a success of any situation he finds himself in:**

*“I’ve always kind of created like a chart in my head of, it's like, if I can do it, it doesn't matter...And like, if I can't do it, there's nothing I can do about it anyway... So yeah, so in that way, I guess... it sounds like, I wouldn't say, cos that makes it sound like nothing matters to me...But, in a way, I'm not bothered by outcomes as much as other people are in a way, because, like, ‘oh, financing is an issue’...Can I deal with it? Yes”*



	<p><i>"So it's like, I've got, there's always going to be an option, it might not be the best option, it might not be the option that you like the most, but...It's better than maybe the alternative so..." ... "But that's like, kind of, the side of my map skills... Or maybe my team work, maybe of, I can always see maybe, a few options"</i></p> <p><i>"I've never really thought...of [obstacles] be...actually, because I've always just been like...I'll deal with it"</i></p> <p><i>"if you know you can do it, and if you know you want to do it, you put in as much as you can"</i></p>
<p><b>Criterion 5 –</b> How past experiences influence our main character going forward / their learning / sensemaking</p> <p>Including aspirations for the future</p>	<p><b>Timothy describes the reasoning behind his first-choice university location, which is undoubtedly tied to his upbringing and home community:</b></p> <p><i>"It's where we used to go, kind of, it's not, necessarily on holiday... But like day trips, weekend trips, as in like, like, in the past. And we, all my family and I, like, like the town. Yeah. And I prefer... the outdoors and like the quiet towns more than the big bustle of like, cities. Yeah, it's like living in like HOME LOCATION"</i></p> <p><i>"So maybe exploring UNIVERSITY LOCATION for the first time, because...That's kind of, not become a home away from home, but like a place away from HOME LOCATION, maybe..."</i></p> <p><b>Timothy again, uses his experience of himself as a learner and his skill-set coupled with what he enjoys to direct his decisions:</b></p> <p><i>"I've always been passionate with like, about geography and stuff like that, it was kind of splitting between kind of, physical geography or environmental sciences as a course option... and I just umm, saw the modules I guess, and decided the environmental sciences were kind of, they sounded more interesting because they kind of linked to chemistry, which is like a subject I'm doing now..."</i></p> <p><b>In relation to his alternative pathway of a HE apprenticeship, Timothy again speaks further to the influence of his past experiences and interactions:</b></p> <p><i>"Just... so, I've been, because my uncle, he lives in LOCATION, umm, near LOCATION... But that's kind of near RAF Fairford...It's where they hold the air shows every year, so since I was about 7 or 8, I've been going to the air shows in July every year, so that's kind of...Just always been a passion for me, really"</i></p> <p><i>"It's like, kids want to be astronauts... Whatever, I was always...Kind of, either pilot, because of the RAF or, and like the Fairford thing, or be like a, work in the mountains I guess... Just be outdoors"</i></p> <p><b>Timothy's love of the outdoors can be attributed to his local environment and his families embracing of this throughout his childhood, be it 'biking' and 'walking' or visiting the 'canal'. Timothy acknowledges the accessibility of such activities when you're from a low-socioeconomic background. Timothy does also speak to some influential figures from the world of TV however:</b></p>

*"Like as a kid...one of my people I've looked up to the most is David Attenborough...all his documentaries and stuff, yeah... It's just like...when I was younger, all the kind of, umm, nature documentaries, except from his, were all behind pay walls, like on Sky and National Geographic...kind of, what's called nature, kind of geography, world things, I had were on the BBC and most of them were him or like...I can't remember the other few, but it was mainly the nature documentaries on the BBC and like the science documentaries"*

*"I've, I've never really wanted to be like a super scientist, but I always find Brian Cox, as well...he's interesting, you know, I never really wanted to be like a scientist like that, but, like, kind of...Just interesting and easy to understand for every age as well"*

*"So, but it's like I, I kind of like steal, I guess, little segments of ideas... combine them into like my own, I guess"*

**Timothy takes inspiration from other cultural references in the form of musicians also, choosing particular songs that speak to him and his attitude to life:**

*"'It's time' - it's time to begin now...never too late, maybe"*

*"Then there's like, 'Believer', which is all about...beating the negative thoughts"*

**Another important cultural reference and lasting influence in his sense- and decision-making for Timothy, was also what he took from his holiday to Croatia:**

*"So I guess, that was like a common thing over there, so that maybe, that's kind of opened my eyes in the recent like, even if you're not good at something...Umm, you can still try your hardest for other people" ... "And maybe that kind of influence, like my choice to do, environmental sciences is like, even though I maybe not, might not see the benefits of my work...The people in the future, maybe will... it might improve our climate for the better"*

*"You can only do as much as you can do... but always do as much as you can for the things you can do"*

*"Always give your 100% because like...There's things I haven't been able to do. I enjoy geography...And I know I can do it – so I put everything into it"*

**As the above quotations suggest, Timothy has a strong work ethic for his specific areas of interest but this might also seemingly be associated with a sense of his economic status:**

*"I would always, as a parent, try to be there, maybe if I know they should do it, but they don't want to, and push them for that. Be there to support them. So I don't want to be like, the kind of pamper, kind of, do everything for them...and that's in the way of, like, maybe, economically with money as well. It's just going to make them feel like they, not deserve everything... like there's a difference between thinking you deserve everything, and then thinking you deserve everything because you're gonna try your hardest to get it"*

	<p>In a similar vein, Timothy also speaks to a sense of realism...the notion that we can never assume that things will automatically work out for us, and that it is worth thinking as much about what we care to avoid as what we hope to achieve:</p> <p><i>"This maybe, might not relate to this part, but, it's maybe to do with future, not plans, but like, consequences, like...If I do end up in like a low, low job, I would rather do...My, my main thing is, I hate, but that's maybe why I also dropped psychology, is I hate the idea of office work. I, I would, I would rather be like a Tesco's shelf Stocker than like an accountant, just because I hate, doing things again and again"</i></p>
<p><b>Criterion 6 –</b> Temporal aspects of the story including the denouement and in this case, thoughts around the future also</p>	<p><b>Beginning:</b> <b>Attuned adults ensured early support and success for Timothy:</b></p> <p><i>"I feel, if we... going back to primary school, I feel like I was extremely fortunate because I went to SCHOOL NAME just, close to here. Umm, but one of the teachers, their, I can't remember, was it a son or daughter, had just been diagnosed with dyslexia, and this was the Year 5. But they were noticing the same tendencies with me, so I thought I had... I, I, I feel like I've had a very, very lucky early advantage with my dyslexia being noticed that early"</i></p> <p><b>Whilst Timothy was not always the biggest fan of school, he enjoyed some key connections and his natural curiosity leant itself to learning:</b></p> <p><i>"I would like to know everything... I would kind of question everything" ... "I guess, it wasn't school that I enjoyed... I enjoyed learning...because I've always been...not a...really...social kid I guess"</i></p> <p><i>"But it didn't help cause, I guess in primary school...the only sport that people really played was umm, football and I never enjoyed football, so it's, that's, I kind of, I'd say that's maybe what influenced me going forward, as like, the people who play football, they, meet up on the weekends, they'll be at the same football club, but I wouldn't, I wouldn't have that, like, kind of, out of school time with them"</i></p> <p><i>"I would enjoy talking to the teachers and I would enjoy talking to my specific friend group"</i></p> <p><b>Middle:</b> <b>Beginning to find my way...</b></p> <p><b>Orienteering with the school's team secured skills that would prove pivotal to Timothy's prospective plans to travel the world:</b></p> <p><i>"So, I was more of, kind of, I guess in primary school and early high school, I was always part of the orienteering team and... we won some county medals and stuff and I was the map reader, so that kind of thing ties into my sense of direction"</i></p> <p><b>Facilitative to these dreams of travelling to 'five culturally different countries', might be university:</b></p>

