

ASPIRATION AND NEEDS:
YOUNG PEOPLE MAKING THEIR WAY IN THE WORLD OF FE

by

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ABSTRACT

Young people who leave school with few qualifications and subsequently do not go on to college or gain employment have come to be known by the label NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training). NEET is an imprecise label and is frequently used pejoratively to signal the problems allegedly caused by young people who, it is often claimed in the media and policy, lack skills and aspiration. The fragile voices of these young people are rarely heard in policy discourse. This project seeks to investigate what these young people aspire to and how they form these aspirations. It asks how these young people make their way through the further education and skills sector after leaving school. Using policy documents, it will attempt to identify how far their aspiration matches with an 'officially' prescribed aspiration as defined by government reviews and reports. This project will also evaluate how these learners comprehend their position within the further education and skills sector when attending programmes of study designed for learners who have not achieved GCSEs or are NEET.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Further education is everything that does not happen in schools and universities.” (Kennedy, 1997, p1)

This thesis is about a small part of what does not happen in schools and universities. It is a study of young people who have entered the world of Further Education (FE) intending to learn vocational skills that have been neglected and marginalised by the education sector since 1945. Their voice is fragile and ephemeral. They stay for a short period in the sector, changing institutions and courses regularly.

This study seeks to investigate the position, aspirations and agency of young people as they make their way in the world of FE, accessing training in the most marginalised part of a fragmented and complex education system. It seeks to understand how they view themselves and the training they are able to access in an FE and Skills (FE) sector that, since at least 1945, formally developed as a means of providing technical learning. However, in a society where the relationship between class and educational experiences remains inextricably close, FE was devalued by its status as manual and technical learning. It became something that most aspirational parents regarded as for “other people’s children” (Richardson, 2007, p411).

There has never been a parity of esteem between academic subjects, studied by those who are successful at school and aspire to white collar professional careers, and those who intend to go on to practical learning after school. Practical education has historically been seen as less worthwhile than progressing on to university, especially by those whose class and upbringing

makes university a real aspiration for their children. This has led to a lack of parity of esteem with universities and other academic parts of the education sector.

This research focusses on young people who are studying at Level 1, or the equivalent of GCSE at grade D in the qualifications framework (see appendix v), at training providers in Birmingham. These training providers offer programmes of study specifically aimed at young people who have not succeeded at school. Failure is defined as not achieving GCSE grade C in maths and English and other subjects. Failure at school is then used to explain why these young people are not able to find employment or access training courses at FE institutions.

It is young people who were aged sixteen to nineteen, who have few qualifications and are accessing courses offering qualifications lower than GCSE that are of interest to this project. At the age of sixteen they have been able to leave their secondary school and start attending an FE college or training provider. When they reach the age of nineteen, most learners will be considered adult learners, with increasingly less access to free education.

The data collection will focus on interviews with young people aged sixteen to nineteen who still qualify for free education. This will be complemented by a policy and literature review that looks how policy has treated NEET young people and those who leave school at age sixteen with few qualifications. The literature review will look to see how academia has attempted to hold policy to account on the issue of youth unemployment and underachievement in the age sixteen to nineteen cohort.

These young people have been labelled NEET by policy, an imprecise term which has gained negative connotations related to individualised failure, few skills

and low aspirations. This label has acquired a pejorative construction in policy and the media, defining these young people by what they do not have, and is popularly used to cast doubt on the aspiration of a group of young people. Simmons and Thompson argue that there is a narrative of NEETs “in trouble” and “as trouble” (Simmons and Thompson, 2011b, p65) which can be seen in headlines such as “Shame of 500,000 ‘NEETs’ who don’t even want to work” (Daily Mail, 2015) produced by some elements of the popular press, and a policy language that links, for example, being NEET to “persistent offending or problem drug use” (SEU, 1999, p8). These terms appeared in a government report with the forward written by the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, giving definitions such as these an official sanction. Such policy language is facilitated and enabled by the FE sector being seen as for technical learning with lower standing. These are the NEETs of policy language and media opprobrium that are the focus of this study.

The aims of this research are:

- i. To identify what aspirations young people studying on courses designed for NEETs hold for themselves, how these aspirations are formed, and how they make their way in FE in pursuit of a career.
- ii. To identify how far this aspiration matches with an ‘officially’ prescribed aspiration as defined by government Reviews and reports.
- iii. To evaluate how these learners comprehend their position within the FE and skills sector in relation to their aspiration and career choices, especially when attending programmes of study designed for learners who have not achieved GCSEs or are NEET.

This project includes a history of the sector between 1945 and 1997, a policy

review between 1997 and 2010 which incorporates a literature review, and an empirical study where young people attending Level 1 courses at training providers have been interviewed to discuss their aspirations and feelings about the FE and skills sector.

The history of the sector between 1945 and 1997 is necessary, as it shows how young people today have been affected by how FE developed. It foregrounds how policy decisions taken in the years since 1945 have meant that the sector is viewed as a place for “other people’s children” (Richardson, 2007, p411). It highlights how a practical education has historically been seen as less worthwhile than an academic education, especially by the middle classes who see university as a real aspiration for their children. There is also a discussion on how failure, and a lack of skills, has become increasingly individualised on to the young people, who have remained in childhood longer than previous generations, partially facilitated by access to courses at FE institutions.

The policy history and literature review foregrounds how policy post-1997 had sought to bring a recognition and parity of esteem for practical learning. It critiques how policy since 1997 sees an absence of academic GCSEs at grade C as making a young person a failure, consigning them to future economic uncertainty. The chapter introduces the concept of NEETs, arguing that due to the imprecise nature of the term, the academic literature has been unable to hold policy to account on the nature of these young people, their needs and aspirations. Overall, FE is under researched (Further Education Trust for Leadership, 2015) with academic research having difficulty challenging policy perceptions of NEET young people due to the imprecise nature of term (Furlong, 2006, p554). In the

absence of a substantive academic literature on the subject, official policy documents from 1997 onwards have been used to form the aims of the study, giving an insight into how they portray the sector and the young people who attend FE institutions.

The empirical study analyses the findings of ten semi-structured interviews with young people attending two different training providers that offer courses to NEET young people. Their reflections on how they made decisions about their education are analysed, with attention paid to what kind of job, career or profession they aspire to. Their reflections on how they view the sector will be evaluated to gain an understanding of how young people at the margins of the FE sector see their status, and if they see themselves as being able to overcome an absence of GCSE grades and meet their aspirations. The interviews ask the young people if they were aware of all their options after completing their GCSEs. It will assess if they had an awareness of the lack of parity over what they aspire to, the different institutions that form the FE sector and the skills they hope to learn.

Related to the aims of the project, this thesis has two themes. Firstly, 'parity' between types of institutions, such as universities, sixth forms and general FE colleges, and between knowledge based academic learning and skills based practical vocational learning. The second theme is 'aspiration', of the young people to gain qualifications and sustainable employment, and of the sector, to gain parity and become recognised as an essential part of the education sector.

Parity is linked to the lack of esteem that FE is held in compared to other parts of the education sector. Kennedy (2007) points to why FE is held in lower esteem, arguing:

“Further education suffers because of prevailing British attitudes. Not only does there remain a very carefully calibrated hierarchy of worthwhile achievement, which has clearly established routes and which privileges academic success well above any other accomplishment, but there is also an appalling ignorance amongst decision-makers and opinion-formers about what goes on in further education. It is so alien to their experience.”(Kennedy, 1997, p1)

Richardson (2007) puts this in much simpler terms, remarking that “in class-conscious England” policy makers see FE as “best suited for ‘other people’s children”” (Richardson, 2007, p411).

Aspiration is the second theme of the project. This not only includes the aspiration of the young people who enter FE but also the aspiration of the sector and of FE institutions. Whilst learners aspire to qualifications and careers, the sector has aspired to gain parity of funding and esteem with schools and universities. As the historical analysis shows, at times colleges have also aspired to be like businesses and act as corporations rather than educational institutions.

This thesis shows that despite changing employment patterns and shifts in industry, young people recognise the value of learning and qualifications, aspiring to move into further study and employment. They are not the folk devils (Cohen, 1987), portrayed by the pejorative view of the media and policy which usually connect NEETS to an ‘underclass’ (Tomlinson, 2013, p48). However, they do face barriers and new ‘problems of youth’ (Colley, Wahlberg & James, 2007, p47). Many will not have achieved sufficiently at school to enable them to move into

their choice of career. Others will have received poor advice or lack the knowledge of which career choices are available to them.

This historical analysis helps us to understand the position of these young people at this point in time. It enables us to understand the position of FE in the wider education sector and society. It is a story of how the sector has faced changes to the economic and employment situation since 1945. It is a story of how these young people became used as tools of party politics, with politicians promising to fix skills shortages or problems that have become associated with youth, including not being ready for work, youth unemployment and low GCSE grades. However, the fragile voices of the young people are missing. They are ephemeral, and their stay in the sector is only brief.

CHAPTER TWO A HISTORY OF FE-1945-1997

“FE Colleges can be thought of as historical tapestries that, in addition to being made of local or regional fabric, tell us which parts of greater stories-about curriculum, qualifications, improvement-have been in town, which ones have dispersed, and which have stayed on. Some parts of the image have been reworked many times. Other parts have been unpicked, forcibly erased.” (Colley, Wahlberg & James, 2007, p59)

This project is about young people making their way through the FE sector today. However, an important argument of this project is that the experiences of these young people, their dispositions and aspirations, cannot be adequately explained or understood without also understanding the history of the sector. How the sector developed since 1945 is instrumental in the education that these young people who are labelled as NEET are able to access.

For that reason, this chapter begins at the close of World War Two. It presents a selective narrative drawn from a mixture of primary and secondary literature which argues that a policy language which increasingly attributed responsibility to the individual for their lack of skills and qualifications, emerged from the 1950s onwards, and is still prevalent in contemporary policy. It traces how FE, and vocational learning, has remained in lower esteem, with any attempts to tackle the lack of parity with academic learning failing. It sees how young people moved from training with jobs to speculative learning so that they could compete on the employment market. It is an account of how these young people’s education is entwined with increasingly complex structures, which culminates with the semi-privatisation of the sector, where success and achievement are bought to the fore, and FE institutions are divorced from their local communities.

Before World War Two, FE provided training for a small proportion of the working class, creating a “white male labour aristocracy in craft occupations” (Colley, Wahlberg & James, 2007, p45). It developed locally and regionally out of institutions such as Mechanics Institutes of the 19th Century and Junior Technical Schools of the early 20th century (Bristow, 1968, p139). In addition, Day Continuation Schools and Evening Institutes of the early 20th century were set up by companies such as Cadbury and Roundtree to provide an education for their employees, with Cadbury gaining the cooperation of the local education authority (Weedal, Ward & Twynman, 1988, p6). This developed into a general FE college, Bournville College of FE. In the main, FE developed at a local level, responding to local industrial needs. Rather than a cohesive system, regional variance existed.

At the end of the World War Two, it was recognised that post-war rebuilding would necessitate training young people in technical craft trades (Ministry of Labour and National Service, 1945a, p1). Politically, there were changing attitudes to planning how the state was configured, including the introduction of the National Health Service (Kynaston, 2007, p44) and nationalisation of key industries (Kynaston, 2007, p139). This would go on throughout the late 1940s and 1950s. A ‘Ministry of Labour and National Service’ pamphlet published in 1945 referred to the skills that were curtailed by the war needing to be replenished. The cause of this can only be the slaughter of the long conflict. It highlighted the need for post-war planning to ensure that there was adequate access to training and that the country had skilled workers. Similarly, there were schemes set up to enable the continuation of apprenticeships (Ministry of Labour and National Service, 1945b).

Along with training young people for industry, FE would aspire to the higher purpose of developing young people into citizens. The Education Act of 1944 required Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to provide 'adequate facilities' for young people who had left school. This was to include leisure and cultural activities. It required LEAs to submit schemes for large 'County Colleges', and introduced the idea of compulsory attendance at FE colleges for young people up to 18 (Cantor & Roberts, 1969, p1).

Subsequent policy documents published by the Ministry of Education (1945) aimed to bring clarity to FE. This aimed for the sector to gain in esteem through the provision of high quality colleges and technical education throughout the country. Although enacted at a local level, these documents saw the expansion of FE being planned at a national level to meet national needs.

Published in 1945 by the Ministry of Education, "Youth's Opportunity: Further Education in County Colleges" (Ministry of Education, 1945) outlined a detailed scheme where County Colleges would be available in each region with central and branch colleges in more densely populated areas (Ministry of Education, 1945, p17). Giving a comprehensive and compulsory part-time education to those until 18, they would have been complemented by other technical and area colleges providing adult and evening classes. This elaborated on plans set out in Education Act of 1944, noting that FE could:

"Provide an opportunity for the young people of this country to make better use of their powers and to give better service to humanity; to learn, in short, the real relationship between rights and obligations and between work and happiness." (Ministry of Education, 1945, p48)

This is quoted directly to highlight the language used, reflecting the idea that FE could improve society by providing trained and happy workers who participated in a democratic society. The utopian nature of the Ministry of Education pamphlets that followed the Education Act of 1944 is underlined in the concluding paragraph to “Youth’s Opportunity: Further Education in County Colleges”:

“This pamphlet about the future has been written under the shadow of events which lie “between the desire and the fulfilment”. Only when they are in the past will it be possible to translate the suggestions made here into action.” (Ministry of Education, 1945, p48)

“Youth’s Opportunity: Further Education in County Colleges” was followed by a detailed and technical Ministry of Education Pamphlet, “Further Education: The scope and contents of its opportunities under the education act 1944” (Ministry of Education, 1947). This outlined plans for FE provision including details on accommodation, qualifications, day and evening classes, governing bodies and extra-curricular activities. These were utopian documents, setting out ideals for FE without considering practical matters of costs and resources. They didn’t take into account the cost of post-war reconstruction and the reconfiguration of the state that was happening under the 1945 Labour government (Bristow, 1967, p139). Although local authorities had a statutory duty to submit schemes for FE, the plans set out were not completed, mainly due to the cost of reconstruction and other priorities including schools. As Cantor and Roberts (1969) argue:

“In the absence of any form of major regional or national planning, and under the pressure of financial stringency, a patchwork-quilt of further education establishments developed in the decade after the end of the war.” (Cantor & Roberts, 1969, p3)

The vision for FE set out by the Ministry of Education was never made real. County Colleges, although fixed by legislation, failed to be enacted in their entirety.

By 1960, eminent educationist and psychologist Ethel Venables (1967) reported that for one college the plans were largely forgotten except for a concert hall built to meet the cultural requirements of a County College. Although employment day release courses and voluntary attendance grew in the post-war years (Bristow, 1967, p139), compulsory attendance until 18 was not enacted, possibly due to the cost that comes with educating young people and the need for man-power in the workforce.

Despite the expansion of the FE sector during the 1940s and 1950s (Cantor & Roberts, 1969, p2), there remained frequent criticisms that it was failing to provide young people with the skills needed to keep pace with technological change and the need for national economic development. This period also saw the risk of failure begin to be moved on to young people rather than the blame being placed on the economic structures that can affect employment and training.

This narrative first emerges in Technical Education (Ministry of Education, 1956), published in 1956, which, common with many reports on technical education, highlighted a mismatch between the skills needed by industry and those possessed by young people (Cantor & Roberts, 1969, p6). There was an assumption that FE was not providing young people with the skills needed to keep the UK as a leading industrial nation during a period of technological change. Industry now expected government involvement in the training of its workforce. Conversely, there was a growing feeling in government that industry could not be relied on for training (Tiratsoo & Tomlinson, 1998, p132). Whilst FE has been seen as a solution to the 'problems of youth', such as unemployment, crime and an increase in leisure time (Colley, Wahlberg & James, 2007, p47), it has also been

blamed for skills shortages when the economy is not working efficiently. Yet government policy continually returns to FE as a means of giving young people the skills and aspirations they are lacking. It can be simultaneously seen as a reason why and the solution to young people lacking skills.

This narrative of young people with few skills and pejorative characteristics continued towards the end of the 1950s. Published in 1959, “15 to 18: A report to the Central Advisory Council for Education (England)” (Crowther, 1959), or the ‘Crowther report’ (Crowther), reaffirmed the need for a compulsory part-time education for all young people (Cantor & Roberts, 1969, p259). A moral dimension was introduced in the report, concerned with the increase in spare time and a lack of family discipline (Colley, Wahlberg & James, 2007, p47). The report identified problematic failure and drop-out rates from colleges that were allegedly contributing to the problems that young people were facing. Crowther suggested an increase in the number of young people going on to FE after leaving school and an increase in general studies (Cantor & Roberts, I.F. 1969, p71) as a solution. This ‘alternative road’ sought to give parity to FE by making it an equal alternative to academic routes via a humane education centred on practical application (Peters, 1967, p111).

For all of the intentions of post-war planning, by the end of the 1950s a complex and incoherent patchwork of institutions existed at local and national level. In 1959 Crowther had difficulty establishing institutional types and numbers with any degree of accuracy (Richardson, 2007, p389). That a coherent sector with a parity of esteem equal to academic learning did not emerge in the 1940s

has meant that vocational education and FE has lacked parity with other parts of the education sector.