	<p><i>"I never really... had a thought about university until about year nine, year ten anyways..."</i></p> <p><b>With the possibility of higher education on the cards, Timothy secured a set of GCSEs that reflect his interests, and which he might go onto study at post-16:</b></p> <p><i>"I feel like my GCSEs, I personally wouldn't say they're a milestone for me because I know it was cos of COVID, and they were teacher assessed grades. I know I could have pushed myself more and I know I could have done more, but I also could have pushed myself less, so I feel it's just like a thing that I did. I'm kind of proud of it, but I'm not...super proud of like, I dedicated XYZ time to this... like you got the highest score I could. Like it's more like, I tried, in the things I enjoyed and... I just didn't care about, like Spanish...I'm surprised I even passed Spanish" ... "just didn't appeal to me when I was doing it, so I kind of just like did the bare minimum and just kind of brushed it aside, whereas like geography...science and in a way, IT"</i></p> <p><b>Where "the exam was only on the bits [he] enjoyed", Timothy enjoyed success in IT...this would later pay dividends when Timothy would teach himself to 'build a PC' that could further support his academic endeavours of interest.</b></p>
	<p><b>End (Denouement) to the story so far:</b></p> <p><b>Crossroads:</b></p> <p><b>Whilst Timothy is not so wedded to a path that there are no other options, he is confident that higher education will feature in some form:</b></p> <p><i>"I'm going to go through uni and see what opens up to me. So my goal, I guess maybe you would say is finding as many opportunities as possible. Maybe that's, maybe my main goal"...</i></p> <p><b>And Timothy has already secured 'conditional offers', including at his first-choice university in his preferred location.</b></p> <p><b>All that's left now is for Timothy to "pass...the exams [getting]...the grades...or points [he] need[s]".</b></p> <p><b>Timothy feels confident about this having chosen subjects where he is enabled to "focus on something [he] like[s]...was passionate about". These subjects include geography and an Extended Project Qualification ('EPQ') which Timothy has related to his interest in the RAF.</b></p> <p><b>Amongst these subjects is 'core maths', which Timothy suggests "benefited me because it gave me more real-world skills and understanding about maths. So, like, because you learn about taxes and insurance and stuff" ...it is this learning, in part, that has enabled Timothy to consider HE (be this an 'environmental studies degree' or an 'engineering apprenticeship with the RAF'), seeing it not only as financially viable, but actually as 'an investment'.</b></p>
	<p><b>Future:</b></p> <p><b>An open vista...to be travelled!</b></p>

**Whichever road Timothy chooses to take, the direction of travel is onwards and upwards:**

*"Living abroad in the future is 'on the table, definitely'; 'Canada is a choice. I quite like the idea of Southeast Asia as well. I'm really interested in the, umm, geography and like, biology, I guess you could say, of the region...It's just really interesting and the culture is very interesting as well...and sort of, I'd say it's expensive for plane tickets, but the actual living cost over there is quite cheap"*

**Timothy feels that living abroad would be better enabled by incorporating a year to study abroad into his studies:**

*"At uni, the one thing I'm kind of pushing for and excited for and saving for, I guess, is in, I'm gonna take an extended year and like, the, study abroad, I guess"*

**Timothy feels that this could be a good opportunity to "creat[e] like, I guess not friendship links, but just links from around the world...I guess that ties in with my travel, with, with wanting to travel".**

**Again, Timothy sees this as an investment in his future:**

*"Four years...So, a bit more on the loan, because that's the kind of route that I'm planning for...but...umm...It doesn't, like, the way we learn about it, because I do core maths as well is that, cause, the loan is what's, get directly correlated to your earnings...and you don't pay. You won't be, pay any more per month... It just might take a bit longer to pay off, which I'm willing to accept really. So...It's definitely worth the investment"*

**Timothy's choice of university similarly makes economical sense to him – as well as offering the outdoorsy environment and opportunities Timothy is looking for:**

*"And that's, I guess, what also tied in with UNIVERSITY LOCATION because that's like a LOCATION town, not too expensive...There's a beach...So, I guess it's like a two hour journey each way, but it's for like, the cost it's way worth it"*

**Opportunities to be outdoors and pursue his own interests and passions are important to Timothy given that "one of the things [he's] not really looking forward to the most, is like the party side of it":**

*"I, yeah, really hate the idea of clubbing and stuff like... I just... see it as like, kind of...not worth the time and the money and the effort. I'd rather spend that...biking".*

*"if I get a job, I'll maybe invest in a bike or something"*

**And beyond biking, "[d]efinitely driving" is important to Timothy.**

**Whether on account of his subjective sense of class, or on account of his learning of core maths concepts, Timothy does not perceive finances to be a barrier:**

	<p><i>“Umm, to be honest with you, I don't think there's that many barriers because, like, there's financing, but I've already, I've... financing is a barrier, but it's one I've planned for...and I know it's coming, so...It's, it's not really a barrier, it's just a thing that I need to get through”.</i></p> <p><b>In terms of potential barriers, Timothy suggested changes within himself and / or the environment that might impact:</b></p> <p><i>“Well there's global events and stuff... That's like the big, upstanding one... It's like global tensions. Hmm...Maybe a change in, not personality as such, but like a change in heart, maybe...What I want to do...not, not really... that would be a course change, maybe”</i></p> <p><b>This clear consciousness of context and particularly the environment is at the forefront for Timothy whose ultimate goal is to make a difference at this level for future generations:</b></p> <p><i>“Just I think even if I don't get the benefits of it, the people in future will. So... That's kind of my main, that's probably a goal actually, just trying to do as much... If I do go down the environmental sciences courses... Just try to make the biggest impact I can with anything...”</i></p> <p><b>Wonderfully, Timothy felt the process of partaking in this research itself, had clarified some of his thinking and sensemaking of his situation and where he is headed:</b></p> <p><i>“I, I think this is really good. I think this has helped me as much as when I talk to my aunts about my dyslexia, it's kind of...Cos I don't really think about what I...oh what, how would you word it, that maybe, not how much I know, but like, think about...I guess it is how much I know...So, it's kind of, helped me kind of consolidate and realise, maybe...what's there...and like...stuff like that”</i></p>
<p><b>Criterion 7 –</b> How events and happenings culminate in the story's denouement: emplotment</p>	<p><b>Much of the criterion above feed into this final criterion focused on the overall emplotment of Timothy's story. Perhaps most importantly is, the backdrop and potential scene changes that are written into this narrative. Whether Timothy is shining a light on his home 'environment' and community context or thinking forward to the new environments and 'cultures' he hopes to encounter in the future, there is no doubt that Timothy's journey is as much physical as metaphorical.</b></p> <p><b>Timothy's embodied experiences of 'dyslexia' and an 'asthma' diagnosis also play an important part in his story: whether this highlights the 'early' help he received through school that supported his academic attainment; his identifying with a subject teacher now, or the realisation of his ability to 'lead' and 'think strategically' in a move from player to 'coach' in basketball.</b></p> <p><b>Timothy's story is very much grounded in the physical world and related to his physical experiences and interactions. This speaks to, to Timothy's travels, the learning he has taken from these experiences, and his hopes for the future: “like my choice to do, environmental sciences is like, even though I maybe not, might</b></p>

*not see the benefits of my work...the people in the future, maybe will... it might improve our climate for the better".*

**Whilst the environmental sciences are Timothy's 'first choice', he does have other pathways he is prepared, and has prepared, to undertake if need be. All these options are aligned with Timothy's skill-set and interests, and he has ensured study and extra-curricular experience that will lend itself to these where necessary.**

**Timothy credits his 'map reading skills' and propensity for 'strategic thinking' to being able to recognise different routes to success. This flexibility within Timothy's hopes for the future may also be impacted by his subjective sense of class, associated with what he believes to be "worth the time and the money and the effort".**

**Timothy's subjective sense of his socioeconomic status appears less fixed however, and at times he questions whether the support he's received from parents forethought and financial planning, and his own subsequent saving habits (and 'core maths' knowledge) that have reduced the 'financial barriers' he experiences, mean that he does not qualify for this study; despite his qualifying for a widening participation programme in the form of the post-16 bursary fund.**

**Undoubtedly Timothy's sense of his families and community's historical context complete with the struggle inherent, feeds into Timothy's determination for "finding as many opportunities as possible" and his mentality to "[a]lways give your 100%" where you believe it counts most.**

**Appendix 11:** Tabular Synthesis of raw data (quotes and story excerpts) taken from participant interviews and participant stories

Similarities and differences across narratives in relation to research question 1

Research Question 1: What do post-16 students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds report as facilitative to their academic achievement?	
Similarities across stories	Differences/ contrasts across stories
<p><b>Personal Investment: <u>Grit and academic resilience</u></b></p> <p><b>John:</b></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>  “John’s own developing sense of self gradually enabled him to see how his working-class identity might benefit his academic aspirations and beyond: i.e., John’s propensity to <i>“put in a shift”</i>, as his grandparents had done”.</p> </div> <p><b>John further speaks to:</b>  <i>“an underdog mentality” – “in a way that sort of motivates me because I can just do it in, in the quiet and just, and just get it done really”.</i></p> <p><i>“...definitely the graft”.</i></p> <p><i>“A principle to try hard”.</i></p> <p><b>Matilda:</b></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>  “...the kind of resilience one only knows when they have faced true adversity; <i>“I think my like, my grandparents have taught me to be, because they’re like, we know it’s happened but there’s nothing we can do, so we might as well just carry on”</i>”.</p> </div>	<p><b><u>‘Other-imposed prophecies’ (Schaedig, 2023; Adler, 2012)</u></b></p> <p><b>Matilda:</b></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>  “<i>“Change’</i> is as important to Matilda as it is to her mother, in whom Matilda has witnessed great change over the latter years. Matilda takes from this a lesson, that she believes applies to herself also: that it is possible <i>“to prove ...other people ...wrong”</i>”.</p> </div> <p><b>Matilda further speaks to:</b>  <i>“...we like to prove each other’s, other people... Wrong...who think it’s not gonna be alright”.</i></p> <p><b>Proud:</b></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>  “Whether in the interests of proving non-believers ‘wrong’, or her circle of support right...Proud is determined to ...<i>‘ensure that the youngest of children start out with the message that actually dreams are possible...You can do it’</i>”.</p> </div> <p><b>Proud further speaks to:</b>  <i>“Umm, so, for a lot of high school...although fives a pass in English, they said, ‘you’re probably gonna get a five’... like, I was in top set because they were like, ‘your</i></p>



<p><b>Proud:</b></p>	<p><b>Matilda further speaks to:</b>  <i>"I feel like, when something bad happens, I'll try to overcome it by something good happening on top of it".</i></p> <p><i>"...working every day".</i></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>  <i>"Knowledge of her mother's experience always 'pushed [Proud] to do better'".</i></p> </div> <p><b>Proud further speaks to:</b>  <i>"So, I actually did better at English GCSE than I did at Maths, but then I did a Maths A-level and I got a B there, and so... I hated it at A Level... Well, I, I clearly did alright, but like I was getting to the point where I'd sit and look at an equation and actually cry... but now doing it again from year seven, it's my favourite subject and I absolutely love it".</i></p> <p><i>"You prove you can, then...you can just keep going...you can get through it".</i></p> <p><i>"I think sometimes you can be your own worst enemy, and if you pick at yourself enough, you will just give up... Umm, but if you just stick at it and kind of ignore those thoughts and you will get through it".</i></p>	<p><b>John:</b></p> <p><i>knowledge is there', 'but from every test you've done so far, you're probably are gonna get a five'... And then... I got eight's in both English... So, I proved them wrong".</i>  <i>"[N]o matter what others say, you can do it... You can prove them wrong".</i></p> <p><b>In contrast to this, John warns:</b></p> <p><i>"I don't think, I don't think anyone could sit there being put down constantly and could ever make it through. I don't think it's that simple. I think it was just, I think it was just different, different people giving different responses; and so if you have enough of that doubt, umm, if you have small amounts, there's enough of that doubt, then you can certainly use it as a motivating factor. But of course when we have too much of it then, umm, then you're likely to, umm, sort of derail yourself".</i></p>
<p><b>Timothy:</b></p>	<div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>  <i>"Timothy is acutely aware of his family's history of 'hard labour' and 'small' housing, but also their determination to 'push through' and make the best of it".</i></p> </div> <p><b>Timothy further speaks to:</b></p>	

	<p><i>“I’ve always just been like...I’ll deal with it”...“beating the negative thoughts”.</i></p> <p><i>“...always give your 100%”.</i></p>	
<p><b><u>Identity and inspiration</u></b></p> <p><b>John:</b></p> <div><p><b>Excerpt from story:</b></p><p><i>“John’s possible future self, and the research into how to make this a realisation, was inspired and informed by the internet. Here, John stresses that while “we are at a disadvantage being from a low socioeconomic background...the digital space...is helping to bridge that in many ways””.</i></p></div> <p><b>John further speaks to:</b></p> <p><i>“And it’s sort of the first time that someone, that was a strong, masculine role model, that I looked up to, told me to try hard in school”</i></p> <p><i>“Umm, in your own mind, trying not to constrain yourself by your, by your background. But it’s, it’s almost impossible to do that...But I think for me it was more a channelling of my background into different areas”.</i></p> <p><b>Matilda:</b></p> <div><p><b>Excerpt from story:</b></p><p><i>“...much like Roald Dahl’s character from which her pseudonym is taken; “she didn’t have that brilliant upbringing, and then, she was a smart child, so I think...it was like, a bit like me””.</i></p></div> <p><b>Matilda further speaks to:</b></p>	<p><b><u>Separation from local context</u></b></p> <p><b>John:</b></p> <div><p><b>Excerpt from story:</b></p><p><i>“...seemed out of reach to the young man battling a “conflict of identity” at secondary school. This conflict, triggered, John believes, by his transition to a secondary school out of area (which in contrast to his hometown, was “a very, very middle-class area”), would be overcome in time and with John’s best efforts to “separate” these two worlds when and where necessary”.</i></p></div> <p><b>John further speaks to:</b></p> <p><i>“that’s also helped by the fact that umm, I go to a school that’s away from my town...Yeah, so, I thought that sort of helps and there’s always been that separation for me from the local context, and then the academic context and those two spaces are kind of separate”.</i></p> <p><i>“So I think, sort of, my local context, my local community, umm, it always felt like it held me back in many ways”.</i></p> <p><b>Matilda:</b></p> <p><i>“...we’re at a disadvantage being from a low socioeconomic background...but I think, sort of, the digital space, how it is helping to bridge that in many ways, and, and just more knowledge as well? Umm, among teachers and especially in the state school</i></p>	