The complexity of FE would continue into the next decade. When education lecturer A.J. Peters came to describe all of the institutions that could be described as belonging to the FE sector in 1967 it took 18 pages (Peters, 1967, p58-76). However, what was outlined in 1945 was complex and, whether implemented or not, would have created a complex system of national, regional, area and local colleges as opposed to one single type of post-compulsory institution aimed at providing technical education. This meant varied, repeated and inconsistent provision developed at a regional level (FE Histories Timeline) that did not meet national needs.

Peters (1967) saw this as a lost opportunity (Peters, 1967, p277). As provision developed during the post-war years there were improvements including recognised qualifications, new buildings and a trebling in the number of students attending FE Institutions up to 1964 (Peters, 1967, p276). There was also an increase in funding and teacher numbers. It has been suggested that this made the 1950s and 1960s some form of 'halcyon age' (FE Histories Timeline). However, there were also shortages in skilled workers due to poorly realised day release from companies. Day attendance for under-eighteens was not made compulsory and the examinations system was 'chaotic' (Peters, 1967, p277). Richardson (2007) corroborates this, arguing that the 1950s and 60s was an era of poor facilities, high failure and high non-completion rates. Richardson argues that:

"The 1950s and 1960s was not a golden period for young people making their way into adulthood via FE" (Richardson, 2007, p394).

These young people that Richardson refers to are “other people’s children” (Richardson, 2007, p411) who attended technical education in FE colleges. This differed for students following an academic pathway at this time. Sixth form provision, either connected to a school or in a sixth form college, had its origins in public and grammar school education. Robinson and Burke (1996) argue that the sixth form colleges emerging in 1960s had a “history which was imbued with an elitism which was both academic and social” (Robinson & Burke, 1996, p6). Sixth forms had become a place where the children of aspirational and professional parents attended. They were designed to be the intermediary between school and university and were “distinctive due to the academic goals and relative social advantage of its intake” (Richardson, 2007, p390). This is the structure that young people making their way through the FE sector see today. The privileged routes are preserved for those with academic success and social advantages, whilst the technical learning that takes place in FE colleges has a lower cachet.

The post-war consensus began to break down during the 1970s, which saw the oil crisis of 1973, and a stagnant British economy suffering from high unemployment and industrial unrest (Heyck, 2002, p285-286). As there were fewer jobs with training for young people, there was a move from day release provision to ‘pre-vocational’ provision. If the 1960s was a period of “training for jobs”, involving apprenticeships and day release from employers, then the 1970s began the era of “training without jobs” (Armitage, Bryant, Dunhill, Hayes, Hudson, Kent, Lawes, Renwick, 2003, p27, p269). The drivers for this were linked to the wider economy. Training with jobs can only occur if there are jobs available.

This was the start of the system of students beginning vocational courses speculating they would get a job when they had gained the skills and qualifications needed, entering the job market as a skilled 'product'. An inference can be made from the high unemployment of the era that speculative FE courses could also mean, and to some extents still does, 'training for jobs that do not exist'.

As the need for FE places continued to expand, with more and more young people moving into FE, more institutions were needed to cater for their education. Richardson (2007) argues that youth unemployment and access to comprehensive education doubled the amount of young people attending FE institutions from four per cent of the cohort in 1968 to eight per cent of the cohort in 1979 (Richardson, 2007, p390). This would require planning for new institutions to meet this need.

To cater for this increase in young people wanting to progress into technical education, some local authorities established tertiary colleges, the first of which was opened in 1970. These would combine FE and sixth form provision in a single institution where students could study vocational and academic qualifications (Richardson, 2007, p390). Tertiary colleges would allow local authorities to maintain low spending on education and increase sixth form places for A-levels by utilising the local technical college (Preedy, 1998, p5). They would facilitate comprehensive ideals in FE, enabling more equality of opportunity through wider access to courses (Preedy, 1998, p4). Tertiary colleges are close to an ideal of a comprehensive education for the FE sector, where academic and technical learning would be undertaken in the same colleges. There were advantages to this system, including the pooling of resources (Simmons, 2009, p164), but there was opposition from parents and teachers keen to preserve the academic route that a

sixth form could offer a certain section of young people. There was a fear that vocational provision would adversely affect the standards of academic provision previously on offer in sixth form colleges and school sixth forms (Simmons, 2009, p164). This class based argument offers an insight into the lack of parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications. This view has fed into policy, keen to keep an academic and vocational divide, and still affects the education of young people who are studying at FE institutions today. This has contributed to a complex sector, where certain institutions offering vocational education can be obscured, such as the training providers attended by NEET young people who may not have achieved GCSEs. This has led to a lack of parity for institutions, and contributed to a shift that occurred in 1970s where young people were expected to enter the job market fully trained for their career. This idea remains today, where young people can be blocked from accessing their aspirations due to their own failure to achieve certain qualifications needed to gain access to higher level courses or certain careers.

The 1970s were a time of poor economic performance (Heyck, 2002, p285-286) and high youth unemployment (Simmons, 2009, p163). In 1976 the Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan began his 'great debate' on education, pointing to young people leaving school without the skills needed for industry and the economy to be a success. Tomlinson (2005, p3) argues that this was the end of an optimistic period. Until 1979, education policy was based upon the government regulating and resourcing education for societal and economic good. Callaghan's 'great debate' on education signalled the end of this and a move from the

structures of society to individual responsibility, later brought to the fore by Thatcherism.

Bailey and Ainley (1997, p5) saw this as an attack on teachers, schools and young people. This placed the risk of unemployment on the young person rather than the economy. This foreshadows many of the debates around FE that were to come, especially in the Kennedy (1997) and Wolf (2010) reports, which saw a lack of skills and poor quality vocational education as reasons for economic failure and social exclusion. Bailey and Ainley (1997, p5) also see this as the point where the needs of industry overtook the needs of the individual in FE.

However FE had always served the needs of industry. In reality, what it marked was the shift to speculative training, and the emphasis on a young person to enter industry qualified and prepared, rather than industry having a role in the preparation of a young person for work. If a young person was not ready for work, or had picked the wrong trade to learn, then that job would go to somebody else. To gain skilled employment, they were expected to stay in education longer, beginning an extension of childhood. If enough young people had not undertaken the required training before finding employment then the work would move elsewhere to a place where the skills were in supply. The state would provide training but this would no longer lead directly to a job.

For young people to gain sustainable employment they had to stay in education for longer to gain the skills and qualifications needed or become, in effect, NEET. This is the same challenge that the young people interviewed for this project face; an individualised risk of failure, and an expectation that they will go and gain new skills to enable them to progress into employment, with the only

alternative being NEET.

The 1980s brought in a new Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher. This began an aggressive reconfiguring of state involvement in society including education, health and social services (Tomlinson, 2005, p3). This was the beginning of a new era, with the state planning assumptions that had dominated since 1945 being ended by Thatcherism and a desire to accelerate the changes brought about by the oil crisis. With growing youth unemployment, there was a need for more expansion in the FE sector.

The new Conservative government sought to reform the links between school and FE to make it more responsive to the needs of the economy and any future demand for training. Simmons (2009, p165) argues that at the end of the 1970s there was still no national policy of post-sixteen education, meaning there was no national planning being undertaken. Parfit (2014) argues that FE developed a poor reputation during the 1980s and onwards due to continual policy shifts that divorced it from the community, along with a decline in local government activity (Parfit, 2014, p29). Parfit links this, as Kennedy (1997) did in her 1997 policy report on FE, to policy makers in government not understanding FE as it was outside of their experience. However, the 1980s did see a move towards a coherent national planning strategy over the assumption that planning should take place locally within the LEA.

During the 1980s, a major policy response to youth unemployment was the Youth Opportunity (YOP) and Youth Training Schemes (YTS) that operated throughout the decade. Richardson (2007) argues that these programmes were the largest state intervention into the youth labour market made during peace-time,

with YOP engaging 9% of the age sixteen to eighteen cohort in 1982/83 and YTS engaging 16% of the cohort in 1988/89 (Richardson, 2007, p404). Simmons and Thompson (2011b) note that although FE colleges were involved in these schemes, they saw an increase in the use of private training providers, such as those used in this study, to deliver training paid for by the state on a contract basis (Simmons & Thompson, 2011b, p42).

The 1980s also saw shift in how young people were perceived by policy makers. Young people were increasingly seen as being dependant on their parents. Furlong and Cartmel (2007, p57) argue that this was formalised during the 1980s to beyond eighteen, far past where young people would have previously been considered adults. Higher unemployment during early 1980s contributed to a growth in young people attending FE colleges (McVicar & Rice, 2001, p61). This meant that they were entering the adult world of work later. During the 1980s and 1990s, staying in education or training became the norm for school leavers (Simmons & Thompson, 2011b, p5).

Thatcher's new Conservative government commissioned Neil Macfarlane, a minister with a responsibility for science, to review local planning for FE. This was to assess future needs, how schools worked with FE colleges, and how FE could be made more cost effective. "Education for 16-19 year olds: a review undertaken for the government and the local authority associations" (Macfarlane, 1980), or 'the Macfarlane report' (Macfarlane), recommended that a system modelled on tertiary colleges be created. This would combine all post-compulsory forms of education including school sixth forms and sixth form colleges. These would have served young people of all abilities and needs, being the only progression point between

school and university (Simmons, 2013, p93) and would have effectively been a planned national comprehensive system for post-compulsory education, without competition between institutions and duplication of provision.

Macfarlane was largely ignored, having the same fate as County Colleges and Crowther. On publication, Macfarlane only recommended that LEAs consider tertiary colleges in the context of their own localities, meaning that there still was no effective national planning for FE. The then Conservative party ideology was counter to comprehensive education (Simmons, 2009, p165). This contributed to the diluting of the original report. Simmons (2013) argues that the success of sixth forms also played a part in the report not recommending tertiary colleges as a national response to FE and post-sixteen education (Simmons, 2013, p97). Sixth forms still retained connections with academic and social elites, and divided young people by ability (Robinson & Burke, 1996 p6). They support the idea that academic and technical education should be separate. This separation, enshrined in Education Act of 1944, between 'elite' academic and vocational education, is still maintained in Birmingham, through grammar schools and the eleven plus examination (Grammar Schools in Birmingham, 2016).

The popularity of sixth forms with aspirational parents has also been identified as a cause for changes to the Macfarlane report (Simmons, 2009, p164). This is manifested, firstly, in a middle class keen to maintain their position in society and, secondly, aspirational parents keen for their children to become part of an academic and social elite. McCulloch (2006) argues that anxiety in the middle classes about social decline and the loss of social position is a driver maintaining separation in education as "a place of refuge for those whose dread"

comprehensive education (McCulloch, 2006, p704). McCulloch argues that a protection of academic routes to university was enshrined in education reforms of 1940s, a spirit of which still exists today.

McCulloch (2006) identifies a growing middle class keen for their children to gain social advantage through education. Citing Tomlinson (2005) McCulloch argues that the middle classes “moved towards excluding the disadvantaged and troublesome from interfering in their children’s education” (McCulloch, 2006, p698); a type of ‘gentrification’ (Wiener, 2004, p12) where working class parents who have experienced social mobility aspire for their children to maintain their position through education. As Ball, Macrae and Maguire argue:

“These families see GCSEs, A-levels and university as absolutely crucial building blocks for a worthwhile future.” (Ball, Macrae & Maguire, 1999, p220)

This leads to a fall in esteem for working class craft careers for those seeking social mobility or to protect their position in society for future generations.

Such was the strength of opposition to Macfarlane in government, the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher intervened (Ainley & Bailey, 1997 p6, Simmons, 2013, p97). This protected sixth forms, which were mainly attended by the aspirational middle classes, preserving their academic and social superiority. FE institutions would remain the vocational sibling to the academic sixth form. However, neither of the major parties made reference to tertiary colleges in their manifestos for the 1983 General Election (Preedy, 1998, p13). The status of FE as less important than schools and universities, unable to command political attention or public support, was confirmed.

The few educationalists who research vocational education have taken

notice of this moment in the history of FE, agreeing that this was another missed opportunity to provide equality of opportunity to young people whatever their background or class. Simmons argues:

“The potential to extend opportunities normally reserved for the privileged would have been created through a broad, comprehensive system of tertiary colleges.” (Simmons, 2009, p167)

In breaking the established complex system, a sector based upon class divisions and an imbalance of esteem between academic and vocational learning could have been opened up to a meritocracy. Students would have attended one institution regardless of class.

Towards the end of the 1980s, reforms across all sectors of society had gained pace, including the privatisation of national industries. There was now a drive to move FE out of local authority control, and undertake some form of national planning. This would manifest itself firstly in the Education Reform Act of 1988 and reach its apotheosis in the quasi-privatisation of the sector through the Higher and Further Education Act (1992).

Until the Education Reform Act (1988), FE was largely beyond regulation (Reid, 1990, p123). Hodgson, Bailey and Lucas (2015, p12) cite reports highlighting the financial and teaching inefficiencies of the sector and an accusation that LEAs were failing to run colleges in the interest of the economy. FE colleges were once more being blamed for the ills of the economy and not responding with sufficient rigour to deal with the threat to the economy caused by working class children lacking skills and abilities.

The Education Reform Act (1988) gave principals and governing bodies greater responsibility for the efficiency and effectiveness of colleges (Weedal, Ward & Twynman, 1988, p83). The act required college governing bodies to ensure that colleges would focus on contributing skills to the local and national economy (Reeves, 1995, p25). If LEAs were not responsive to local economic needs then that responsibility would now be conferred on to the institutions. This can be seen as a forerunner to the Higher and Further Education Act (1992), or incorporation, when colleges became independent from LEA control.

The Higher and Further Education Act (1992) was implemented on the 1st April 1993. It was the first wholesale remodelling that FE had undergone since the end of the World War Two (Ainley & Bailey, 1997, p14). Colleges were freed from LEA control and placed under the control of a 'corporation' who were enabled to act like a business. The official discourse at the time promised FE the dynamism of business free from local government bureaucracy and supposed inefficiencies of the public sector, even if there was scant evidence that LEA control was causing FE colleges to be run inefficiently (Simmons, 2008, p362). This allowed them to offer goods and services, borrow money to invest and sell assets that were once property and responsibility of local government. They became, in effect, organisations in their own right, taking responsibility for management that would have primarily lain with the LEA (Reeves, 1995, p33). This quasi-privatisation allowed principals to become styled as chief executives and colleges to act as commercial organisations.

Colleges began to be centrally funded through the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), which Fletcher, Gravatt and Sherlock (2015) argue:

“Demonstrated the capacity of a national body to design and impose a quasi-market that incentivised growth in student numbers and efficiency.” (Fletcher, Gravatt & Sherlock, 2015, p159)

College principal Frank Reeves (1995) argued that this made each college’s goals remarkably similar. He argued:

“Local idiosyncrasies, including any alternative aims of further education are swept away. There is a new uniformity, not only between colleges, but within them too.” (Reeves, 1995, p33)

Courses were funded based on criteria and targets set at a national level, further divorcing colleges from their local community (Reeves, 1995, p99).

Simmons (2010), along with Ainley and Bailey (1997), argue that incorporation was part of an ideology that stated that the market was a superior way to run public services over democratically elected local authorities. This came to the fore during the Thatcher and Major Conservative governments between 1979 and 1997, with privatisations occurring across the public sector and state industries.

As Hodgeson, Bailey and Lucas (2015, p12) note, many colleges principals initially saw incorporation favourably, enjoying their independence from the LEA without many changing to funding. However, the FEFC soon commissioned reports that noted poor financial management, poor retention and poor achievement in FE colleges. This led to the linking of funding to the number of students who achieve qualifications. It also led to cuts in funding for the sake of efficiencies. In part, this was designed to create parity of funding between colleges where there was variance in funding (Hodgeson, Bailey & Lucas, 2015, p14, Ainley & Bailey, 1997, p17), but also facilitated a cut in central funding to every college.

Working in a competitive market did bring about some improvements in what support and extra-curricular activities colleges could offer to students (Hodgeson, Bailey & Lucas, 2015, p14). However, the customer is always the one who pays for the service. They also expect quality and value for money. In the case of FE colleges, this was the FEFC who were demanding more achievement of qualifications from more young people for less money via the efficiency of the market. This in turn led to mergers and take-overs as colleges sought to pool resources and alleviate the financial pressures caused by the changes in funding (Ainley & Bailey, 1997, p114, Fletcher, Gravatt & Sherlock, 2015, p159).

College principles initially hoped that incorporation would raise the status of the sector and give stability, along with freedom from local government bureaucracy and the power to grow (Hodgeson, Bailey & Lucas, 2015, p12). However, incorporation brought about volatility and a complicated and bureaucratic approach to data and funding. By 1997, efficiency savings had put many colleges into financial difficulties whilst other colleges were increasing their funding allocations by manipulating the system. Colleges had seen growth up to this point. However, in 1997 additional government funding was denied (Hodgeson, Bailey & Lucas, 2015, p15).