<p><b>Proud:</b></p>	<p><i>"So yeah, it was nice to get that fresh start, to start again. Yeah, find like the people that I...want to hang around with and like the influence I wanted".</i></p> <p><i>"I feel like, if it wasn't for the things that happened, then I wouldn't be who I am now...So, it has a lot to do with like, what I wanna do, where I wanna go...stuff like that".</i></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>  <i>"...with a few teachers in particular further inspiring and confirming Proud's aspirations to teach".</i></p> </div>	<p><i>setting, I mean plenty of state school schools are starting to improve, especially in my area".</i></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>  <i>"However, with Matilda's circle of support, motivation to 'give back' to her Grandparents and having chosen a university that will grant her funding for her studies and to see "see the place a bit" (beyond her home community – though "not too far"), no one would suppose that Matilda's future should look anything other than "exciting".</i></p> </div>
<p><b>Timothy:</b></p>	<p><b>Proud further speaks to:</b>  <i>"...particularly inspirational because actually he didn't have a plain sailing journey into higher education and teaching either".</i></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>  <i>"Irrespective of where Timothy sees himself in a class or socioeconomic hierarchy, he knows his place in the world, in his environment, and is determined to "try to make the biggest impact [he] can with anything" he does".</i></p> </div> <p><b>Timothy further speaks to:</b>  <i>"My geography teacher is a big...Because he's, sort of, got dyslexia...but he's also passionate about the thing I'm passionate about...so it's, I feel a big link to him as well".</i></p>	<p><b>Timothy:</b></p> <p><b>Matilda further speaks to:</b>  <i>"Like from where I am now, when we first moved out it was quite like a safe place you could say, but now it's like definitely got worse as times moved on. I know like, from, there's people that live like, in X [nearby location], but they come down. It's like, like, drug dealing... in the streets drinking alcohol... Stuff like that. The usual really".</i></p> <p><i>"...if I'm going out somewhere, I don't tend to go to X [home location], I go like to X [college location], or X [nearby location]".</i></p> <p><b>In contrast to this, Timothy shared his passion and the possible pull of his place of residence:</b>  <i>"Like some people in [my home location] are always trying to just like, I guess, trying to escape [it], but I wouldn't mind living not ...[here] my whole life because there's places to be, places to see, but...like it's got some strong underlying sentiment and like the area and its history and stuff".</i></p>

			<p><i>"Like I probably found comfort in the outdoors, just like the fresh air maybe".</i></p>
<p><b><u>Teacher support/investment</u></b></p>		<p><b><u>The role of Covid-19</u></b></p>	
John:	<p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>            "This attainment coupled with John's aspirations to attend a Russell Group university were further encouraged by key members of school staff who <i>"always believed"</i> in him; staff who threw him a lifeline when he was <i>"getting in trouble and not really doing any work" at school</i>". This <i>"belief carried [John] through"</i>.</p>	John:	<p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>            "...John's best efforts to <i>"separate"</i> these two worlds when and where necessary. Covid lockdowns perhaps supported this separation..."</p>
Matilda:	<p><b>John further speaks to:</b>  <i>"...when you start doing well, your teachers, especially when you go from doing poor to doing well, they start to motivate you a lot. Umm, so, I thought that sort of helped"</i>.</p> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>            "Whilst Matilda might find herself <i>"shocked"</i> by her own achievements at times – those that truly know her, are less surprised: <i>"my tutor now...He's like, constantly like, 'you're fine. You've got this'"</i>.</p> <p><b>Matilda further speaks to:</b>  <i>"I feel like, to be fair, like teaching wise, like, cause I've had like, appointments to school counsellors and stuff like that and they're quite good and X [Head of Year] is</i></p>	Matilda:	<p><b>John further speaks to:</b>  <i>"I ended up doing very well at GCSE...umm, and sort of that was Covid as well that helped that and whatever; I sort of had that complete separation from school, umm, which I think helped, and helped my maturity in a way"</i>.</p> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>            "Matilda stressed that achieving her GCSEs was <i>"massive"</i>, even without the <i>"extra 2% advantage"</i> applied due to Covid-19 - that Matilda partially attributes to her success - she can recognise her own part in this achievement: <i>"I was quite proud of myself. I'm not gonna lie"</i>.</p> <p><b>Matilda further speaks to:</b>  <i>"I know the school applied for me to get like, my extra 2% advantage on my grades, which did definitely help"</i>.</p>

<p><b>Proud:</b></p>	<p><i>brilliant as well. The head of the year. I feel like, because it takes me a while to build relationships with people, like, that's not family and friends... And then once I do, I'm quite happy to like, confide in them. Like X [Head of Year] knows the highs and the lows... yeah. He's seen it all with me, but, yeah, yeah".</i></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>          "From her very early education in an 'amazing' primary school, Proud felt that she had the support of 'key adults' that "genuinely wanted to be there and that...actually cared".</p> </div>	<p><b>Timothy:</b></p>	<p><b>On the contrary, Timothy is less inclined to take pride in his GCSE results awarded by teacher assessment only during the pandemic:</b></p> <p><i>"I wouldn't say, I feel like my GCSEs, I personally wouldn't say they're a milestone for me because I know it was cos of Covid, and they were teacher assessed grades".</i></p>
<p><b>Timothy:</b></p>	<p><b>Proud further speaks to:</b>  <i>"...people at school that believed in me".</i></p> <p><i>"[I]f there's a problem, talk about it... It really does help"...          "Yeah, most of the things I've dealt with, I've dealt with it through, even if the teacher just sits there... I just rant at them..."</i></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>          "Timothy also recognises the role of specific teachers throughout his schooling: whether this speaks to the teacher that recognised and supported his dyslexia at an 'early' stage; or to his now geography teacher whom aside from sharing a 'passion' for his subject, also shares a dyslexia diagnosis".</p> </div> <p><b>Timothy further speaks to:</b>  <i>"...my PE teacher...he was always kind of there for everybody. But he was just like a happy character and</i></p>		

*whatnot...So, he was kind of just like someone you could kind of, go to and talk to for a bit".*

**External (eco)system support/investment**

**John:**

**Excerpt from story:**

"While community expectations for John seemed low, there were characters within his community that took an interest in his academic endeavours. This interest and seeming investment in John's achievement, like his parent's investment in supporting him...proved fundamental to facilitating John's higher aspirations and subsequent academic attainment".

**John further speaks to:**

*"So, I think my parents have been really supportive and they're quite supportive in whatever I want to do. Umm, so I think that helps massively".*

*"So, one of my friends dad, whose been quite a role model for me, has always seemed to just understand it and understand the benefits and sort of supported me in it; always asking about how I'm doing at school umm, when it's kind of separate from the culture completely. So, I thought that that's been quite instrumental really".*

**Matilda:**

**Excerpt from story:**

"Matilda clearly states that 'reassurance' from her circle of support has been integral to where she is today...This circle of support would include her 'friends', her 'boyfriend', select staff from school, and most importantly her grandparents, who are "a massive part of it".