Writing in 1997, at the end of 18 years of Conservative rule, Ainley and Bailey summarise the situation as unstable:

“In the absence of more coherent arrangements, mergers have become a form of planning by default as well as the ultimate outcome of competition between colleges.” (Ainley & Bailey, 1997, p113)

However, what cannot be read from this statement is how much this affected the learners, nor their knowledge of the situation. Nor is it clear how those with few

qualifications felt about their time in FE. Richardson (2007), who attempts to locate the experience of young people in FE since 1945, notes that most research on student experience between the 1940s and 1980s was about part-time students and employment; “much sketchier is the student experience of full-time FE for non-advanced students during this period” (Richardson, 2007, p395).

This chapter has seen the emergence of a policy language which viewed the sector as providing vocational education that was held in lower esteem to academic learning. This remains true of NEETs, where a shorthand policy term has pejoratively categorised a group of people as lacking in skills, confidence and aspiration. Their voices are especially fragile as they can move between training providers and colleges, attending a number of institutions before entering the adult world of work and possible unemployment. The institutions they attend are ephemeral and missing from recorded histories. These include private training providers which offer Level 1 courses to young people who are NEET.

Throughout this narrative, the paucity of voices of young people who studied for vocational qualifications at FE colleges has been revealed. Their voices are fragile and ephemeral. This study hopes to slightly redress this as it tries to identify a loose cohort of students, to record key elements in their biographies and to speak with them about their experiences. The next chapter focusses on the years 1997-2010, a period where the term NEET, and its pejorative connotations, would become part of official policy discourse. It would be an imprecise term that would allow a section of young people to be viewed negatively as having poor skills and low aspirations.

CHAPTER THREE: FE: A POLICY HISTORY 1997-2015 INCORPORATING

A LITERATURE REVIEW

“Further education is a land of contradictions.”
(Hughes, Taylor & Tight, 1996, p7)

The previous chapter described how FE developed along local lines, being seen as a place where working class young people went to learn skills away from privileged academic routes favoured by the middle classes. It argued that the sector was partially seen as at fault for a failing economy, starting with the white paper of 1956, and continuing through the decades until Callaghan’s ‘great debate’ of 1976 made it explicit that young people had a responsibility to gain the skills needed for the economy to function correctly (Ainley & Bailey, 1997, p5). During these years there was a shift from training for or with jobs to training without jobs, and the rise of speculative FE courses where young people learned new skills in the hope of getting a job at the end of their course. The learners who undertook speculative training courses were increasingly blamed for not having the skills needed by the economy, despite many of them continuing in education at FE institutions. Planning was undertaken at a local level, until incorporation in 1992 effectively placed the sector into the market place.

This chapter turns to policy literature from between the years 1997-2010 to analyse how these changes were understood and what policy recommendations were made in response. It does this for two reasons. Firstly, FE is widely regarded as under researched (Further Education Trust for Leadership, 2015, Hughes, Taylor & Tight, 1996, p7, Gleeson, Davies & Wheeler, 2005, p445). Research has tended to focus on local institutions without contextualisation, or on FE at a

national level using policy that does not fully recognise the diversity of the sector (Hughes, Taylor & Tight, 1996, p7). For example, Biesta & James (2007), on reporting on the 'Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education Project' in 2007, remarked that it had been the biggest research project regarding FE up to that point, and that FE was "chronically under-researched" in comparison to other parts of the education sector (Biesta & James, 2007, p7). The RoutledgeFalmer reader in the History of Education (McCulloch, 2005) includes a chapter on education and the economy, and the relationship between qualifications and work, but no direct analysis of FE. However, it does include an analysis of the history of higher education, foregrounding the lack of parity between the sectors even in academia. A search on the 'Education Resources Information Center' for 'Education UK' on 10th July 2016 yielded 2622 articles marked as 'higher education' and 1243 articles marked as 'post-secondary'.

Although neglected by academic literature, Biesta and James (2007) note that since the late 1990s FE has become more visible in government policy. Therefore policy documents will be used as documentary evidence for this project. Important exceptions to this general picture of academic neglect of FE are the growing number of researchers attempting to hold policy to account on NEETs. This includes Furlong (2006), Yates and Payne (2006), Atkins (2010) Maguire (2013) and Simmons and Thompson (2011b). In particular, Atkins (2010) offers a critique on how policy sees aspiration as high or low binary positions, while Simmons and Thompson (2011b) argue that young people do hold aspiration of some form.

Furlong (2006) has argued that what academic literature there is on NEETs

has failed to hold policy to account (Furlong, 2006, p554). Maguire (2013) notes that the increase in policy and academic attention paid to NEET young people is due to the effect of the economic downturn on the youth labour market and the relationship between NEETs and social problems such as civil unrest. Maguire also argues that while research has identified shared characteristics of the NEET cohort, it has yet to identify interventions that will effectively reduce youth unemployment (Maguire, 2013, p65). However, these studies begin to critically analyse the policy of this period and explore the use of the term NEET to describe young people.

Secondly, this documentary analysis demonstrates how policy constructed these young people, their aspirations, success and failure. These documents have been selected due to their prominence and impact on the sector and the education of young people who study at FE institutions. This chapter begins with the Kennedy report in 1997, which sought to bring parity to vocational and academic learning and brought increased government funding to the sector. This was followed in 1999 by the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) report on NEET young people, which defined the term NEET. In 2002, Success for All increased funding to the sector and began new reforms to vocational education, which culminated in the Tomlinson report in 2004, a failed attempt to unify vocational and academic learning into one qualification. Finally, the Wolf report of 2010 will be considered as the first major enquiry into vocational learning and FE of the Coalition government, and how it characterised much of the learning undertaken by low attaining young people to be of little value.

These policy documents began to associate failure with social exclusion

and social disadvantage. Kennedy argued that there was a link between failure at age sixteen and future social disadvantage (Kennedy, 1997, p22), whilst the SEU argued that those who didn't achieve were more likely to come from a disadvantaged background (SEU, 1999, p8). Whichever way causation is applied, social exclusion and disadvantage is part of the biography of NEET young people.

Documentary evidence from official sources is useful as it can be considered authentic and credible due to the official nature of the source (Scott, 1990, p19). These documents reflect the direction that was being pursued by the government for FE and vocational education. Scott proposes four criteria for documentary evidence: 'authenticity', 'credibility', 'representativeness' and 'meaning'. Bryman (2014) argues that it is the latter two criteria that need greater consideration. What these documents represent is a particular political viewpoint therefore they carry with them bias. However "such documents can be interesting precisely because of the biases they reveal" (Bryman, 2014, p550). These policy documents reveal a political bias toward these young people, whose fragile and ephemeral voices are overwhelmed by the strong and powerful voices of policy. They represent an official view of these young people. However, this project hopes to give a different representation of these young people which, when using a critical realist framework, captures their fragile voices, and shows how their lives have been affected by how the sector developed from 1945 and, in particular, policy since 1997.

This chapter begins at the end of eighteen years of Conservative rule with an FE sector that was seen to be in "a state of disarray" (Simmons, 2013, p87) due to funding freezes and cuts. The quasi-privatisation of FE had allowed for a

reduced focus on economic and social inequality, with a focus on results rather than local social and industrial conditions. This had facilitated the social exclusion of certain groups from FE. This became a focus of New Labour, who were aiming to be elected in 1997. They promised to make education, training and employment a cornerstone of policies that incorporated social justice and private enterprise (Tomlinson, 2005, p7).

Before he was elected as Prime Minister, Tony Blair (1996) argued in a speech given to the Labour Party conference that the previous Conservative government under John Major had been the most “incompetent managers of the British economy in this country’s history” (Blair, 1996).

Explicitly linking skills and a failing economy, Blair argued that:

“There is no future for Britain as a low-wage, low-skill, low-technology economy.” (Blair, 1996)

This argument then links skills, achievement and aspiration:

“Just think of it-Britain, the skills superpower of the world. Why not? Why can’t we do it? Achievement, aspiration fulfilled for all our people.” (Blair, 1996)

This speech was made prior to the 1997 election that Tony Blair went on to win, joining the ranks of political references from both Labour and Conservative governments linking a skills deficit to a failing economy. However, just as in 1945, the language used was positive and spoke of ‘aspiration’ rather than failure. Here aspiration is referred to as latent, ready to be unlocked. In move away from previous political speeches on skills and the economy, such as Callaghan (1976), the demand in the economy for low skill, low wage jobs is cited as a one of the causes of the poor economic condition of the country. This recognised that people

were doing jobs that their ability exceeded for low wages and that by increasing the skills base of the country the economy would improve. This is similar to previous arguments, but recalibrates the risk of not having skills partially back on the state.

On coming to power in 1997, New Labour promised social-democratic responses to the reconfiguration of the state that occurred during the eighteen years of Conservative rule. They introduced 'third way' policies that attempted to provide social justice whilst maintaining the status quo with regards to privatised public services (Tomlinson, 2005, p11-12). They introduced redistributive policies to counter social exclusion, including 'Sure-Start' for young parents and a 'New Deal' to get low skilled young people into work (Tomlinson, 2001, p270). For the FE sector, New Labour introduced the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), where young people from low income families would be paid to continue studying. EMA was as equally practical as it was symbolic. Practically, it raised participation rates of sixteen year olds by four percent and seventeen year olds by seven percent (Perry & Davies, 2015, p51). Symbolically, EMA identified the FE sector as a means for social mobility. It encouraged young people to stay in education for longer, especially as students in FE were more likely to be from lower social economic and socially excluded backgrounds, with more than half experiencing financial hardship (Perry & Davies, 2015, p51). The benefits of attending an FE institution were increasingly being understood not only in terms of gaining instrumental skills but also for the positive effects on young people's aspiration. FE was no longer just about gaining employment through skills or a means of tackling youth unemployment. It was now being identified as a means of social

enhancement similar to attending a sixth form or completing A-levels. This played on the feelings and emotions of aspirational parents and young people. The term NEET was also applied to young people during this time. However, this became an increasingly pejorative term carrying with it the ascription of a lack of skills, motivation and aspiration.

The first attempt at reforming the FE sector by the New Labour government was led by Helena Kennedy QC, a human rights lawyer. It had been recognised that 'educationally disadvantaged' and 'socially excluded' people were not accessing FE (Department for Education and Employment, 1998, p5), and that colleges were more likely to recruit students who would succeed, rather than from marginalised backgrounds. Kennedy argued that this included:

“Disaffected young people, more women, more people from ethnic minority groups”. (Kennedy, 1997, p3)

And:

“Those for whom learning is a daunting experience, is hard work and financially unrewarding.” (Kennedy, 1997, p3)

The Learning Works Committee was set up by the Further Education Funding Council to identify groups who did not participate in FE and investigate how participation in the sector could be increased and the quality of learning be improved. It aimed to recommend strategies to improve participation, including funding increases and improvements in teaching and learning (Kennedy, 1997, p111). Although the committee was set up by the previous Conservative government, New Labour endorsed the findings of the report (Department for Education and Employment, 1998, p5).

“Learning works: widening participation” (Kennedy, 2007), also known as the 'Kennedy Report' (Kennedy), argued that there was a class bias, with far more

funding going to universities and sixth forms that catered for the middle classes, rather than the working classes who attended FE Colleges in far greater numbers (Kennedy, 2007, p9).

On more practical matters, it promised re-training for people whose skills were no longer needed due to technological change, and an entitlement for training for all adults up to Level 3. This meant that many young people could now aspire to A-level equivalent qualifications and university, meaning that FE was increasingly being understood in terms of social mobility and white collar professional careers.

Kennedy was explicitly referring to the lack of parity between vocational and academic qualifications, where academic qualifications were seen as superior to vocational qualifications. This was caused by “prevailing British attitudes” and an “appalling ignorance amongst decision makers and opinion-formers about what goes on in further education.” (Kennedy, 1997, p1).

Although critical of the idea of ‘worthwhile achievement’ (Kennedy, 1997, p1), which Kennedy argued was seen as success with academic qualifications, the report later argued that a grade C or above at GCSE is a worthwhile achievement, and a grade D or below as being seen as worth less (Kennedy, 1997, p28). The report also linked not achieving a grade C at GCSE to future social disadvantage. Kennedy argued:

“There are clear links between previous educational achievement and economic and social disadvantage. The link between staying on in education, GCSE results and economic and social disadvantage at 16 is well established.” (Kennedy, 1997, p22)

This linked GCSE results to the kind of job that young people would be able to get,

and the level prosperity that they would be able to attain over the course of their lives. Failing your GCSEs, or achieving lower than a grade C, could make you a failure for life. It argued that there was a link between future social disadvantage and not achieving exams at age sixteen.

FE has always tended to work with a larger cohort of socially disadvantaged groups (Perry & Davies, 2015, p50), and those with lower achievement (Thompson, 2009, p34). Kennedy argued that the role of FE was to find a solution to underachieving young people. FE was seen as a place to send young people who had failed; a place to rescue the socially excluded from economic and social disadvantage:

“Further education has the capacity to engage and re-engage them, through a wide choice of basic skills, academic, vocational and pre-vocational routes in formal, informal and workplace settings.” (Kennedy, 1997, p28)

By using terms such as ‘basic-skills’, ‘pre-vocational’ and ‘informal’ (Kennedy, 1997, p28) to describe the ‘choices’ available to them, young people were being offered remedial solutions at a lower level than they were expected to achieve at school. These young people were not yet allowed to aspire to GCSEs at grade C, which would supposedly enable them to prosper. First they had to undertake speculative learning to gain the basic skills required to join a vocational course at an FE institution or be able to find a job, perhaps never being able to achieve those valuable GCSE grades. The aspiration for these young people was to ‘re-engage’. From this an officially prescribed view of aspiration begins to emerge. However, how the young people viewed the “formal, informal and workplace settings” (Kennedy, 1997, p28) they were meant to aspire to was not heard.

Whilst government responses to Kennedy were largely positive it ultimately failed to narrow the gap between the underprivileged and privileged and their access to FE and higher education (Groves, 2015, p27). Throughout the early years of the New Labour government, youth unemployment continued to be a problem that Kennedy did not ultimately find a solution for. Defining this as a problem of social exclusion, in 1999 the government set up the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) to report on youth unemployment and dis-engagement.

The SEU Report, "Bridging the Gap: New opportunities for 16-18 year olds Not in Employment, Education or Training" (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999), assessed how many aged sixteen to eighteen year olds were not in education, training or work. It looked at the reasons why, and gave proposals to help these young people into work or education. Being NEET was now as much a matter of social exclusion as it was individualised blame. Young people were being socially excluded from certain educational pathways and careers due to class and achievement. This could be remedied by new ways of delivering education focussed on individual learner support and socially redistributive methods such as EMA (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999, p6).

However, the SEU's conclusions were familiar. It argued that those who did best academically at school followed the privileged route of A-levels and university. Some of these students went on to do vocational qualifications that allowed them to enter the labour market or do apprenticeships. Young people from disadvantaged background were least likely to have these paths open to them. Students who did not succeed in academic study, and did not achieve the standard of 5 GCSEs at grade C, were disproportionately from disadvantaged

backgrounds and were least likely to have “achieved success in school needed to enter these routes” (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999, p8). These students were locked out of routes to either university or vocational training.

Low GCSE attainment was also a common feature for these young people (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999, p29) who, even when they did attend an FE college or a training provider, had unsatisfactory experiences. The report made this explicit when it concluded that, for NEET young people, FE was less likely to lead to sustainable employment. The SEU argued that the courses offered to NEETs did not enable them to develop skills for work. As the SEU (1999) argued, these courses did:

“little to enhance skills, ether specific vocational skills or basic literacy and numeracy and personal and social skills which employers require for any job with satisfaction and prospects.”
(Social Exclusion Unit, 1999, p8)

According to the SEU, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds were not doing well at school and were subsequently being failed by FE colleges and training providers, who were offering courses which provided them with few skills that employers valued. This included personal and social skills, with young people supposedly not knowing how to act in the workplace.

The SEU defined NEETs by deficit. They were educationally disadvantaged, lacking qualifications that would enable them to access high quality education after they left school. They lacked the maths, English, and personal and social skills that employers wanted their employees to have. However, the report did not define what these personal and social skills were. The young people also had ‘low aspirations’ (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999, p48). The

report cited structural reasons for this, including low expectations at school, poverty and discrimination (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999, p48). However, the solutions that it proposed were support with literacy, numeracy, and personal and social development. The SEU argued that:

“A system of accreditation, with recognition of achievement, increases the sense of progression felt by the client.” (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999, p115)

This is similar to the system that the young people who are participating in this study have entered when they began their Level 1 course at a training provider.

This led to the formation of Entry to Employment (E2E) courses in colleges and training providers, which offered a curriculum based on literacy and numeracy, introductory vocational qualifications, and personal and social development learning. This included the prevention of offensive behaviour, the development of assertiveness and motivation, and a “focus upon the wider notion of the young person as an active and effective citizen with rights and responsibilities” (Learning & Skills Council, 2004, p11).

This was a form of therapeutic education, designed to change a young person’s behaviours, motivation and self-esteem, as well as developing their skills. Ecclestone (2004a) argues that during the New Labour period it was agreed in policy that social exclusion was linked to influences that were damaging to self-esteem even if this was not supported by any conclusive research findings (Ecclestone, 2004a, p119). This led to policy viewing perceived personal characteristics as leading to social exclusion, rather than looking for structural symptoms. Policy sought to “repair damaged identities” whilst not looking “outwards to social change” (Ecclestone, 2004b, p131).