Proud:	<div></div> <p><b>Matilda further speaks to:</b>  <i>"If like, my grandparents didn't, like, become my legal guardians, then I would have been in the care system so I don't know where I would have been right now, like, so yeah".</i></p> <p><i>"I think, ask for help when you need it, because without like, you know, that support network you wouldn't get far to be honest...because you, you just need it...otherwise you're not gonna go far".</i></p>
	<div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>          "Proud knows, that despite not always getting 'those messages from home', her parents bestowed upon her, something special, something important, and something that showed their belief and pride in her all along".</p> </div>
Timothy:	<p><b>Proud further speaks to:</b>  <i>"Yeah, she [mum] said she would have been happy with whatever I got, but she was like, if you can get them and you can do well, then go for it".</i></p> <p><i>"I've got, like everyone at the youth club and I've got all my colleagues and all my friends, leaving all of that, well, they're not left because they're still here and I can still come to them whenever I need".</i></p>
	<div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>          "Aside from the unshakable 'support' of his mother and the encouragement, 'push', of his father".</p> </div>

**Timothy further speaks to:**

*"...it's up to my parents, but from when I was born, I had a 18 year, 18 year fund, I guess, so... Like when I was younger, half of my birthday and Christmas money went into it...And then every month, like a tiny bit of my parents spare earnings would go into my sister's and mine funds, and it would build up and it's built up substantially over the years".*

*"...he's always stayed like close to family...and that's the like, the uncle, I go to the air shows with, so he's always been like, I, I only see him maybe three or four times a year. Yeah, he's always been there and showing an interest in what I'm interested in too".*

**Independence**

**John:**

**Excerpt from story:**

*"Access to information, advice and guidance, beyond that of the Widening Participation Programme, has enabled John to set his sights high and map out a flight path for his future".*

**John further speaks to:**

*"I think I've been disadvantaged by having to do that research... so, it felt like with X university for me, umm, [inaudible/undiscernible speech] with the application, it sort of feels like starting a race with your shoes untied; so I had to come down and tie my own shoes and then I just had to start running and it certainly felt like that".*



<p><b>Matilda:</b></p>	<p>“basically, I like to have discipline in all my areas, umm, and I probably like, like control as well, in my areas as well”.</p> <p>“I think it's about probably pragmatic planning for me”.</p> <p>“I think that sort of separation, has just more been an individual thing that I've had to work out on my own”.</p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>          “This ‘worry’ sees Matilda working a part-time job to assist her studies; and even though this means she’s ‘busy’, she sees the benefits, like the ‘independence’ and the ‘confidence’, that this work (related to her chosen career) brings”.</p> </div>
<p><b>Proud:</b></p>	<p><b>Matilda further speaks to:</b>  <i>“I’ve started working at the X [refers to care industry role] now, in September this year. And it’s like I’m completely different, like my independence has like shot up! And I’ve seen it as well like, I’m like, secretly quite proud of it”.</i></p> <p><i>“Yeah, it’s all to do with like organisation, like timetables”.</i></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>          “Proud has always had to “rely on [her]self”, given the needs of her siblings, the loss of her father and the associated need for her to take care of herself as much as she can”.</p> </div>
<p><b>Timothy:</b></p>	<p><b>Proud further speaks to:</b>  <i>“I just think, having to rely on myself... so just planning ahead so I know what I’ve got and what I have to do”.</i></p>

**Excerpt from story:**

“Timothy remains embodied and grounded throughout – the central character in whichever ‘*environment*’ (or scenic backdrop) he finds himself in over time. Timothy sees himself and his interests as ultimately determining his direction”.

**Timothy further speaks to:**

*“I like working as a team, but I always, I kind of feel myself as, not a...born leader, but I kind of, understand... I, I would say I have a greater understanding than most people about stuff... So, it kind of helps me make...better informed decisions”.*

*“I always think of like the best strategies you could use”.*

*“I’ve always kind of created like a chart in my head of, it’s like, if I can do it, it doesn’t matter...And like, if I can’t do it, there’s nothing I can do about it anyway”.*

## Similarities and differences across narratives in relation to research question 2

Research Question 2: What do post-16 students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds report to have been facilitative in their aspirations of continuation into Higher Education?	
Similarities across stories	Differences/ contrasts across stories
<p><b><u>Personal investment in a specific goal/passion</u></b></p> <p><b>John:</b></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b></p> <p>“John hasn’t always perceived the sky to be the limit! His current aspirations to be an Officer in the RAF and the positive steps he has, and is taking toward the realisation of this dream, seemed out of reach to the young man battling a <i>“conflict of identity”</i> at secondary school”.</p> </div> <p><b>John further speaks to:</b></p> <p><i>“umm, I’ve always wanted to join the military”.</i></p> <p><i>“There’s sort of this divide... Yeah, that has then, this sort of, this divide where you can’t access these things unless you go to university? So, it’s this sort of officer’s thing where you go and fly and you get to get a sponsorship onto joining the RAF as an officer after. So, that was a sort of, a big motivation for me”.</i></p> <p><b>Matilda:</b></p> <p><i>“so I’m part of the air cadets, so that’s been a big opportunity for me... So it’s definitely confirmed what I’ve wanted to do”.</i></p>	<p><b><u>Motivation to make a difference</u></b></p> <p><b>Matilda:</b></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b></p> <p>“Our protagonist’s superpowers include a natural propensity to ‘care’ for others, a ‘sympathetic’ disposition, and the kind of resilience one only knows when they have faced true adversity”.</p> </div> <p><b>Matilda further speaks to:</b></p> <p><i>“I think it’s like, I always wanted to do nursing because I’m just one of those people that likes to care”.</i></p> <p><i>“I feel like if it wasn’t for the things that happened, then I wouldn’t be who I am now? So, it has a lot to do with like what I wanna do, where I wanna go... stuff like that. I feel like it’s kind of, it also gives me the motivation, because I know what’s happened to me, and I don’t want it to happen to other people, so, it’s like, that’s my way of looking at it”.</i></p> <p><b>Proud:</b></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b></p> </div>

	<p><b>Proud:</b></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>          “These values and characteristics have served Matilda well thus far and will continue to serve her in her chosen field of <i>“children’s mental health nursing”</i>”.</p> </div> <p><b>Matilda further speaks to:</b>  <i>“I feel like it's like, the automatic next step up for what you want to do, like I can't really imagine doing anything else really”.</i></p> <p><i>“And everyone says I’m a really goal driven person... I feel like that is to do with the fact that I've got that like passion to do it, because I know what it's like”.</i></p> <p><i>“And this year, because of my job and, and the exam we're doing as I’m working in health and social care? So, it's literally my job, so I'm able to write like essays on exactly everything...and I'm getting distinctions in like, in the mocks which is brilliant”.</i></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>          “Proud is set to continue to ‘smash’ down any barriers that threaten her aspirations to become ‘a primary school teacher’. Proud is determined ‘to help others to find their sense of purpose’ and ‘ensure that the youngest of children start out with</p> </div>	<p><b>Timothy:</b></p> <div> <p><i>“Proud is determined ‘to help others to find their sense of purpose’ and ‘ensure that the youngest of children start out with the message that actually dreams are possible... You can do it’.</i></p> </div> <p><b>Proud further speaks to:</b>  <i>“making that difference”.</i></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>          “With Timothy’s love of the environment, ‘outdoors’, in mind, Timothy’s preferred “choice is to do environmental sciences...even though [he]...might not see the benefits of [his] work...the people in the future, maybe will... It might improve the climate for the better”.</p> </div> <p><b>John:</b></p> <p><i>“Just I think even if I don't get the benefits of it, the people in future will. So... That's kind of my main, that's probably a goal actually, just trying to do as much... If I do go down the environmental sciences courses... Just try to make the biggest impact I can with anything”.</i></p> <p><b>In possible contrast to this -</b> John did not explicitly share such a motivation for his career choice.</p>
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*the message that actually dreams are possible...  
You can do it”.*