However, E2E courses were similar to what the SEU saw as part of what was socially excluding these young people, with the offer of poor quality courses and qualifications. By suggesting that young people could then be given a “supported transition into mainstream training” (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999, p115) policy indicated that there was a separation between types of education and training and that NEET young people should only be able to access a particular kind of training, separate from all other ‘mainstream’ forms of FE.

The academic literature can be used to counter this normalised view of NEET young people, defined by the SEU and the E2E curriculum as having a deficit of motivation, aspiration, achievement, skills and prospects. Atkins (2013) argues that the deficit model used by policy makers is ill defined and leads to a response of socialising for low skilled and poorly paid employment. This persists in low level courses aimed at NEET young people that have an ‘employability’ or ‘personal and social development’ content (Atkins, 2013, p145).

Higgins (2013, p185) argues that many young people reject the idea of a ‘deficit’ that policy has placed upon them. They have aspirations for further study and want to progress. Aspiration in NEET young people was also identified by Simmons and Thompson (2011b, p172), where most of the young people had ambitions to continue studying (Simmons & Thompson, 2011b, p172). Atkins (2008, p202) identifies that Level 1 learners aspire to the same careers as middle class peers, even though they face more structural constraints. Atkins (2010, p4) also argues that NEET young people tend to aspire to specific job roles. However, policy usually refers to aspiration as an abstract, latent in young people who have high or low aspirations.

Atkins argues:

“Despite their over-use in government documents, terms such as aspiration and opportunity are not defined or problematised. Aspiration, for example, is normally expressed in terms of raising aspirations.” (Atkins, 2010, p4)

This intersects with the first two aims of this project. Firstly, what do young people who have experienced failure at GCSE or have been NEET aspire to, what courses do they see themselves doing, what parts of the education sector do they see as unobtainable and are they optimistic about reaching their aspirations? Secondly, Policy uses abstract and imprecise terms such as low or high to define aspiration. However, the second aim of this project seeks to identify in policy a concrete aspiration in terms of qualifications or jobs for these young people, and how this differs from the aspirations the young people hold.

After completing their GCSEs many young people face making decisions about where they will go on to study. FE is a complex sector, where class divisions can manifest in the type of institution a young person attends. Higgins (2013) argues that how a young person views themselves is mediated by the ‘institutional structures’ where they learn (Higgins, 2013, p190). This is key to the third aim of this project, which seeks to explore how learners studying on courses designed for NEETs comprehend their position within the FE sector in relation to their aspiration, and what effect studying at certain institutions has on what they see themselves doing as a career.

Yates and Payne (2006) argue that the use of the term NEET is problematic as it describes a deficit similar to that of describing young people in terms of how many GCSEs they have not achieved. They argue that:

“Identifying a substantial part of the nation’s youth by what they are not (i.e. not in education, employment or training) fails to allow for the often significant difference in their situation, or to take account of their reasons for ‘NEET’ and the associated support needs that they may have.” (Yates & Payne, 2006, p343)

In proportioning the blame on to young people for not having skills, policy can forget that they are individuals, with individual situations, needs and aspirations. Some are exercising a choice, whilst others are more structurally constrained. Many of these NEET young people are accumulating more failure, with generic responses not meeting their needs. Young people all have different aspirations, and need different approaches to meeting these aspirations, but they have been marked as a generic failure, with generic characteristics, as well as with a generic identifier in the term NEET.

Furlong (2006) provides a critique of the policy idea that all NEET young people can be characterised as low skilled and disengaged, and why academic literature has been unable to hold politicians to account for their policies on youth:

“For researchers, one of the main disadvantages of the use of the term NEET is linked to the lack of an agreed definition, which makes it extremely difficult to identify trends or to make international comparisons. In effect this makes it difficult for the research community to hold politicians to account for their policies on youth.” (Furlong, 2006, p554)

Furlong identifies a number of possible reasons why young people may find themselves NEET, including taking time off from learning to peruse other interests such as music or travelling. This also includes those with caring responsibilities or who have illnesses that prevent them from going to college. The current categorisation of NEET young people is imprecise, and includes people who have achieved at school, and who are from middle class backgrounds. This critiques the

generic characterisation of failure to achieve GCSEs, as defined by the SEU and Kennedy. However, as Furlong argues, the imprecise categorisation has meant that the literature has been unable to offer effective critiques on government policy, which, like Kennedy and SEU, associates failure with social disadvantage. The first aim of this research seeks to find the voice of these young people who have been labelled imprecisely as NEET, recognise their different backgrounds, and seek to assess how this affects their capacity for aspiration.

In their second term in office, the New Labour government continued to review and reform FE through “Success for All-Reforming Further Education and Training” (Department for Education & Skills, 2002). Success for All, published in June 2002, aimed to develop and implement a reform strategy that would tackle the varying quality of institutions and poor strategic planning at a local level (Department for Education & Skills, 2002, p5).

The consultation paper would measure success as when “there is widespread public acclaim for further education and training, and the achievements of learners” and “parents are confident that their fourteen-nineteen year olds have access to a range of excellent academic and vocational courses” (Department for Education and Skills, 2002, p5).

Success for All promised extra funding and sought to strengthen links with industry and employers by increasing the number of apprenticeships available. However, in a continuation of the imposition of business practises on the sector that had become common since incorporation in 1992, minimum levels of performance were imposed on colleges. This meant that colleges could only offer courses that would achieve high success rates, whilst being forced to close

courses with lower pass rates, even if there was a demand for those specific skills locally (Fletcher, Gravatt & Sherlock, 2015, p168). This further narrowed the choices on offer in FE Colleges for young people, once more limiting what they could aspire to do.

Following Success for All, further reforms to FE were undertaken by the New Labour government, keen to improve the skills of young people and respond to the parity issues that Kennedy had failed to fix. Rather than attempt to tackle the lack of parity between technical and academic learning, a new approach was undertaken, where academic and vocational learning would be combined into one.

Led by former chief Ofsted inspector Mike Tomlinson, the 'Working group on 14-19 reform' published their report in October 2004 (Department for Education and Skills, 2004). This was known as the 'Tomlinson Report' (Tomlinson). In particular, Tomlinson noted that too many young people were leaving school without the skills needed for work. It argued that the vocational qualifications that young people were achieving were not meeting the needs of employers, and aimed to raise the status of vocational qualifications. It suggested the reform of vocational qualifications and the introduction of a diploma that mixed academic and vocational learning, bringing parity to each type of learning. This would allow young people to find the best educational match for their aspiration.

In effect, Tomlinson suggested introducing a diploma system that would start at Level 1, equivalent to a GCSE at grade D; a change that would have in effect stopped a system that divides young people into academic and vocational qualifications, often along class lines. All young people would do the same qualification irrespective of if they were undertaking academic or vocational

subjects, and irrespective of class. This would start when they were in school and continue into post-compulsory education in FE institutions (Department for Education and Skills, 2004, p20).

Like Macfarlane, this was effectively stopped at the highest level of government, with Tony Blair rejecting the proposals as they threatened the position of A-levels (Stanton, Morris & Norrington, 2015, p77). The Tories were mounting a defence of A-Levels (BBC, 2005b), and there was pressure from the right wing press (Hodgeson & Spours, 2008, p33), with headlines such as “Another reform, another betrayed generation” (Daily Mail, 2004) being published in the Daily Mail. This led Schools Minister Ruth Kelly to state categorically that A-levels would not be replaced (BBC, 2005a).

This was a protection of academic qualifications taken by the children of white collar professionals aiming for university, just as the rejection of Macfarlane was a protection of sixth forms. Former Conservative Secretary of State for Education, Lord Barker argued that New Labour had ‘bottled’ it over Tomlinson as Blair wanted to protect A-Levels. Former Secretary of State for Education and Skills Charles Clarke sees the failure to implement the changes as a “key failure of the Labour government” (Nash & Jones, 2015, p37).

What was introduced was an additional qualification, the Diploma. This ran as a vocational alternative to, and alongside, A-levels. Although having a good reputation, they were “watered down by Labour then killed off by the Coalition government” (Nash & Jones, 2015, p37), keen to link the New Labour government with the 2008 financial crisis, a failing economy, a fear of NEET young people and a crisis in skills, just as Blair and Callaghan had done in previous generations.

A new decade brought with it the new Coalition government, formed by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties, keen to make its own reforms on vocational and technical education. They assumed joint responsibility for FE, through the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Skills and the Department for Education. After the election of the Coalition in 2010, the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, the Liberal Democrat Vince Cable, was reportedly told by civil servants that “nobody would really notice” if FE colleges were closed to save money (BBC, 2014). This alleged observation foregrounds the class divide in post-compulsory education. It also signals the lack of understanding of FE, and of the young people who attend FE institutions, that is held within government. Jephcote and Salisbury (2009, p967) argue that the poor reputation FE had gained was, in part, due to it being associated with 2008 financial crash and the economy being in a poor state. This meant FE was up for reform once more by the Coalition government, with the Conservative David Cameron as Prime Minister.

The year before he was elected, David Cameron, in a similar vein to Tony Blair in 1996, told the Conservative conference that the economy was ‘broken’ and needed ‘rebuilding’ and that if elected the economy would return to growth by boosting ‘skills’ (Cameron, 2009). This once more relied on young people gaining skills or risk facing becoming NEET. Shortly after Cameron became Prime Minister in 2010, he promised to bring about reforms in education to give “Children the skills they need and that businesses want” (Cameron, 2010). This argument has been repeated by Labour and the Conservatives, suggesting debates about skills and the economy are largely party political, rather than ideological.

According to the Coalition, the reforms New Labour had made to the sector

had not worked. The economy was still being affected by NEET young people not having the correct skills. Since the Coalition government came to power in 2010, Cameron claimed that there had been an increase in apprenticeships (Allan, 2016, p5). This makes explicit that the Conservative party sees training being delivered in the workplace as a priority, and that FE has failed to train a workforce via the means of speculative courses. This was further cemented by a policy commitment made to increase the number of apprenticeships in the Conservative manifesto in the run up to the 2015 general election (Allan, 2016, p6), attempting to exploit the associations that apprenticeships have with employment to political effect. He also promised to make NEETs undertake 30 hours a week mandatory community service in return for benefits (Guardian, 2015). Although the effect on the electorate is difficult to gauge, NEETs were seen a sufficient issue with voters for the Conservatives that they made them part of their election manifesto.

During the first term of the Coalition, compulsory education until age eighteen was introduced as a means to tackling youth unemployment (gov.uk, 2010). Known as RPA or 'raising the participation age', this was a coercive response. This was preceded by the withdrawal of EMA payments (National Archives, 2010). However, as RPA has not been enforced in any meaningful way (Maguire, 2013, p74) it is unlikely to be an effective strategy to reduce NEET figures. However, parents of young people who stay in education or training could continue to claim child benefit for their child up to the age of eighteen (gov.uk, 2015).

On taking office in 2010, the education secretary ordered another review of vocational education to be undertaken by the economist Alison Wolf, also known

as the 'Wolf report' (Wolf). This review focussed on the value of a range of vocational qualifications compared to GCSE and the preparedness of school and college leavers to enter the job market. It arguably repeated the same themes of previous reports and reviews. For example, echoes can be heard in arguments made by Wolf in 2011 to statements made by Callahan in 1976, Kennedy in 1997, SEU in 1999 and Tomlinson in 2004, with Wolf (2011) arguing:

“Large numbers of young people are not on programmes which will help them to progress either educationally or in the labour market.” (Wolf, 2011, p44)

Wolf brought about the continuation of study of maths and English until 18 (Skills Funding Agency, 2014a) and the reduction in funding of some vocational courses that were perceived of as being of little value. It was widely seen as a break with the New Labour approach. However, there are echoes of Kennedy and SEU, especially regarding young people's ill-preparedness for work being caused by their own lack of achievement, skills and qualifications. Wolf repeated the idea that an individual had to achieve GCSEs to be seen as a success (Wolf, 2011, p8).

Throughout the New Labour years, national planning, including Kennedy and Tomlinson, had failed to bring about parity of esteem between technical and academic education. Wolf took a different position, questioning the value of achieving parity, and argued that there should be a focus on promoting excellence in vocational education in colleges and schools in itself rather than in comparison with other sectors (Wolf, 2011, p21). Wolf Argued:

“Up to now, this report has consciously avoided discussing 'parity of esteem' for vocational and academic awards. The phrase has been a staple of political speeches, and policy initiatives for decades; testimony to the fact that academic and vocational education are *not* seen as enjoying such parity. It is also a

completely misguided objective.” (Wolf, 2011, p111)

Wolf assessed that the public like the division of academic and vocational education, and the prestige that academic qualifications can bring their children. In part, Wolf was only reflecting the status quo that had existed since the Education Act of 1944, which enshrined academic segregation in British society.

However, Fuller and Unwin (2011) argue that Wolf could lead to further ‘segmentation’ of the FE sector. Academic pathways would remain in high esteem, while vocational learning would be partitioned into ‘technical education’ and ‘lower level practical learning’ (Fuller & Unwin, 2011, p192), similar to E2E. This means that regardless of ability, learners with low achievement and attainment who aspired to a technical craft education could end up learning lower level practical skills rather than higher technical skills which hold higher achievement entry requirements. This argument intersects with the third aim of this research, which sets out to evaluate how these learners comprehend their position within the FE sector in relation to their aspiration and career choices, especially when attending programmes of study designed for learners who have not achieved GCSEs or who are NEET.

Wolf shared many similarities with Kennedy despite the 13 year gap and the change of government. This correlates with the similarities between the electoral promises made by Blair (1996) and Cameron (2009) the year before either were elected as Prime Minister. Although Wolf set out to criticise the wide range of options put in place after Kennedy, both saw GCSEs and economic well-being as being linked:

“English and Maths GCSE (at grades A*-C) are fundamental to

young people's employment and education prospects...the funding and accountability systems established by government create perverse incentives to steer (age) sixteen plus students into inferior alternative qualifications." (Wolf, 2011, p8)

The inferior qualifications referred to in this statement were the "wide choice of basic skills, academic, vocational and pre-vocational routes" (Kennedy, 1997, p28) recommended by the Kennedy report. These were implemented throughout the New Labour government as maths and English GCSE equivalents such Key Skills, Adult Literacy and Numeracy, and latterly Functional Skills which still remain as part of the offer as stepping stones to GCSE (Skills Funding Agency, 2014a). These qualifications are not always held in the same esteem as GCSEs with employers expressing concerns about the standard of Functional Skills when compared to GCSEs and the level competence each qualification is meant to represent (Education and Training Foundation, 2015, p11). This project will evaluate how learners comprehend their position in FE as learners who are studying Functional Skills as opposed to attempting to retake their GCSE maths and English, and assess if this affects what they aspire to.

Wolf's recommendation, implemented via Functional Skills and other qualifications (Skills Funding Agency, 2014a), was for learners to continue to study maths and English until they were 18 or until they had achieved GCSE maths and English at grade C. This could lead to a young person sitting their GCSE maths and English a number of times without success. This would mean the possibility of repeated failures for young people who have been accumulating failures since they left school, leading to further educational and social exclusion.

In 2015 the centre right think tank Policy Exchange (2015) repeated what

the Kennedy report said in 1997. It argued that funding should be redistributed from higher education to FE. Policy Exchange also foregrounded the complexity of the sector, arguing:

“The FE system, or the skills system, is bewilderingly complex in comparison to other education sectors. This reflects both the wider breadth of responsibilities which fall on it, the political changes which have been made to it with extreme frequency, and the funding environment which has required it to constantly change and adapt.” (Policy Exchange, 2015, p36)

Eighteen years earlier, or the entire life of an aged sixteen to nineteen year old coming to the end of their studies in FE, the same arguments were made by Kennedy; that FE was the most complex element of the education sector, is underfunded and has gone through constant change.

This chapter has provided a policy history between 1997 and 2015. It has identified that the term ‘aspiration’ used in policy discourse is imprecise and without clear definition. A key feature of these policy documents is that they associate failure to achieve GCSEs with future social deprivation. Although using a discourse of structural failure, they all place the responsibility on the young person to attend remedial pre-vocational training, before moving on to a higher level course. This has been constant in policy since 1997, even with changes in government, and has echoes to earlier eras, where the risk of failure was increasingly placed on the young person. Although Kennedy aimed to bring more parity between vocational FE and academic sixth forms and universities, there still exists a gap in policy and opinion over the esteem in which vocational and academic education is held. The same is true of the institutions where each type of learning takes place.

The aims of this research have emerged from this policy and literature review. Firstly, as Atkins (2010) argues, in policy aspiration is: “expressed in terms of raising aspirations despite evidence suggesting young people aspire to career type jobs” (Atkins, 2010, p4). It is used imprecisely, as is the term NEET, to accredit these young people with vague and imprecise ‘low aspirations’. However, policy never considers what their aspirations are. Secondly, policy has associated poor performance at GCSEs with future social deprivation. It has stated an aspiration for all learners to achieve a set standard equivalent to GCSE at grade C. Finally, the third aim looks at where the young people position themselves in this complex sector. Do they recognise, if not the class divisions, then a divide in which young people attend which institutions, and study academic or technical subjects.