**Timothy:**

**Proud further speaks to:**

*“You can do a job that makes you happy and get the money on top’, which is an added like, added bonus”.*

*“...there's always a pathway to get you where you want to go, even if it's different to, sort of other people's path”.*

*“...that's all I really want to do”.*

**Excerpt from story:**

*“Timothy's ‘main goal’ concerns itself with him ‘finding as many opportunities as possible”, one of which, and the preferred option presently, pertains to studying at the level of higher education. With Timothy's love of the environment, ‘outdoors’, in mind, Timothy's preferred “choice is to do environmental sciences”.*

**Timothy further speaks to:**

*“...the other pathway I'm looking at...which isn't a university pathway...but as another pathway, like, if I don't get into university or suddenly I just don't really feel like going, is I'm looking at an engineering apprenticeship in the RAF. So, that's on like, the, probably, second choice really”.*

	<p><i>"I could do that on...Kind of... I kind of focus on something I like, passion, was passionate about. Yeah. So, that was EPQ, and then like, you pick up core maths as a subsidy as well... But I feel like...That umm, benefited me because it gave me more real world skills and understanding about maths. So, like, because you learn about taxes and insurance and stuff. It's quite useful, yeah".</i></p> <p><i>"100% focus on what you want to".</i></p>		
<p><b><u>Wider investment through <u>Widening Participation initiatives</u></u></b></p>		<p><b><u>Extra-curricular activities</u></b></p>	
<p><b>John:</b></p>	<div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b></p> <p>"John's possible future self, and the research into how to make this a realisation, was inspired and informed by the internet. Here, John stresses that while <i>"we're at a disadvantage being from a low socioeconomic background...the digital space...is helping to bridge that in many ways"</i>. Access to information, advice and guidance, beyond that of the Widening Participation programme, has enabled John to set his sights high and map out a flight path for his future".</p> </div> <div> <p><b>John further speaks to:</b></p> <p><i>"...so, my head of year has been quite supportive in that aspect and sort of explained the system".</i></p> </div>	<p><b>John:</b></p>	<div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b></p> <p>"This interest and seeming investment in John's achievement, like his parent's investment in supporting him to attend a school out of area and engage with extra-curricular activities to support his dreams and development, proved fundamental to facilitating John's higher aspirations".</p> </div> <div> <p><b>John further speaks to:</b></p> <p><i>"I think it's sort of helped my confidence and definitely going on to university and obviously beyond that, has made me realize that I can operate and function and thrive in different environments with different people".</i></p> </div>

<p><b>Matilda:</b></p> <p><i>“Umm, to start when you go so, so when I went to X university open day, I started to meet people, and students, and you with...but then start to realize that the gap is not that, not as big as you think it is...Umm, it's, it's just, different, sort of, norms in the way that you speak rather than... there's no difference in intellect or anything like that. And that, that's where, sort of like, the barrier has been crossed for me”.</i></p> <p><i>“Umm, which is a lot behind the X university application. So, X university's very cheap to live in. In fact, possibly one of the cheapest universities in the country to live at. So that was a big thing driving the application”.</i></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b></p> <p><i>“However, with Matilda's circle of support, motivation to ‘give back’ to her Grandparents and having chosen a university that will grant her funding for her studies and to see “see the place a bit”...no one would suppose that Matilda's future should look anything other than “exciting”.</i></p> </div> <p><b>Matilda further speaks to:</b></p> <p><i>“...obviously I have the bursary at the moment which I get. Which is really helpful”.</i></p> <p><i>“It kind of like it depends because X university is my top choice. Yeah, if I go to X university they fund for</i></p>	<p><b>Timothy:</b></p> <p><i>“...that sort of environment's definitely helped”.</i></p> <p><i>“So, I went there and I actually excelled a lot and that sort of helped me, so I've moved through the ranks quite quickly and sort of issuing positions of leadership... Umm, moved quite quickly through; umm, which has given me massive opportunities. Umm, so I think that it's also helped my confidence and definitely speaking. So obviously something that I was insecure about speaking, but... I think when I initially joined, umm, there was definitely a class barrier - 100%...but I've actually excelled in that environment”.</i></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b></p> <p><i>“This undoubtedly impacts Timothy's own attitude to future employment, whereby his open vista includes consideration of a few alternative paths if his endeavours into higher education change. Timothy's ‘map reading skills’ and propensity for ‘strategic thinking’ undoubtedly help here, allowing Timothy to “always see maybe, a few options”.</i></p> </div> <p><b>Timothy further speaks to:</b></p> <p><i>“So, I was more of, kind of, I guess in primary school and early high school, I was always part of the orienteering team and... we won some county medals and stuff and I was the map reader, so that kind of thing ties into my sense of direction”.</i></p>
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<p><b>Proud:</b></p>	<p><i>your course as long as you stay within X [location] for like... The next two years after so like employment in X [location], but I feel like if I've done six years, I'll probably end up staying there anyway".</i></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>          "Perhaps the biggest show of support and belief in Proud's potential would be in her sixth form teachers putting her forward for a widening participation program. For Proud this would offer more than the reassurance that they believe in her ability to 'get to that point', it would also provide the information, advice and guidance she needed to truly believe that higher education is attainable for her".</p> </div>		<p><i>"I like working as a team, but I always, I kind of feel myself as, not a...born leader, but I kind of, understand... I, I would say I have a greater understanding than most people about stuff... So, it kind of helps me make...In, better informed decisions".</i></p> <p><b>Matilda:</b> <i>"So, I joined their karate at the club as well. So, I've been doing that for about a year now as well, and that's been like, brought some more community kind of, social into my life".</i></p> <p><b>In contrast to this, Matilda and Proud speak to development of their skills in relation to paid employment, as opposed to engagement with extra-curricular clubs.</b></p>
<p><b>Timothy:</b></p>	<p><b>Proud further speaks to:</b>  <i>"Yeah. So, they gave more information because I think sometimes schools think you know it, even if you don't know it. So this, just because it was just about university, it gave you a lot more pinpointed information. And because it was made by universities it was more tailored as well".</i></p> <p><i>"...my barriers can be removed, and I can do it, [so] I'd rather just do it. Umm, just because I can".</i></p> <div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>          "With this in mind, and also minded to his "real world skills and understanding about maths",</p> </div>	<p><b>Proud:</b></p>	<div> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>          "This 'worry' sees Matilda working a part-time job to assist her studies, and even though this means she's "busy", she sees the benefits, like the "independence" and "confidence", that this work (related to her chosen career) brings".</p> </div> <p><b>Matilda further speaks to:</b>  <i>"And this year, because of my job and, and the exam we're doing as I'm working in health and social care? So, it's literally my job, so I'm able to write like essays on exactly everything...and I'm</i></p>



Timothy knows that higher education will be an 'investment'".