The next chapter sets out the methodology for this project, describing how interviews with young people will be used to form a case study, from which discussions can be had about their aspirations. It will also outline the theoretical foundation, the research method and the design of the data collection to be utilised for the empirical study.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHOD AND DESIGN: ASPIRATIONS AND NEEDS, A CASE

STUDY APPROACH

“The wish to research ‘with’ and not ‘on’ arose from moral and ethical concerns about social justice and finding a means by which the voices of a particular marginalised group might be heard”
(Atkins, 2013, p145)

This chapter describes and justifies the framework that will be the basis for the empirical research. It describes the method and design of the data collection and justifies the choices made when collecting, collating and analysing the data. The research employs a case study method, and a design based on semi-structured interviews. Taken together, this method and data collection design make it possible to capture the reflections of a cohort of young people studying on Level 1 courses designed for NEET young people.

Chapter one introduced the key themes of ‘parity’ and ‘aspiration’. The first theme is parity. This considers the esteem FE is held in compared to other parts of the wider education sector including universities, and the parity between academic and vocational learning and qualifications. The second theme is aspiration. This asks what the young people want to achieve and do as a career, and what role FE should aspire to as part of the education that is on offer to young people.

Chapter two presented a history of FE between 1945 and 1997. This argued that FE has a fragmented and complex history, which set out to train young people to be skilled workers for a buoyant economy but began to be seen as not serving the needs of industry. With this, there was a shift from training for jobs to training without jobs, with the blame for failings in the economy, and their own status as unemployed or lacking in skills, placed on the young person.

Chapter three argued that there has been relatively little academic attention paid to FE and what does exist has made no sustained attempt to explore and evaluate the experiences of young people. This research can partly be read as a response to policy documents that identify NEETs as a problem, and diverted funding into low level pre-vocational courses designed to fix a supposed deficit in the skills and behaviour of NEET young people, rather than affect a wider change in society that would facilitate sustainable employment for the young people. It also set out a history from 1997, a period when NEETs were defined in government policy by a deficit. This established that policies implemented in the late 1990s are continuing to having an influence on the education of young people who have not achieved GCSEs at grade C or above.

Given the absence of student voice in the academic literature, the task for this project was to capture student experiences and voices. Qualitative methods, involving interviews, were the obvious way to do this. However, there are many approaches to qualitative research employing interviews. These include narrative research (Bryman, 2012, p585) and life history approaches (Bryman, 2012, p488). However, this research employs semi-structured interviews heavily influenced by critical realist approaches to data collection and analysis. Therefore, an explanation of critical realism and how it relates to this project will now be given.

A critical realist approach, after Bhaskar (2008, p2), will be employed as a theoretical foundation of this project and a means by which to understand and interpret the data collected from the interviews. A key element of critical realism is that the nature of reality, or ontology, is greater than our knowledge of reality, or epistemology (Fletcher, 2016, p2). Reality consists of events that are experienced,

observed and interpreted, events that occur that have not been experienced, and structures and mechanisms that facilitate these events (Blaikie, 2010, p101).

Therefore, for critical realism, reality is separated into three different domains or levels. Firstly, the domain of experience, or empirical level, where events are observed and interpreted by humans through experience and knowledge. This level is dependant of observation. Secondly, the domain of the actual, where events occur whether or not they are observed. The final level is the domain of the real, where structures possess casual powers that are enacted by human interaction. These may or may not have an observable effect on the empirical level and may not be the full potential casual powers of the structure (Fletcher, 2016, p2). As the domain of the real may be inaccessible to observation, evidence has to be found for its existence. An interpretation of what is observed, or positivism, only interprets regularities, not the unobservable causal structures that may counteract each other, mitigating their effect on an individual's experience but not what has gone unobserved in the domain of the actual (Blaikie, 2010, p101).

As part of this critical realist approach, Archer (2007) will be used as it helps us to understand how these young people, to paraphrase Archer, go about making their way through the world of FE. Archer foregrounds human reflexivity as the process by which people form their agency, arguing:

“The pursuit of human projects in the social domain frequently encounters structural properties and activates them as powers. In such cases there are two sets of casual powers involved in any attempts to develop a successful social practice: those of the subjects themselves and those of relevant structural or cultural properties. The causal powers of structures are exercised inter alia as constraints and enablements which work automatically, even though they are activity dependant in both their origin and exercise, whereas human powers work reflexively.” (Archer, 2007, p9)

The constraints and enablements implicit in a structure are enacted through human activity. However, humans act reflexively through their own internal conversation, constructed through their own knowledge of the world. Where the causal powers of structures lead to new experiences outside their knowledge, they may experience confusion or 'fractured reflexivity' (Archer, 2007, p93). This is where an individual's internal conversations can lead to confusion about what path to take and they are unable to critically assess the situations they find themselves in.

Critical realism will be used as a means to interpret the data provided by the young people's testimony. This theoretical framework recognises that the learners' experience is only part of their time in FE. There are many structures that they are unaware of, which are influencing their decisions about what they plan to do next. This includes the complex structure of FE as a sector, and attitudes towards different types of learning being for different types of young people.

Learners will experience FE differently to their fellow student and to different effect. This means two or more students can experience the same lesson in different ways. For example, each young person will experience a class in a different way, recalling actual events differently. It also accounts for different possibilities that may not have happened to each student but could happen to another, if the structures were enacted in different ways. This could be a learner getting a job mid-way through a course or receiving a different grade.

When a young person completes their GCSEs they encounter structures away from school. Although it may seem like they are gaining choice over what they will do next, they will encounter a number of structures that may impede what

they planned to do. As the literature review showed, the type of FE provider they will go to and what qualifications they will be able to do may be limited by their GCSE grades. To have agency, make critical decisions and exert some control over what they do next, young people have to develop their capacity for reflexivity. This is the means by which they talk to themselves when faced with unfamiliar or new situations.

The notion of 'constraints' or 'enablements' inherent in structures, and structures having causal properties activated by human agency, is important for this project. Constraints can be defined as anything related to learning that may hold a learner back. This could be, for example, a minimum qualification entry requirement for a course. A learner could also be constrained by the stories they tell about themselves, possibly from external voices that have become internalised. This could be an internal narrative telling them what is the right kind of learning and the right kind of job for a young person from their background. For example, they may not think that university is for them because they lack the intelligence or are not academic. Enablements can be defined as structures that enable a learner to progress on to a higher level course or employment. For example, this could be access to a maths and English workshop or a support worker. It could also be a positive attitude to higher education or the ability to progress on to a sixth form college.

This project uses a case study method as it aims to describe a contemporary phenomenon where the "boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident" (Blaikie, 2010, p189). In this case, the learners are attending courses specifically designed for young people that display certain

characteristics. These are not characteristics internal to the person, such as personality traits or sense of humour, but external characteristics, such as employment status or failure to achieve GCSEs at grade C. However, as the literature review showed, these external characteristics have been increasingly conflated with internal characteristics without questioning how these young people are positioned in society and the societal factors in them becoming NEET. The relationship between the real life context of the research, FE providers, and the phenomenon, the aspiration of young people who have not achieved GCSEs at grade C or who are NEET, are so closely related that it is this relationship that is being explored. This makes a case study method appropriate as it allows for the young people's reflections to be given as an example of phenomena.

My interest in NEET young people arose from working at a number training providers and FE colleges in teaching and management positions. This included teaching on E2E courses and managing programmes of study aimed at learners who had not achieved 5 GCSEs at grade C or above. From a management perspective, I was interested in the effectiveness of FE in facilitating young people's aspirations, especially when young people were moving between providers without increasing their level of qualification.

Although I had ceased working with the NEET cohort before the research began, having moved to managing adult education programmes in a different city, I had a very different view of these young people than what was being stated in the media or policy. In the interest of transparency, and to allow for trust to be built, I shared some of my career experience with the interviewees; I did not tell them where I had worked in Birmingham, unless it was relevant to that particular

interview.

Although my experience with NEET young people meant that I was able to converse with them on familiar terms, ethically, I was aware that this also posed a risk of bias or distortion and care needed to be taken to interpret the result neutrally rather than to attempt to corroborate my own experiences with NEET young people or project my own prejudices on to the data. Atkins argues that:

“Any work seeking to construct knowledge about the identity of young people, and to understand how they perceive reality, inevitably involves extensive interpretation of the contributions made by participants in the research. In any act of interpretation, however impartial the writer aspires to be, the person writing the text has a stronger voice than those contributing to it” (Atkins, 2013, p154)

With this in mind, I endeavoured to keep the interviewees voices to the fore. A key component of this project is that these learners’ voices have been marginalised in policy and needed to be heard. Therefore, direct quotes from the interviews will be used as part of the analysis.

Also, I had not taught these learners, nor worked in the institutions they were attending. The learners were not personally known to me before the interview. No advice or opinions about their studies was offered, so that any advice from their current training provider would not be contradicted. All other ethical considerations about privacy were adhered to, with data being anonymised.

The design of the data collection utilises semi-structured interviews with learners at two training providers in Birmingham. Sampling was based upon the type of course that the young people attended, with five young people interviewed at each provider. The sampling can be considered purposive (Blaikie, 2010, p177) as a particular sample was sought. There is an element of pragmatism to these

participants being sampled as they were at the providers at the time when the interviews were due to take place. However, this non-probability purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012, p418) avoids being a convenience sample as the providers were selected on the basis that they offer courses to NEET learners who fit the profile defined in the first aim of the research.

The interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes and focused on key issues relating to aims of the research, enabling the collection of data to speak to these questions about what aspirations the young people held. Interviews were considered the most appropriate way to gain the personal experiences and reflections from individual young people, especially as group interviews may lead to individuals feeling ignored and not contributing (Curtis, Roberts, Copperman, Dowie & Liabo, 2004, p170) and questionnaires may lead to inarticulate responses (Finlay, Sheridan, McKay & Nudzor, 2009, p856). Young people may also be reluctant to share personal experiences in front of their peers.

The interviews included discussions about education history, aspirations, apprenticeships, higher education and GCSEs. The interviews also allowed for the questions to be applied to multiple institutions if an interviewee had attended more than one FE provider. These themes have been selected as they draw on the literature review, the aims of the research and the themes set down in the introduction.

The data was then coded to enable the analysis of their responses recorded during the interviews. This allowed themes to emerge, and for comparisons or corroborations to be made between learners' testimony, policy and the academic literature.

Through coding, a large amount of data gained through interviews can be reduced to a form where they can be made sense of and analysed (Blaikie, 2010, p25). Codes relating to what the learners were asked during the semi-structured interviews were used to fragment the recordings of the interviews. Bryman (2014) argues that these codes “should not be thought of purely as mechanisms for fragmentation and the retrieval of text” (Bryman, 2014, p577). Coding can provide the means of identifying connections and identifying broader phenomena.

These fragmented interviews were then further coded so that comparisons and commonalties could be identified when analysis was undertaken. These were then tabulated into four themes: Biographical (see appendix i), Aspiration (see appendix ii), Reflections on the Sector (see appendix iii) and Making their way in the world of FE (see appendix iv).

These themes were selected as they reflected the aims and objectives of the project and themes emerging from the literature review. The biographical themes relate to family background, parental employment as an indicator of class and achievement at school. The theme ‘Aspiration’ related to what the young people aspired to when they completed their GCSEs, if this had changed, and what they hoped to do after they had completed their current programme of study. ‘Reflections on the sector’ was used as an indicator of whether the themes of parity that emerged during the history presented in chapters two and three were part of the learners experience of the sector, and if this had any effect on the internalised conversations they had about their aspirations after they had completed school. ‘Making their way in the world of FE’ questions if the young people felt their experience

had prepared them for leaving the familiar world of school, and how optimistic they felt about their prospects and meeting their aspirations.

Responses related to biographical details or plans were coded to reflect the career type or qualification they hoped to progress on to. Parental occupation was recorded as blue collar, skilled blue collar or white collar. Qualification types were given codes related to whether they were academic or vocational and what level of GCSE equivalence they were (see appendix v). Previous school type and employment status was also coded so it could be compared. Codes were kept consistent for educational history, current learning and aspirations, so that they could be effectively compared and analysed.

For feelings and reflections on past educational performance, their aspirations, along with the themes 'reflections on the sector' were coded using a 3 point scale, positive, ambivalent or expressing no opinion, or negative. Aspiration to an apprenticeship or further study in higher education was coded by using a 3 point scale, strong, medium, or none. Additional coding was added as a measure of feeling as they emerged during the interviews. This included adding whether the young person thought qualifications were difficult or easy. For feelings that were binary a two point scale was used. This related to whether they thought GCSEs were important or not. Although a young person may have a range of feelings on the importance of GCSEs, these were simplified to a binary as the young people expressed their feelings in binary terms. This is similar to policy seeing GCSEs as a binary pass or fail along the grade C boundary. Similarly, questions that required a yes or no response were recorded on a binary scale.

Optimism was measured using a four stage Likert scale, with one corresponding to 'no choice' and four corresponding to 'total choice'. Rather than being coded after the interviews, the intensity of learner's feelings was collected directly from the learners. Likert scales are used in social science research to collect data on a range of factors in a comparable and measurable way. They allow participants to state on a scale their feelings or attitudes, giving a measure to the intensity to their feelings (Bryman, 2012, p164). Through this there is an attempt to assess the strength of feelings of optimism that they will have choice over what they will progress on to after they finish their course and choice over what they will eventually do as a career. This will allow for a measure of optimism to be drawn for the entire cohort of interviewees.

These codes allowed themes to develop in the research, from which an analysis related to the aims of the research could be undertaken. They were considered suitable as they would allow the distillation of the interview data into a form where corroborations and divergences could be identified. However, direct quotes from the interviews have still been used in the findings to give nuance and specific detail to the analysis.

The data collection was undertaken in accordance with Rabionet (2009), who proposed a six stage approach to designing and conducting semi-structured interviews. This gives a process for selecting an interview type, establishing ethical guidelines, and developing an interview protocol, going on to discuss conducting and recording interviews, analysis and reporting of the findings (Rabionet, 2009, p564-565). This gave a process to be followed.

Atkins' (2013) research with learners in FE colleges, studying at a similar

level to the young people who participated in this study, acted as a guide to how to approach conducting this research. Although differing in design, that particular study offered guidance on how to explain the study and how to ensure that the young people could speak in their own voice. As Atkins found, this often led to “unsought material the students wished to share which provided valuable windows into their lives and identities” (Atkins, 2013, p155).

The aims of this research and what the participants have stated about their aspiration and education are suitable for a case study method as it is about a single phenomenon, the aspirations of young people who are studying on Level 1 courses at training providers in Birmingham. Myers and Thomas (2015) argue that this ‘singleness’ allows us to gain an understanding of a “unique phenomenon in its completeness” to give “understanding of how and why something may have happened, or why it may be the case” (Myers & Thomas, 2015, p7).

This singleness allows for the creation of a ‘snapshot’ illustrative case study (Thomas & Myers, 2015, p64) or an ‘exemplifying case’ (Bryman, 2012, p70).

Bryman (2012) defines an ‘exemplifying Case’ as:

“The notion of exemplification implies that cases are often chosen not because they are extreme or unusual in some way but because either they epitomize a broader category of cases or they will provide a suitable context for certain research questions to be answered.” (Bryman, 2012, p70)

The young people who have been interviewed are not in an extreme or unique situation. There are many young people studying at training providers and FE colleges after not achieving a grade C for maths and English at GCSE. Although they may have had diverse experiences in education and have different backgrounds, the qualifying criterion makes these learners an example of the

wider character of young people studying at Level 1 at training providers in Birmingham. However, the type of case study that is being undertaken can often change whilst collecting data. What was planned to epitomise a broader category may turn into an extreme or unique case depending on what the data collection shows (Bryman, 2012, p70).

With a case study, there can be criticisms to how far it can be generalised due to its singleness. Bryman (2012, p71) and Blaikie (2010, p192) argue that case studies may have limited external validity due to their uniqueness or singleness. Blaikie (2010, p192), citing Lincoln and Gruba (1985) argues that there may be 'transferability' if the contexts are judged to be similar.

Using two similar training providers working with young people who have not achieved GCSEs and would otherwise be NEET will strengthen the argument for generalisation amongst training providers in Birmingham. However, there is no reason to believe that these young people are typical. Learners in the same situation in other parts of the country will be subject to different economic and educational conditions. Local educational contexts will affect the results of the study, for example Birmingham has selective state schools, whilst neighbouring local authorities such as Bromsgrove or Solihull don't. Therefore generalisations will not be sought. However, by using an exemplifying case study 'corroboration' (Sayer, 2010, p146) may be found between participants in other studies.

A case study method is appropriate for this project as the research aims are specificity asking about a single phenomenon. The testimony of the young people, whereby they give access to how they made their way in the world of FE in pursuit of their aspirations, is critical to the aims of the research. A more wide-ranging

project could follow the young people further, utilising an extended longitudinal process rather than a single snapshot process, to track how far they are meeting their aspirations. However, this project asks about what their aspirations are, and how they are affected by the structure of FE and the constraints and enablements that they have to navigate around. It is about the process rather than the end point.

The next chapter provides an analysis of the interview data collected. It uses the coded data to form conclusions about how young people make decisions when following their aspirations. It interrogates how they use their internal voices, and if this is sufficient when they find themselves studying on Level 1 courses designed for NEET learners. It will interrogate how far their aspiration meets the official view of what it means to be a success as they move into adulthood via the medium of FE. It will use the data to see where these learners locate themselves in a wide and diverse sector, and if this has any effect on the way they speak to themselves as they make decisions about their education.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

“Does it matter that most of those who leave school at 15 rapidly lose all contact with education? What are these boys and girls of 16 and 17 missing which it is important that they should have? For most of them, these years mark the last stages in the long journey from the complete dependence of childhood to the independence of early adult life. Towards its end, there is a rapid acceleration in the speed of the transition.” (Crowther, 1959, p173)

This chapter presents the findings from ten interviews with young people (see fig. 1) at two training providers in Birmingham. These interviews were designed to explore how a cohort of young people experience, understand and exercise the decisions they must take about their education at age sixteen. It explores how these young people develop their aspirations during their time in FE.

Fig. 1

Participant	Training Provider	Age	Gender
A	1	17	Male
B	1	17	Male
C	1	18	Male
D	1	18	Female
E	1	17	Male
F	2	19	Female
G	2	18	Male
H	2	16	Male
I	2	17	Female
J	2	16	Female

These young people are not NEET. However, they have been defined in policy by the term NEET, and, as the interviews show, many have been NEET. Many suspect that they would be NEET if they were not attending their current programme of study. This is recognised as a limitation of the data collection as it

does not capture the voices and aspirations of those who are NEET. However, the NEET categorisation is a policy term, and the young people interviewed for this project and others, including Simmons and Thompson (2011b), were engaged in training that was a policy response to NEET young people. Even though they were engaged in training they still fitted the policy view, and retained the characteristics of the NEET categorisation. They would be NEET if the courses they were studying on did not exist. Therefore, the voices of the young people who are navigating their way through FE on courses designed for NEET young people are still relevant and important to our understanding of young people who are NEET or studying on the margins of FE.

Their voices have been marginalised in policy, which views them as a failure. They are characterised by the term NEET, individualising their failure, and defining them as having low aspirations and poor skills. The voices of these young people are fragile and ephemeral, with their personal biographies overridden in policy by a discourse that sees FE and technical learning as for the working class. The voices of young people who have failed to achieve GCSEs at grade C or who are in danger of becoming NEET, are rarely heard. This chapter reports on ten semi-structured interviews with a view to understanding and evaluating how these young people comprehend their position within the FE sector. It asks what resources, ideas and beliefs these young people draw on to explain their location in the FE sector, and their understanding of FE in the wider educational sector.

Previous chapters have set the scene for this discussion by analysing key long term developments in FE that have occurred since 1945. Firstly, chapter one described the themes of 'parity' and 'aspiration'. This questioned how FE is viewed

by those who make policy and what the sector aspires to be. 'Aspiration' relates to the aims of the research, asking what young people at the lower end of the achievement spectrum aspire to at age sixteen, how different this is to how policy makers define them, and where they position themselves in terms of class and achievement in a wide a varied FE sector.

Chapter two described how aspiration and parity have troubled the FE sector since its expansion in 1945. FE was always seen as a solution to the problems that affect the young such as youth unemployment and supposed delinquency and, in a class segregated educational system, a place for the working class to gain an education.

A key element of this class segregated system was a fundamental tension between the higher esteem ascribed to academic education over technical vocational education. This facilitated a policy discourse of segregation in education based on class and academic and technical divides. One reason why this difference in attributed esteem came to matter so much was because of its impact on the perceptions of young people. Although class divisions were closely mirrored in a segregated education system, an absence or deficiency in academic qualifications came to be seen as a character trait of young people themselves. As manufacturing jobs slowly disappeared in the shift to late capitalism, young people lost the protection of the culture of labour. They were increasingly blamed for not acquiring the skills needed to keep the economy in good condition. They had the risk placed on them for being unemployed.

Chapter three described how this accusation became manifested in government policy as the failure to achieve five GCSEs at grade C or above

including maths and English, and the emergence in policy of the term NEET with pejorative connotations related to worklessness. Poor performance at examinations became associated with individual failure to get a job and have a prosperous life. Young people had begun to accumulate failure from when they sat their GCSEs. These histories are important to the data collection as they have located these young people in terms of the sector.

I have argued that there is a paucity of literature regarding the aspiration of young people who are low attainers or are NEET and of FE itself. Policy has had to be used as an alternative literature to develop the aims of the research. This project attempts to define how these young people make decisions during their time in FE, a sector so wide and varied, and make speculative choices about courses in pursuit of their career aspirations.

Chapter four set out the methodology for this project. These case studies, although featuring different learners in different situations, are designed to create a snapshot illustrative case study (Thomas & Myers, 2015, p64) that “epitomise a broader category of cases” (Bryman, 2012, p70).

The data was collected via interviews with ten young people attending two different training providers. These training providers offered courses to NEET young people at Level 1. Training provider one offered a range of vocational courses including customer service, business and administration and care. Training provider two offered childcare qualifications. Alongside their vocational courses, learners at both training providers were expected to study employability courses to prepare them for the world of work, along with maths and English if they did not have a grade C at GCSE.

The data was then coded along key concepts derived from the aims of the research and tabulated (see appendices i-iv). The interviews included the learner's reflections on their GCSE grades, their aspirations when they left school, their aspirations now, and any aspirations for apprenticeships, higher education, A-levels or other Level 3 courses. The interviewees have reflected on what guided them when making decisions, including the influence of parental voice and the effects of parental class on the stories these young people tell themselves about training, education and employment.

The learners' reflections have then been compared to three key official policy aims that have been set out for young people. These emerged from the policy and literature review presented in chapter three. They are the aspiration for all young people to achieve a grade C at GCSE, the offer of apprenticeships and the aspiration to eliminate youth unemployment. For the purposes of the research, GCSE maths and English were used as a comparator for what these young people should have achieved. Due to an element of compulsion that has been introduced into the FE sector, all young people who do not have a grade C at GCSE maths or English must now continue to study these subjects until they achieve a grade C or reach age nineteen (Skills Funding Agency, 2014a). The increase in the offer of apprenticeship emerged from the interviews with the young people, where some of the learners described how they had attempted unsuccessfully to gain a place on an apprenticeship. Finally, the literature review discussed how academia had mostly been unable to hold policy to account due to the imprecise nature of the term NEET. However, policy has an aspiration to deal with youth unemployment and it will be assessed if the solutions being offered by policy meet the

expectations of the learners and what they aspire to.

Finally, the learners' reflections have been analysed to assess where they locate themselves in a class segregated FE sector. Their reflections on the parity between vocational and academic qualifications, the parity between GCSEs and Functional Skills, and between institutions, such as FE colleges and sixth forms, will be recorded and assessed.

This chapter reports the findings of the interviews with a view to understanding and evaluating how these young people comprehend their position within the FE sector. It asks what resources, ideas and beliefs these young people draw on to explain their aspirations.

Young People, Aspiration and FE

Each of the ten young people interviewed had a different educational history. However, there are commonalities that affected their aspiration. They were recruited through their training provider, with the training provider selected on the basis that they offered courses aimed at learners who had not achieved five GCSEs at grade C or were NEET.

In a city like Birmingham, which still maintains selective state funded grammar schools (Grammar Schools in Birmingham, 2016), none had followed this privileged route. This meant that they had started from a position of relative educational disadvantage from other young people in the city which started when they were aged eleven.

The existence of selective grammar schools does not mean that all the state schools and academies in the local authority are of poor quality. Ofsted (2016, p149) statistics show that 74% of pupils were attending schools in

Birmingham rated good or outstanding in 2015 rising to 76% in 2016. However, it does mean that these young people are attending school in a region where a small proportion of young people benefit from a grammar school education based on academic selection at 11.

Seven of the young people had attended local authority or academy state schools. Two had moved to alternative provision in large FE colleges. This is another facet of the education sector that FE assumes a role in, enrolling young people from the age of fourteen who need a school place, are finding school challenging or it has been decided that a vocational education would suit them more. Young person D had not completed her schooling due to a disrupted education which included time spent overseas.

Since leaving school, these young people had been accumulating risk at a fast pace. From when they decided what they wanted to study after completing their GCSEs, they were at risk of failure, of unemployment, of remaining low skilled and under-qualified. This accumulation of risk is signalled by eight of the young people stating they believed they would be NEET if they were not at the training provider (see appendix iv). The interviewees expressed no confidence, and little hope, in the efficacy of the qualifications they had taken. Nine of the interviewees expressed negative or ambivalent feelings on whether their GCSE results will enable them to progress (see appendix i).

The young people have internalised this failure, ready to accept the blame for failings, rather than recognising it in terms of social exclusion. This is borne out by comments made by young person D, who did not sit her GCSEs, but still individualised the fault of failure on to the young person. She remarked:

“Most young people do have a choice and if you don’t it’s your mistake for not getting your GCSEs”.

This is a view echoed by young person B, who did achieve GCSE maths at grade B but attained a grade D for GCSE English:

“People don’t get what they were expecting to get and then they blame themselves for not getting it. I dropped a whole grade this year because I thought I was going to pass and then I dropped a whole grade. I got a D...It just shows you have to work more harder and you just can’t do the bare minimum; you have to work much much harder”.

This corroborates what Furlong and Cartmel (2006) argue about the accumulation of risk by young people. They argue that young people:

“Regarded setbacks and crisis as individual shortcoming, rather than as an outcome of processes which are beyond their personal control. Unemployment, for example, may be seen as a consequence of a lack of skills on the part of the individual rather than a result of a general decline in the demand for labour.”
(Furlong & Cartmel, 2007, p6)

Their ability to make decisions about their education is constrained within parameters based on what grades they achieved at GCSE, availability of courses and assumptions on what is the right kind of learning for young people like them. An assumption has been made that due to academic failure, vocational learning is all these young people should aspire to, rather than the privileged academic route followed by those who have gained GCSEs.

Yet these learners would not consider their exclusion from the greater opportunities afforded by gaining a degree to be caused by class. Simmons and Thompson (2011b, p7) argue that social exclusion, which in this case manifests itself as exclusion from apprenticeships, further education and higher education, is normal to these young people, “and does not immediately strike them in terms of

class” (Simmons & Thompson, 2011b, p7). Throughout the interviews, and similar to the findings of Simmons and Thompson (2011b), the young people “often attribute their status to individualised factors such as their low ability, lack of work experience, and low confidence or self-esteem” (Simmons & Thompson, 2011b, p7) rather than structural class inequality.

Equally the interviewees had optimism for a job or career in the future, and a willingness to change their aspirations in reaction to new opportunities. All knew they had failed, some a number of times, but they still felt that this time they were following the correct path.

To identify what aspirations young people studying on courses designed for NEETs hold for themselves, how these aspirations are formed, and how they make their way through FE in pursuit of a career.

The first aim of this project asks how young people who have failed at school form their aspiration, and what they aspire to do as a job or a career. The voices of these young people are rarely heard in relation to what they want to achieve and do as a job or long term career.

All of the young people who took part in the project could articulate some form of will or aspiration, an optimism that they would be in employment be it a job or a career.

During the interviews the learners were asked to rate, using a four stage Likert scale, how optimistic they were that they would have choice over what they would do as a career, with one being no choice, two being a little choice, three being a lot of choice and four being total choice. All of the young people rated this as three or four, with half being optimistic that they would have total choice. Each young

person was optimistic that they would meet their aspirations, even if these were not the same aspirations they had when they left school (see appendix iv).

This was in tension to the view of eight of the interviewees that there were few opportunities for young people and that if they were not currently studying that they would be NEET. When discussing what he would be doing if he was not on a course designed for NEET young people, Young Person A remarked:

“Living on income (unemployment benefits), Sitting at home, watching TV or something, no one is going to give you a job out there”

This was corroborated by young person H who remarked:

“Probably nothing. Probably still looking because I was looking for at least six month and nothing came around”

Young Person B felt that the job market was difficult for young people, remarking:

“How it is now finding a job is hard because people are not taking on kids. It’s hard because it took my cousin two years just to get work where he is now so me I wouldn’t be working until I was twenty”

This tension may arise from nine of the learners having experienced being NEET since completing school (see appendix i). However, they were optimistic that completing a programme of study would lower the risk of them returning to being NEET and that it offered them a place where conversations about their careers were had. As identified by Bathmaker (2001, p86) and Atkins (2010, p5), all felt that gaining qualifications was the route to better employment prospects. Although many felt that this did not eliminate the risk of unemployment, they were optimistic about their current aspirations.

These young people have a lack of ambition or low aspiration attributed to them by policy and research literature. However, Simmons and Thompson (2011b)

argue that young people who find themselves on courses aimed at NEETs do hold aspiration of some kind. Simmons and Thompson argue:

“Virtually all the young people had ambitions for work or further education, and some had ambitions to go onto higher education or professional study.” (Simmons & Thompson, 2011b, p172)

Aspiration can be abstract. Simmons and Thompson differentiate between FE, HE and professional study but in respect to employment they refer only to being in work, rather than the type of work that the young people see themselves in. For this project, the types of work the young people aspire to have been split into blue collar, with perhaps some soft skills transferable to other low level jobs in other sectors, skilled blue collar, where learners are aiming to become skilled workers in a specific sector, and white collar, aiming for a professional career in a specific sector. This is done with the caveat that the white collar/blue collar split does not necessarily relate to non-manual or manual labour, especially as an enlarged non-manual sector has not created a larger middle class (Simmons & Thompson, 2011b, p36). Many entry level service industry jobs require relatively few specialist skills, but have fixed routines and practices similar to non-skilled or semi-skilled labour. Jones (2012, p145) argues that while these jobs are cleaner and less arduous than the industrial work they have replaced, they are lower in status, security and are less well paid.

The rationale for classifying the types of career that the young people aspire to as white collar, skilled blue collar and blue collar has three factors. Firstly, rather than identify careers as a binary working class/middle class divide, it was decided to include greater differentiation within the working class classifications. This arose from the careers the young people described and how the FE sector divides young

people and treats NEET students, offering them lower level courses, and a therapeutic education based on teaching employability and personal and social development courses. Some higher achieving students get to do a specific vocational option that allows them to develop specialist skills for a particular trade, whilst courses aimed at NEETs offer socialisation for work in entry level positions.

Secondly, the classifications were based on the skills that the young people hoped to gain, and the level of qualifications they hoped to progress on to. Many entry level courses offer only entry level qualifications. While, studying a specific vocation, such as child care may give access to higher level qualifications, none specific vocational qualifications, such as a business and administration at Level 1 provide non-sector specific skills. In this case both could lead to working class or blue collar jobs, so a decision was made to differentiate within the blue collar classification between skilled blue collar jobs, where the FE sector has a role in providing training for a trade, such as catering or childcare, and blue collar where a person could feasibly gain a non-skilled or semi-skilled job with or without a qualification, such as an entry level retail position. Simmons and Thompson, (2011b, p117) identify jobs such as teacher or accounts clerk as being white collar, with this definition being carried over to this project. FE institutions have a role in training people to gain professional qualification or degree, with this being the qualifier for white collar careers.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the classifications reflected the way in which the young people described their future career aspirations and the careers or jobs of their parents. They stated their aspiration career type jobs or sectors irrespective of social background (Atkins, 2010, p4). Their simplicity in

terminology allowed for judgements to be made on the type of job and career that the learners aspired to and what level of qualification they were working towards.

For example, young person B had an offer on an apprenticeship in accountancy, needing only to pass his Level 2 Functional Skills to allow to him to aspire to a white collar career. Young person A initially aspired to be a mechanic, a skilled blue collar career that would need technical learning to be taken, but is now completing a Level 1 course in business and administration. This course is below GCSE level, and he now wants to work in retail, initially in a junior or entry level position that would not need any qualifications to access.

There are limitations to these classifications. The internal and external conversations that they had about aspirations, studying and work could mean that a skilled blue collar career could allow the accumulation of economic capital to be considered middle class through, for instance, becoming self-employed or a business owner. For example, it is plausible that the young people attending training provider two may, at some point later in their career, own a nursery. However, they currently lack the skills needed to enter these trades, and are yet to gain the institutionalised cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, p81) in the form of qualifications that proves their skills and ability. Therefore any future economic and class position is speculative.

The young people that enrol on these courses show a desire to change the circumstances they have found themselves in. There is a will and an optimism that by completing these lower level courses they will be able to gain the skills or qualifications that will enable them to move on to a higher level course or into employment. Government research also found that NEET young people had a

desire to change their employment situation (McCrone, Southcott, Featherstone, Macleod & Dawson, 2013, p37). This will to change their circumstances meant that these young people should not be classified as 'de facto NEETs' (Tomlinson, 2013, p48), on a course of study but not engaged in learning. A young person who joins a course of study is actively deciding not to be NEET despite previous failures that they may be attributing to themselves, and are showing a will, aspiration or optimism to a better employment or qualification situation.

i. Initial aspirations on completing their GCSEs or leaving school.

It can appear that young people are afforded more choice over what they want to study at age sixteen, even though any decisions they make are constrained within the parameters of what grades they achieved at GCSE. For those who are able to meet the entry requirements for A-levels, this may mean a narrowing of subjects from what they did at GCSE to concentrate on subjects they are considering as a career or have an interest in. For learners who progress on to vocational courses subjects studied will be one core area they aspire to as a job or career.