**Timothy further speaks to:**

*"...the way we learn about it, because I do core maths as well is that, cause, the loan is what's, get directly correlated to your earnings...and you don't pay. You won't be, pay any more per month... It just might take a bit longer to pay off, which I'm willing to accept really. So...It's definitely worth the investment".*

*getting distinctions in like, in the mocks which is brilliant".*

**Excerpt from story:**

"And of course, Proud will do it. Not least because she has taken a year out to save for the financial undertaking of her studies and at the same time gain experience of working in education; but also because of her forethought in securing a job to come back to in the holidays to keep those funds topped up".

**Proud's story further speaks to:**

"Proud acknowledged that feedback from others is helpful here and thought about how the '*positive feedback from parents*' she receives in her job presently allows her to believe and feel motivated by the fact that she is '*making that difference*'. This belief and motivation is again, key to Proud's aspirations going forward".

### Similarities and differences across narratives in relation to research question 3

Research Question 3: What factors do post-16 students from low-socioeconomic background perceive might continue to support them in realising their aspirations going forward?			
Similarities across stories		Differences/ contrasts across stories	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Financial planning</u></b></p>		<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Connection</u></b></p>	
John:	<p><b>John speaks to:</b></p> <p>John is pursuing a place at a university where there is <i>“a lot of financial support, which sort of, umm, would make...life a lot easier”</i>.</p> <p><i>“Umm, which is a lot behind the X university (a Russell Group university) application. So, X University’s very cheap to live in. In fact, possibly one of the cheapest universities in the country to live at. So that was a big thing driving the application”</i>.</p> <p><i>“So there's some universities that I'd say would possibly be off limits by, monetary, so in terms of finance they'd be off limits, so definitely, so X (London based) university, like...like that's the sort of university that I'd love; I love the course there. So in terms of passion of the subject, I've looked at it and I, like I'm in love with the course that they offer there, but just in terms of finances there's absolutely no way I could go there and live comfortably”</i>.</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b></p> </div>	John:	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b></p> <p>“John’s <i>“passion for [his] subject”</i> would provide not only a gateway into HE in terms of courses he felt he could apply for and excel at, but also provide <i>“common ground”</i>, a <i>“shared subject interest”</i>, which he believes will enable him to find a <i>“space for [himself]”</i> at university going forward, a space that might previously have felt somewhat <i>“alien”</i> to him”.</p> </div>
		Proud:	<p><b>John further speaks to:</b></p> <p><i>“I think the common ground is essential. So I think, I think the shared subject interest certainly helps, especially in terms of that taster selection day, because, if in doubt, you just speak about the subject and I think everyone could share that passion. I think that would be the same with boxing at university. So, everyone on my Geography course would have a passion for the subject and you could speak about the subject... and of course you'd meet similar people depending on what</i></p>

<p><b>Matilda:</b></p>	<p><i>"...having chosen a university that will grant her funding for her studies and to see "see the place a bit"".</i></p> <p><b>Matilda further speaks to:</b>  <i>"Funding's quite weird, cause that's always been like a bit of a concern for me, just because I live with my grandparents, and so the one has umm, his X occupation pension, and obviously all we're technically living off is their pensions? So, it's always been a bit of a worry for me".</i></p> <p><i>"And my job is probably one of the things that keeps me going because I'm on a good wage".</i></p> <p><i>"...but then it gets to that week and I'm like 'oh...I'm working everyday'...Like, I just don't realise, I just don't realise".</i></p> <p><i>"It kind of like, it depends, because X university is my top choice. Yeah, if I go to X (first choice) university, they fund for your course as long as you stay within X location for like... The next two years after, so like employment in X location, but I feel like if I've done six years and years, I'll probably end up staying there anyway".</i></p> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>  <i>"And of course, Proud will do it. Not least because she has taken a year out to save for the financial undertaking of her studies and at the same time</i></p>	<p><i>society you went to and that'd be the same across all universities".</i></p> <p><i>"So possibly some of the umm, Eaton boys that maybe hang out together, I wouldn't feel comfortable in those circles, but I think there's those spaces for me there, so I know they've got a boxing gym, so I think I could sort of facilitate my interest through there... and obviously I've got an interest in the subject and I have belief that, that I, I, love my subjects and I'm passionate about my subjects, and I'm confident in my subject. So, I think that, umm, there's, there's sort of that there which would make me comfortable with the identity".</i></p> <p><b>Proud:</b>  <i>"Umm, to start when you go so, so when I went to X university open day, I started to meet people, and students, and you with...but then start to realize that the gap is not that, not as big as you think it is...Umm, it's, it's just, different, sort of, norms in the way that you speak rather than... there's no difference in intellect or anything like that. And that, that's where, sort of like, the barrier has been crossed for me".</i></p> <p><b>Proud speaks to:</b>  <i>"Yes. So even last year I didn't think I was gonna move away because I didn't think I would be able to afford it. And I was gonna go to the local university just so I could live here and not have to pay for anything extra. But then I thought, well, it's</i></p>
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	<p>gain experience of working in education; but also because of her forethought in securing a job to come back to in the holidays to keep those funds topped up”.</p> <p><b>Proud further speaks to:</b>  <i>“Well, also what's happened since we last met, was they offered me a position of bank staff, so that... I can work with them whenever they need me or when I need them, yeah”...“Yes. Well, they said because I'd be bank staff, it'd be like a zero hour contract. So, when I come back from uni, and all the holidays - cause they run quite a lot in the holidays - they said 'well, you can come and get paid for all of it'”.</i></p> <p><b>Timothy:</b> <i>“And I know that, whatever money I make, I can just put it straight to uni because I've already got this job for other things I have to pay for, so I know I can just keep all the money that would come from it”.</i></p> <p><b>Excerpt from story:</b>  <i>“Timothy's parent's forethought and financial planning, and subsequently Timothy's own saving habits have led him to feel confident that he is prepared to overcome any potential 'financial barriers' one might usually face in enrolling with university”.</i></p> <p><b>Timothy further speaks to:</b></p>	<p><b>Timothy:</b> <i>a once in a lifetime experience...Like, I'll find the money somehow...Umm, so I'd rather just do it”.</i></p> <p><i>“[T]his is gonna be a big move having always been in the area” ... “I think because I've got, like everyone at the youth club and I've got all my colleagues and all my friends, leaving all of that, well, they're not left because they're still here and I can still come to them whenever I need, but not having them there all the time will be a bit strange... But then there's gonna be things like that where I move, so I'll just have to make those new connections”.</i></p> <p><b>In contrast to this, Timothy was not really looking for new connections, unless it's to</b> <i>“creat[e] like, I guess not friendship links, but just links from around the world...I guess that ties in with my travel, with, with wanting to travel”.</i></p> <p><i>“...one of the things [he's] not really looking forward to the most, is like the party side of it”:</i></p> <p><i>“I, yeah, really hate the idea of clubbing and stuff like... I just... see it as like, kind of...not worth the time and the money and the effort. I'd rather spend that...biking”.</i></p> <p><i>“...because I've always been...not a...really...social kid I guess”...“I would enjoy talking to the teachers and I would enjoy talking to my specific friend group”.</i></p>
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	<p><i>“Umm, to be honest with you, I don't think there's that many barriers because, like, there's financing, but I've already, I've... financing is a barrier, but it's one I've planned for...and I know it's coming, so...It's, it's not really a barrier, it's just a thing that I need to get through”.</i></p>		
	<p><b><u>Grit and academic resilience</u></b></p> <p>Please cross-reference with research question 1.</p>		