All of the young people interviewed could articulate a career that they aspired to on completing their GCSEs. This is unsurprising, given that they were studying at a training provider with a will to develop new skills. Similar to Foucault's (1977) assertion that training and prisons are institutions that people exit changed from when they entered, young people enter a college or training provider with the expectation that they will change in some way; to become more employable in whatever sector they aspire too. The function of the institution will be known to them, even if they feel they were coerced to join a course, and they expect the institution to function as a place where they gain new skills,

qualifications and increased employment prospects.

Seven out of the ten interviewees aspired to a skilled blue collar career, needing skills to be employed in a specific sector. This included working in the childcare or construction sectors. Two of the learners had achieved sufficient credential to begin to study A-levels which would have led to a white collar professional career in the IT and legal sectors respectively. One learner had an aspiration to join a course which would give her transferable employment skills leading most likely to a blue collar carer in administration or another entry level job (See appendix ii).

None of the young people expressed aspirations that were unrealistic in context of their current learning which may be an indication of how entrenched the social exclusion from certain careers may be for these learners. Class is a factor, as these young people will be guided by external conversations and expectations from parents, family and peers. These networks share the limitations of their own experience of work and the right kind jobs of to aspire to. This includes a lack of external voices talking about university and A-levels, or what young person H referred to as a '*whole different world*'. As a counterpoint to this, young person B found external conversations on routes other than university lacking as they did not a feature in his families experiences. As Shildrick and MacDonald argue:

“Social networks of peers and kin were powerful in shaping the way young people perceived and acted upon the choices open to them. Informal, collective knowledge about the right way of becoming and being a working class young adult did much to govern the shape of school-to-work careers. These young people were embedded in a relatively stable, mono-cultural, working class community and their reaction to the ‘options’ presented to them were, at least in part, steered by the values and traditions of the place.” (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007, p9)

Here, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is of importance, where ingrained dispositions, symbolic values and practices, including those about education, training and work, position a person in the social order. This is through the institutionalised cultural capital of qualifications and credentials and the embodied cultural capital of embedded views on education and work (Bourdieu, 1986, p82).

The values, practices and external voices that the young people see and hear in their network of family, peers and friends reflect certain attitudes towards jobs, education and qualifications. This forms into a system for understanding their position in society and reacting to their experiences. Bourdieu terms this habitus.

He argues:

“The structures constitutive of a particular environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence of a class condition) produce habitus, a system of durable, transposable dispositions” (Bourdieu, 1977, p72)

Habitus forms “the basis of perception and appreciation of all subsequent experience” (Bourdieu, 1977, p78). It is through this mediation that a young person experiences the world and recognises what types of learning are suitable for a person from their background, and ones which are suitable for the middle classes.

Nine learners specificity named job roles, giving an indication of how learners think about their future careers as concrete job roles. Atkins (2010) argues that there is evidence that young people aspire to “career type jobs, irrespective of social background” (Atkins, 2010, p4). An example of this was given by young person I, who summarised her initial aspiration thus:

“All my life I always wanted to go to college, ever since I was little, I don't really know why. I was really interested in Law; I wanted to

be a solicitor at the time so I went to do law”

Young people aspire to be, for example, a builder or a nurse and then select qualifications and courses based upon this, rather than looking for general employment skills which would give them the opportunity to change jobs with the labour market. However, most NEET young people do not have access to a generalised liberal education that would allow them to develop their capacity for reflexivity through wider learning in a way that A-level students are afforded. As noted in chapter two, a more holistic learning that was the aim of County Colleges has never come to pass, with vocational learning focussing on one career that, to paraphrase young person B, they will have to do for the rest of their lives.

In this vein, young people A and E expressed an initial aspiration to complete a construction or mechanic course. This is an aspiration to become part of the technical craft aristocracy which brings limited social mobility, but not on the scale that can be brought about by gaining a degree or through academic qualifications. Young person E still had this aspiration, wanting to return to the construction course at an FE college that he had failed to complete. Young person G initially aspired to a career in hairdressing and was able to access Level 1 and Level 2 qualifications which he completed successfully. These aspirations are solid and defined not just by a career type, but by a place in a hierarchy of skilled blue collar careers with their own progression route and management structures. Young person E aspired to be a self-employed bricklayer, aspiring within skilled blue collar employment for autonomy and managerial status, just as many hairdressing students may see owning a salon as a possible route to social mobility. This is the same kind of social mobility offered by training provider two, with professional

childcare and nursery management courses opening up social mobility within a nominally skilled blue collar sector.

Training provider one offered business and administration courses that taught transferable skills for learners who do not know which sector they wish to work in. However, lower level qualifications in generic subjects such as business and administration or customer service, although giving transferable skills, are not necessarily needed to enter the workforce, nor offer a progression route to social mobility.

At age sixteen, young people B and I both had aspirations for A-levels, and the progression opportunities to university courses that these qualifications offer. Both could access A-levels as they had achieved sufficient grades at GCSE. Both were aspiring for white collar careers, indicating that aspiration and achievement are closely bound. These careers require some specialist qualifications, with young person B initially studying for A-levels in information technology and graphic design, whilst young person I started to study A-level Law. Young person B did not achieve his GCSE in English but the focus of his family was higher education, so he re-sat his GCSE while studying for A-levels. Young person B gained access to this kind of education by gaining five GCSEs at grade C or above.

Both learners were able to study other courses alongside their career orientated A-level. Young person B studied graphics and music, while young person I studied drama and psychology. This was despite them holding lower interest than law. She remarked:

“You couldn’t just do law, so I chose my other A-levels”

“I chose drama because I done that at GCSE and I quite liked it and I chose psychology because I had heard about it and I wanted

to understand what it was about.”

These young people were able to access, by means of class in young person B's case and by attainment in young person I's case, a wide yet career focussed education as envisaged by County Colleges (1945). This is not the same for lower achievers or young people without the family connections or knowledge of the middle classes. For NEET young people 'employability' is thought to be the correct curriculum rather than a liberal and wide education that A-level students can access. The class difference here manifests itself in the value of different types of education to different classes of people, and what is the correct type of learning for young people from middle class or working class backgrounds. This appears to be natural to the young people, so much that they do not see it as social exclusion. As Donald argues:

“This is how the curriculum differentiates and categorises people. It specifies what it is to be educated, cultivated, discriminating, clever and so forth, and when linked to psychological notions of development and cognition, it enables such characteristics to appear as the natural aptitudes of the people so defined.” (Donald, 1992, p46)

They see this reinforced throughout their school career, with some pupils being allowed to do academic subjects, while others do vocational BTECs. Some pupils do GCSE maths and English, while others do Functional Skills. Some pupils do not even finish school, being sent to alternative provision at local FE institutions, as experienced by young people A and F. As the histories presented in chapters two and three testify, this can be along class lines, with vocational education serving working class children, with GCSE grades discriminating between those who have passed and those who have failed.

How the curriculum differentiates and discriminates affects how these

learners talk to themselves in relation to their education and the decisions they have to make during their time in FE. It affects their dispositions, and what sectors they choose to enter, and whether they have just the will to find a job or aspire to a skilled blue collar or a white collar career. Nine of the young people aspired to a career at or above skilled blue collar level. With the exception of learner I who gained the possibility of social mobility through achievement, all aspired for similar or better within the class of their parents (see appendix i & ii). Becoming part of the skilled blue collar aristocracy is perhaps where aspiration lies for the blue collar working class, something that was evident before 1945 when FE was limited to a small proportion of the working class which created a “white male labour aristocracy in craft occupations” (Colley, Wahlberg & James, 2007, p45). Although FE has widened access to training for school leavers, traces of this still survives in the aspirations of the young people and the external voices they hear around them from family, teachers and peers.

Nine of these learners, in a short time since completing their GCSEs, had failed to meet their initial aspiration (see appendix i). This signals how quickly these young people are accumulating risk. With a lack of coherent external voices, their reflexivity has become fractured as the paths to their aspired careers became constrained. They had to find new opportunities, and adapt their aspiration to suit what was available to them. They had to be flexible with their aspirations to follow what seemed to be the best new course of action from the little experience they had of this new world.

ii. Were they aware of all the options on completing their GCSEs/leaving school?

Half of the interviewees felt that on leaving school they had received a wide range of careers advice that should have enabled them to form aspiration and make decisions based upon the advice given to them. When interviewed, these learners all now felt that they had had a negative experience of advice and guidance leading them to not being aware of all the options at age sixteen (see appendix iii).

On leaving their initial courses, some were unsure of where to access support. This meant they turned to the internet to find new opportunities. Others, when their initial aspirations failed, gained support from training providers or mentors, whilst young people B and C also had family support to help them find a new aspiration to follow. This means that on-going advice and guidance was lacking, with some relying on marketing from various FE providers found on the internet or at careers fair as a proxy for strong voices and independent advice and guidance.

For young person B, access to careers guidance at school was limited to one visit a week from a careers advisor. This offered a paucity of information on apprenticeships, FE colleges and training providers. He stated that careers advice was limited to progression to the school sixth form. Yet, even with this limited advice and guidance, he felt that he was fully aware of all the options including FE colleges. He now feels he was not aware of apprenticeships or training providers. His teachers promoted the school sixth form as the best option on the basis that he would be in familiar surroundings with teachers who knew him. This made it difficult for him to choose any other path than A-levels. As young person B states:

“We have a careers advisor but he only comes in once a week and once he comes in he does a Tuesday and he’s all booked up. There was not people coming in regular to help you and because we are a big school everyone wants to do something different”.

“It’s hard for us as students to see what we can do in life because we ain’t getting the help, the help and support from the school”.

“I had teachers coming to me saying you should go to sixth form because it’s good, it keeps you in with the school, the school know you better.”

Young person B was relying on external conversions to guide his reflexivity as he had no experience of FE, finding it ‘hard’ to ‘see’ a path to a future career. He took the advice from his teachers on the best path for him. His teachers were trusted external voices. He would expect them to offer the best advice that would enable him to form his capacity for reflexivity and make informed choices about his education. However, he found access to comprehensive external voices constrained.

That he was advised to follow the privileged route of A-levels corroborates the findings of an Ofsted review into careers guidance in schools undertaken between 2012 and 2013, around the time that many of these young people would have still been in school and being given advice on what to do next. As Ofsted (2013) reported:

“Vocational training and apprenticeships were rarely promoted effectively, especially in schools with sixth forms. The A-level route to universities remained the ‘gold standard’ for young people, their parents and teachers.” (Ofsted, 2013, p4)

As exemplified by young person B’s experience, the privileged routes identified by Kennedy in 1997, were still being preserved. A-levels are a gold standard for a particular section of society, those whose aspirations align with middle class and white collar careers; keen to protect their position in society (McCulloch, 2006,

p704). This is evident by the push for A-levels and university that young person B remarked that he felt from his graduate mother working in a white collar career. After failing to complete his A-levels, he began to do his own research into apprenticeships.

Young person D also had to rely on her own research to find out what opportunities there would be for her to continue studying. At age sixteen, she was not attending school due to being taught overseas. This meant that she did not sit her GCSEs or receive any advice and guidance. At first she researched FE colleges but did not have the confidence to follow this up. A potential employer referred her to a large national training provider to improve her maths and English skills. When she completed the course at that training provider she was referred to her current training provider to study at the same level. At both training providers she was studying at Level 1 or below GCSE level and had not progressed towards employment.

Her situation meant that she was guided towards a limited pathway. She was referred to improve her maths and English, which meant her studying Functional Skills rather than academic GCSEs. Although willing to complete Functional Skills, she expressed regret that she did not have GCSEs. She felt embarrassed telling employers that she “*only had Functional Skills*”. She expressed some aspirations for an academic pathway and regretted not having achieved any GCSEs.

Both young people B and D’s capacity for reflexivity was tempered by not having access to all the information required to make decisions about their learning. They were structurally constrained by prior achievement, assumptions

about the right kind of learning for them and a lack of reliable external conversations. These constraints had sent them down a particular structural pathway, rather than the enablements of aptitude, disposition and ultimately, aspiration. This can be observed in the pathways that all of the young people have followed since leaving school.

There is a legal duty for schools and other institutions teaching young people to give careers advice. Statutory guidance issued to all schools in England states that all young people should have face to face advice on a wide range of options including vocational routes and apprenticeships “alongside the more traditional A-level and university routes” (Department for Education, 2015, p5). That the Department for Education (DfE) sees A-levels as a traditional route for all sixteen year olds corroborates what Kennedy (1997) saw as an exclusionary approach to the FE sector, which was little understood by policy makers.

The interviewees described varying levels of incomplete advice and guidance they received while at schools despite the statutory requirement that schools should enable pupils to develop aspiration and ambition. As DfE guidance states:

“Schools should help every pupil develop high aspirations and consider a broad and ambitious range of careers. Inspiring every pupil through more real-life contacts with the world of work can help them understand where different choices can take them in the future.” (Department for Education, 2015, p4)

There may be underlying factors to the limitations on the advice and guidance given, including the breadth and scope of the FE sector which includes sixth form colleges, FE colleges, training providers and apprenticeships. However, the limitations of external voices and conversations can be considered a constraint on

these young people forming their aspiration at the age of sixteen.

Chapter four described a critical realist framework, using Archer (2007) as a means to look at how these young people form their agency through their own internal conversation. However, their voices are fragile and lacking in experience of the world of FE and work. A criticism of Archer's ideas around reflexivity is the emphasis internal conversations have over the effect of external conversation as a means to action. As Caetano (2015) argues:

“Reflexivity is not the only means of mediation. The external conversations people have with one another in specific social contexts should also be taken into account in the explanation of human conduct, as they contribute equally to the definition and negotiation of personal concerns and projects.” (Caetano, 2015, p8)

Careers advice and guidance received at school is an important external conversation that young people use to inform their decisions and aspirations after leaving school. These external conversations inform the young people about a world they have never experienced and are necessary for them to form their capacity for reflexivity, especially as their own internal conversations may not recognise the breadth of opportunity available to them in the FE Sector.

The effects of insufficient advice were evident on the reflexivity of all the young people who were interviewed. This has meant that most of the interviewees had been warehoused, a process where a young person repeats lower level provision at a different provider without gaining access to higher level qualifications and skills. Wolf (2011) was critical of this phenomenon, which has also faced criticism in the academic literature (Hayward & Williams, p186, 2011, Nelson & O'Donnell, 2012, p26). Nine out of the ten learners had attended other provision unsuccessfully, with six learners studying at a lower level than they

started at a previous provider. Three of the interviewees were studying at two levels below their initial courses. Four of the learners had attended two previous providers before starting their current programme of study (see appendix i).

However, each of the young people interviewed clearly recognised that, to borrow from Ofsted (2013), they were responsible for the “careers that lay ahead of them” (Ofsted, 2013, p13) and that they would have to change and adapt to the constraints placed upon them in pursuit of a career. They recognised, even if it was implicitly, that the risk of their future career was placed firmly with them, as was the potential for failure. An accumulation of failure, underdeveloped internal conversations and poor quality external conversations had led these learners to “opt for less satisfactory pathways as they present themselves, minimising immediate risk but sacrificing long term gains” (Simmons & Thompson, 2011b, p138).

iii. Current aspirations.

There are a range of courses that learners are offered in pursuit of their aspirations. However, in FE colleges, these run on a September to July academic year. This can pose problems for young people looking to change course after September. If they need to start a course within the academic year they may have to attend a training provider offering a smaller range of courses, possibly at a lower level than they were previously studying and in a different vocational sector or risk becoming NEET. Nine of the young people had changed courses since they had left school (see appendix i). Eight of the young people had also changed their aspiration since leaving school (see appendix ii).

On completion of their current course, all of the learners hoped to stay in

education in some form. Although not a headline career aspiration, it is indicative of the type of job or career they aspire to. Eight of the young people planned to progress on to courses that would allow access to skilled blue collar careers or white collar professional careers. For three of the young people this meant progressing on to an apprenticeship, which they saw as starting employment rather than continuing in education (see appendix ii).

Young person B was the only learner at training provider one who was aspiring to a white collar professional career. This fitted with his parental social class. He was planning to do this through an apprenticeship in accountancy rather than A-levels in ICT. In contrast to this, young person D was also aiming for an apprenticeship. However this was in administration, leading to qualifications with general non-sector specific skills. This she hoped would allow her to enter a blue collar job in an entry-level administration role. Other learners at training provider one hoped to progress on to an apprenticeship in care or child care, an FE course in construction or progress on to a Level 2 course in business and administration leading to an entry level or junior job in sales. This and entry level jobs in administration can be considered to be blue collar due to the semi-skilled or non-skilled nature of the work. Jones (2012, p145) argues that while these jobs are cleaner than the industrial work they are lower in status and pay.

Training provider two offered a progression route from Level 1 introductory childcare qualifications up to Level 4/Level 5 professional childcare management qualifications. All of the learners saw themselves continuing at the training provider to complete courses up to at least Level 3, allowing them access to skilled blue collar work in the childcare sector. This would also allow young person I, who

aspired for a white collar career in social work, to access higher education qualifications.