## **Appendix 12: My story – researcher positionality.**

This research is no chance happening – in the spirit of narrative analysis I can see how my own socioeconomic situation and life experiences have culminated in this particular interest and inquiry. As a working-class girl (or woman – now at the age of 40), from an ex-coal mining, semi-rural town that is, by POLAR4 classification, in the lowest quantile for participation of both young people and adults in higher education, I was, when the time came, very mindful that I was the first in family to be attending university. The gravity of this situation was not lost on me; I had worked incredibly hard to place myself in that position. My education leading up to this leap into the unknown (HE) had included a mixture of positive experiences (facilitative factors) and negative. Some of these negative experiences reflected my seeing myself as ‘different’, given the extra input and support I required in my primary years around my learning. The most significant memory, and perhaps my measure of this, was failing (albeit marginally) the test for the grammar school my older sister attended. Other memories, and those that I will bring to the fore here for relevance, speak more to my socioeconomic roots (although if the deterministic views of some researchers in intelligence are to be believed, my early learning needs may be related; I choose to ethically distance myself from such beliefs however).

Those events and significant happenings that I link to my socioeconomic background probably start more so within the secondary context. Throughout secondary school my natural curiosity and disposition to question the way things are, or think about things slightly differently, was better embraced and channelled than it had been at primary school. This curiosity, teamed with what has always felt like a naturally compassionate disposition, perhaps provided me with an emotional intelligence that I could seek comfort and esteem in when I otherwise felt inadequate in my educational attainment. Reading around the topic of low-SES and emotional intelligence has led me to question how innate this compassionate disposition is, or how much can be attributed to ‘contextualism’ (Kraus & Stephens, 2012). I recall being aware of the precarious nature of our financial position from a relatively young age, whether through the sharing of the story of my dad being made redundant on the day of my birth, or through the realisation that my mum would often work two jobs at a time. I would later learn of my entitlement to Free School Meals, though

my parents would not claim for them. My mum worked incredibly hard - it's a work ethic I have not seen otherwise rivalled, and my dad would often proudly speak about my mum's success at juggling studies and a day job before us offspring showed up. My dad would often liken me to my mum, and I learned that whilst my mum too had failed the test to attend a grammar school, she had later been awarded top secretary by her employer – outperforming her grammar educated counterparts. I loved this story, and in many ways, I can see now that it is one that I have tried to replicate.

My dad was not only the storyteller here but also played an influential role of his own; stories of my dad's redundancy were in stark contrast to what I remember of my dad's employment status in my younger years. Dad worked a night shift for many years, before being asked to take a more active and senior position within the organisations Union. When I was old enough to know what this meant, I was immensely proud of my dad for taking this on and advocating for his fellow workers. This undoubtedly sparked my interest in social justice, whilst also feeding into my own sense of our own working-class position in society. I became increasingly interested in this position and what it meant for me and my future, and this undoubtedly drove my decision to pursue studies in sociology. Here I started to enjoy not only success, but also a great sense of satisfaction, and a drive to carve out a different future for myself than one that might otherwise have been dictated by my socioeconomic position.

While I was aware of this position when I applied for a grant to go to university for my sociological studies, I did not realise that my SES, alongside, I assume, the recognition of my *potential*, was the reason I would later be enlisted to the AimHigher programme. This programme would encourage me to think about further opportunities in HE beyond my current studies. Despite this intervention, it would be years before I would study at this level again. This delay was due to my financial situation. By the end of my first degree, the starting of which I had already delayed having decided to work and earn a little first, I had met my now husband and we were looking to buy a house. I had worked to support myself throughout my first degree, which I often think may have cost me the one mark I was missing off being

awarded a first-class honours. However, this 'just falling short' of perfection was in keeping with my academic self-concept to date, and by then, I had made my peace with this. Further study would not prove possible until my work as a Learning Support Worker in a Special Educational Needs school (SEN) would offer the possibility of gaining a teaching qualification 'on the job'. This opportunity was pivotal, not only to my ongoing career in education, but also in instilling some self-belief. To be encouraged to apply for a graduate programme that was highly sought after did the world of good for my confidence. Securing a place on this programme, against stiff competition, bolstered my academic self-concept hugely, and this experience would prove crucial to my eventual decision to pursue a career in the competitive field of educational psychology - this and my continuing interest in special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

The much later decision to engage in study at master's level was not taken lightly, it meant taking out another student loan and with two wonderful children now in the mix, this seemed like something of a risk in my thirties! I wondered if I would see a return on this investment. After all, I knew how competitive it was to get onto the EP Doctorate Training which would be the ultimate goal. I worried about the time commitment and juggling study with work, and raising a young family. I wanted to be the best mum I could be, I wanted to be there for my children...but I also wanted to secure for them a better, easier future, where finances would not have to dictate every decision that they ever make. I also wanted to show them that hard work paid off and that we can achieve if we truly strive (as per the Family Investment Model: Zhang et al., 2020). I owed this to my husband too, who was, and remains to this day, my greatest advocate. He believed in me when I didn't believe in myself and helped me often to challenge my self-doubt and negative thinking, when it sought to overwhelm me. For him, and all those that had believed in my *potential*, I wanted to honour their investment, effort, and support.

I confess however, as I must if this is to be an honest account, that I also feel I had something to prove: this working-class girl from that secondary state school with a bad reputation (unfairly awarded) in that down-trodden town, that struggled to read in her earliest years, would become a doctor and woman of science! She would



attend the 'red brick universities' that no one talked about in her community or when seeking careers advice in her younger years. This breaking of the mould mattered not just to me, but for all those girls, and boys - including my own sons - that would be navigating the same systems and battling assumptions about their lack of aspirations or abilities after me. Aspiration was never an issue for me, and my 'falling short' was more about my confidence in my ability, rather than my ability itself. Even when I learned I had a place on the EP Doctorate Training Programme for instance, I was convinced that there had been some kind of administrative error. This didn't happen to people like me! Indeed, as the course has progressed, I have continued to be plagued by notions of imposter syndrome, which I again learn to be relatively typical, through related reading around underrepresentation in the world of academia (Muradoglu et al., 2022). In truth, it is only now, through meeting the inspirational participants within this research that I have begun to truly appreciate my own strengths, value and worth as I was privileged to celebrate their achievements, which then helped me to reflect on my own.

Much of my achievement, must be, I feel, attributed to my socioeconomic and seemingly 'disadvantaged' background. Any claim I have to emotional intelligence that lends itself to my work and studies in psychology, my compassion, care and genuine appreciation of other people's struggles in relation to social justice, and the kind of resilience, determination and grit that can only come through truly knowing adversity (Kraus & Stephens, 2012; Manstead, 2018; Lam & Zhou, 2022). For these gifts, I am grateful of the struggle I can say I have sometimes faced, though, conversely, I would not wish to gift anyone else that struggle. I do, however, hope that through my work in educational psychology, which will follow the achievement of this doctoral research, I can support others who face adversity and struggle to see the strengths and resources they hold within themselves, as well as supporting the systems and social structures around them to equip and empower them further ('From Poverty to Flourishing' Briefing Paper: The British Psychological Society, 2021).