On gaining a place at the training providers, eight young people had changed their mind on what their career aspirations were. This had meant the courses they hoped to do had changed. Aspiration had become a flexible notion for these young people and what they aspire to may have changed more than once. This flexibility of aspiration may not be borne out of reflexivity, fractured or not. These learners might be talking to themselves in a reactionary way, reacting to their situations through opportunity rather than agency. New opportunities may appear as new external conversations, seeming to offer new guidance and a way to a sustainable career. For some, the evidence indicates that they may be experiencing warehousing, where they have attended another training provider at the same level with no progression on to higher qualifications. An explanation to why a learner's own internal conversation is not warning them about repeating lower level provision may not lie in an aspiration for a career. They may be willing to be flexible with their aspiration to avoid being NEET and any future negative effects that time spent unemployed may have on their future. Young person F, who had, since 16, changed aspiration from care to business, and was now studying childcare, also hoped to work in fitness sector. She felt being engaged on a course, rather than unemployment was important, remarking:

"I'm so happy that I'm here because instead of me sitting at home all the time, just waiting for my sign on day until I get money, I'm actually doing something, getting experience."

"(She would be) looking for a job, which would probably be very hard, considering I don't have any like proper proper qualifications."

This was corroborated by young person A, who remarked:

“No one is going to give you a job out there, as long as you've got little bit of qualifications at least, you know like proper qualifications. Obviously, if you want a proper job you need qualifications, you need something at least.”

Young person D's lack of experience and qualifications led to an employer referring her to a training provider to do Functional Skills. In this instance, they choose to refer her to gain qualifications rather than perhaps risk employing a NEET. She now felt that it was important that she was engaged in education, even if it meant being flexible with her aspiration. She remarked:

“I was going to join college for my GCSEs but I didn't have the confidence I guess. I had applied for a job and they had referred me to (previous training provider). That's where I did my Functional Skills Level 1, and now I'm at (current training provider).”

“(Previous training provider) didn't have anything going on. I didn't want to waste my time because I was eighteen, I only had one year left and then I couldn't do anything, so I had gone to connexions (government youth employment agency) and they had referred me to (current training provider).”

“I have to get these subjects in order to get anything.”

This suggests that their aspirations are being guided by the structures of the courses available, and the opportunities they may provide, rather than forming their own agency through critical assessment of what they need to do to meet their aspirations.

For the learners at training provider one, their new aspirations tended to elide on what classroom based vocational subjects they offered. This included customer service, business and health and social care. Young person A had aspired to a career in construction or being a mechanic after moving into the FE

sector at age sixteen. He had attended two other training providers both at Level 1 and had tried various vocational courses including construction, carpentry and mechanics. He had aspired to an apprenticeship, and attended one provider on the basis that they said they would find him an apprenticeship. When this did not come to fruition, he was disappointed as it was the sole reason why he chose that training provider. In a competitive and marketised sector, progression routes are used as marketing tools to entice learners to study at that provider. Young person A found that marketing was not a proxy for a quality external conversation from which he could form his agency:

“They promise you apprenticeships and everything. All these training providers they promise you apprenticeships and what not.”

The failure of this external voice, and the constraint of not having any GCSEs, meant that he was attending his third provider studying a course at Level 1. He had changed his aspiration again to study business and administration and work in car sales. In the year since he completed alternative provision at an FE college, he had failed to progress past a grade D equivalence twice and was now on his third attempt. This flexibility of aspiration meant that he had changed from construction to mechanics, and, as these were not available at his current provider, he had changed his career aspiration to car sales.

Young person C had initially started a catering course at Level 3 or A-level equivalence, an aspiration largely guided by a teacher and the course being marketed to him as not needing GCSE maths and English at grade C. He remarked:

“I did find (the catering course) through one of my teachers, who recommended me because she thought I’d be good at it, so I applied and went to the interview there. That was for catering.”

“When I was doing catering, that wasn’t really for me. It was more of a fact I went there because they were going to take me because I had no maths and English qualifications.”

The external voice of his teacher was unreliable, as was the guidance given by the college. Before he could complete his catering course, he transferred unsuccessfully to a sports course which offered access to higher education, before becoming NEET. He had found his current training provider at a careers fair, with marketing acting as a proxy for advice and guidance. He was now studying health and social care. This is where his aspirations now lay. This learner had a parent with a white collar profession, who could act as a reliable external voice, supporting him to find an apprenticeship in the care sector for when he has finished at the training provider. He was benefiting from a high quality external voice coming from a white collar professional parent whose disposition was to support their child into a better employment position. However, the flexibility in his aspiration had meant he was willing to be guided and change his initial aspiration from catering, to sport to the caring professions which he now felt offered the best chance of employment, and therefore not being NEET.

Training provider one offered three different vocational options whereas training provider two offered only childcare related qualifications. The students who attended here had a more defined view of their current aspirations but four of the students had different aspirations on leaving school (see appendix ii). This included young person H who by the of age sixteen had experienced being NEET, had failed to complete a short health and social care course at his school sixth form and had applied unsuccessfully for a construction apprenticeship. He had

started the care course at his school sixth form after being referred back by a training provider. His acceptance of a place on the course was due more to a will not to be NEET rather than an aspiration for a career in care. The same training provider also referred him to an apprenticeship in construction for which he was unsuccessful in gaining a place. He remarked:

“I was unemployed for a bit and then I went on to (previous training provider and they helped me get in touch with my (secondary school) and I went back there to do a health and social care course. That didn’t go very well, so I left there.”

“It wasn’t lessons, I used to just go there and we’d sit down he’d give me a list of things and he’d say what would you be interested in this that or the other. They put me through to go on to a construction apprenticeship but I had to do (assessment) testing, my English and maths and didn’t go through.”

This training provider was providing an unreliable external voice, whose advice he trusted. This caused him to alter his aspiration to quite disparate careers.

This flexibility in aspiration, coupled with a will not to be NEET, led him to research on the internet for apprenticeships, where he found his current course in childcare. He always had an interest in childcare but was reluctant to join a childcare course as it did not fit with his peer’s gendered view of a career choice for a sixteen year old male. This powerful external voice, which he could engage with on familiar terms, affected his aspiration. He received good family support over his choices especially when it came to wanting to work in a childcare setting. This means that the weakest external conversation for this learner was the professional voice of the training provider who referred him to different courses in different sectors.

At age sixteen, the speed at which change is happening for these young people and the amount of risk and responsibility they are accumulating, means

that they are being asked to make decisions that can affect them for the rest of their lives. Young person I remarked that this can be 'daunting' for some young people:

"A lot of people can be a bit confused because they don't really know what they want to do and what you do at college reflects on what you are going to do after you leave college."

Young person F was unsure of what she wanted to do at age sixteen. This meant she changed courses and colleges a number of times before starting her childcare course at training provider two. She was also considering a career in the fitness industry but had been advised that there were fewer jobs in that sector and that childcare qualifications offered her the best chance of employment. Similarly, young person J, although moving from school directly to a childcare specific provider, was still unsure whether she wanted to do a small animal care course or continue on to the next level of childcare qualification at her current provider.

These young people are starting from a point of perceived failure, be it to achieve GCSEs, complete a course or to be in employment. Their lack of experience in the world of FE and a disposition formed through repeated failure means they are looking for support making decisions about their education. These fragile learners are looking for voices to act as a proxy for experience, but what they often receive is unreliable marketing for college courses. This indicates that the young people were taking a flexible approach to aspiration, and that what they were being offered was shaping their aspirations. This meant that for most of the interviewees, their current aspirations were removed from what they had set out to do at age sixteen.

iv. Aspirations for five years' time

At age sixteen many young people are being asked to make a decision about what they will be doing for the rest of their working lives. This is especially true of learners who are aiming to follow a vocational pathway, where they will choose a BTEC in a particular specialism. This is different to A-levels where a learner can pick a number of subjects either related to their aspiration or not.

By asking the interviewees what they will be doing in five years' time, it was hoped that they would visualise a time past their current and any subsequent studies. What emerged was picture of optimism. All were positive about their future, which they envisaged would include them being in employment. This foregrounded how the young people saw time, with five years being seen as enough time for them to leave education and enter the world of work. For a sixteen or seventeen year old following an academic pathway to university, in five years' time they may still be completing a degree, benefiting from the extension of childhood afforded to academic young people.

Seven learners saw themselves being in a skilled blue collar career or white collar professional career in five years' time. One learner saw themselves in a blue collar job. This aligned with their current aspirations. Two learners identified economic security through being in employment as an aspiration for five years' time. Their current aspirations were for a blue collar job and a skilled blue collar job respectively (see appendix ii).

The two young people who gave a non-specific answer to what they aspired to in five years' time were reflecting on aspirations that had already changed a number of times in the year since they left school. Young person A aspired to

having a “*family and a good job*” whilst young person H aspired to be in “*stable employment*”. Both of these learners had experienced being NEET after leaving school and had changed aspiration a number of times. Young person A was aged seventeen when he was interviewed and had attended two other training providers. He had experienced a number of vocational courses including construction, carpentry and mechanics. Young person H was aged sixteen and had attended one other provider studying a different vocational discipline. He had been refused a place on an apprenticeship in construction. In a short time, these two learners had already experienced economic uncertainty that was characteristic of young people who had experienced educational failure and unemployment. Nine of the ten learners interviewed had experienced being NEET since they were sixteen (see appendix i). This was the experience they drew upon when forming their aspirations. For these two young people, this meant a possible reluctance to be specific about where they saw themselves in five years’ time.

Other young people were willing to be more specific about their aspirations. The learners who had studied A-levels previously still aspired to white collar careers. Young person B stated that in five years’ time he saw himself being a qualified accountant, whilst young person I stated she saw herself working in a nursery and then becoming a qualified social worker or working with children with disabilities. Both of these young people still saw themselves working in careers that involved the possibility of university, even though they both expressed doubts about going on to do degree level study during the interview.

Young person I remarked:

“I’m considering university but with my experiences from college, I’m not too sure.”

“I know there is a lot of work. My friend is at uni currently she is doing psychology and she says it is really really hard. You do get a lot of work. I’m assuming it’s a lot more work than A-levels.”

“I think I could but I’m not sure I want to.”

Whilst young person B stated:

“My mom was like if you don’t want to go to uni then what are you gonna do.”

“Uni is a yes or no at the moment because I don’t know if I want to go.”

These two young people saw progression to university being possible due to achieving GCSEs at age sixteen. The first courses they progressed on to allowed access to university via the privileged route of A-levels. This was amplified for young person B by his one parent being a graduate and in a white collar career, making university and white collar careers part of his experience. In particular, his mother was enthusiastic about university, possibly to protect any social mobility or position she has achieved in society. She was a strong external voice acting on his reflexivity and agency.

Although both of these young people were unsuccessful with their A-level studies, white collar careers and university are still part of the internal conversations they were having about their future careers. However, in asking what they would be doing in five years, neither of these two young people stated that they would still be at university, even if they had not yet started the qualifications needed to apply for a place on a degree.

Two of the interviewees differentiated their time in education and work by stating they wanted to be working in a ‘*proper job*’. For young person J this was in a skilled blue collar career in childcare or small animal care and for young person

D this was in a blue collar entry level business and administration job. This can be considered an aspiration for adulthood, and a demarcation between the learning of childhood and the working of adulthood.

Aspiring for adulthood through the transition to work was inferred by the interviewees who saw apprenticeships as work (see appendix iii) or where study did not feature as part of any young person's aspiration for five years' time. This indicates that for these young people, the transition to adulthood is sooner than for middle class peers who could be at university until their early twenties. These young people expect to enter the world of work earlier and this frames their aspiration.

This can be identified in the responses given at provider two, where all five interviewees believed they would be working. As to be expected at a training provider that specialises in childcare, these young people were aiming to still be working in the sector in five years' time. The young people would have known what they would be studying when they enrolled at the provider and would be aiming to do this as a career.

Young person F was pragmatic about what she would be doing in five years' time. Although she was unsure if she would prefer a job in the fitness industry rather than childcare, she felt that she would remain in the childcare sector due to the job security it potentially offered:

"I was told with childcare there is so many jobs because obviously people are having kids a lot, the populations getting bigger, wider and wider, so that means more childcare jobs, teaching, nursery assistants, all that. It will be more easy, hopefully, to get a job."

For young person F, economic security is closely related to aspiration. Both her parents are unemployed, she has experienced being NEET and is still in receipt of

unemployment benefits. Apart from aspiring to childcare, there was a will to be employed:

“At the moment, I’m stuck with the job centre. I don’t want to be going to sign on all the time and I don’t want to be dependent on that money. I thought OK, let’s ask them, because with the job centre, obviously, I know they can put you on apprenticeships and things. I asked them and obviously that how I got put on (training provider two).”

“That was my motivation; I don’t want to be person who is stuck on the dole for the rest of my life.”

The long term aspirations of the learners attending training provider one had also realigned to what they were currently studying. Young person C was accessing childcare qualifications at the training provider and saw himself working in a nursery in five years’ time. He was able to do qualifications to work toward a specific career. However, four of the five learners at training provider one were accessing Level 1 qualifications in business and administration. These are qualifications that offer no direct access to a trade but provide transferable employment skills. These can give access to a range of jobs and careers in a range of sectors. However, the lower level qualifications will only provide entry-level skills that entry-level positions require. This means that if the young people enter the job market with only that level of qualification, they will only be trained for blue collar positions.

v. Aspiration for apprenticeships.

The idea of an apprenticeship, a job with training that allows for entry into a skilled career, has a long history dating back as far as the middle ages. They largely collapsed in the 1970s to be replaced by the youth training schemes of the 1980s (Allen & Ainley, 2014 p2) and ‘training without jobs’ (Armitage, Bryant,

Dunhill, Hayes, Hudson, Kent, Lawes & Renwick, 2003, p269, p27) where young people started courses at FE institutions speculating that they would gain employment when they became qualified. Currently, an apprenticeship involves a college or training provider working in partnership with an employer. The apprentice has to study towards a vocational qualification as well as Functional Skills maths and English, unless they achieved GCSEs at grade C. The involvement of employers and the time spent in the workplace has put an employment emphasis on apprenticeships for the young people interviewed for this project (see appendix iii).

Young person J, who had never considered doing an apprenticeship, saw it as:

“Like having a job where you have the same responsibilities as having a job and if you pass you get a job.”

Whilst young person G saw an apprenticeship as a:

“Job opportunity; you have to work hard for it and you get paid for what you do and it helps you as well learn more.”

Equally, young person F saw an apprenticeship as:

“Better than college as you get experience, the qualifications and you get paid.”

She feels this is closer to the world of work. Young people B, C, D and E all remarked that you got a wage for doing apprenticeships, something that made it closer to work. This is significant considering the withdrawal of educational maintenance allowance in 2010, a means by which a New Labour sought to increase engagement with FE and reduce the number of young people who were NEET (Spielhofer, Benton, Evans, Featherstone, Golden, Nelson, & Smith, 2009,

p46).

However, none of the interviewees could articulate further what an apprenticeship was. None stated what the requirements were to achieve an apprenticeship, or what the balance between work and study was. There was a general feeling for most learners that doing an apprenticeship was better than doing a speculative FE course as they would be getting experience, something they identified as important in getting a job, but that the apprenticeship may not lead to a job in itself. They essentially saw an apprenticeship as a means to improving their chances of employment by gaining experience, rather than as training with a job that they would retain as would have happened in previous generations. However, the view of an apprenticeship as work rather than study perhaps indicates that young people are eager to enter the adult world of work.

Three out of the five learners at training provider one expressed a wish to progress on to an apprenticeship of some kind, with one other learner previously aspiring to gain a place on an apprenticeship. At training provider two, none of the learners indicated that they wanted progress on to an apprenticeship due to the clear progression pathway to Level 2 and 3 qualifications offered by the provider. They also undertook a work experience placement as part of their programme of study. It should be noted that two of the young people at training provider two had been looking for apprenticeships before they started at the training provider. Therefore, although only three learners had a current aspiration to find an apprenticeship, half of the learners interviewed had, at some point since they were aged sixteen, aspired for an apprenticeship (see appendix ii).

The learners at training provider one were more positive about

apprenticeships. Young people B, C and D displayed a positive attitude towards apprenticeships as this was a route they were aspiring to.

Young person D in particular saw them as a route to a career, remarking:

“I had in my mind that before February, I should get an apprenticeship, and I kind of have got it, I’m going to find out tomorrow, and I know that once I get into it, then I can do Level 3 apprenticeship. Then I can get a proper job.”

Four out of the five learners at training provider two were ambivalent or displayed no opinion about apprenticeships, indicating that the desire to do an apprenticeship was less when a young person could see a planned progression route and had the offer of work experience as part of their course. Negative feelings towards apprenticeships were displayed by young people A and I. Both had previously looked for apprenticeships but were unsuccessful in finding them. This may explain some negative feelings toward this type of learning (see appendix iii).

Young person A stated that he thought apprenticeships were for the ‘talented’ and it was ‘luck’ if you got taken on to one. Young person I remarked that she thought age sixteen was too early to be entering the world of work.

Young person A, without any qualifications from school, found an apprenticeship difficult to find, even though he felt he was promised one by a training provider. He comes from a position of less privilege with an unemployed parent. Young person I, who, similar to young person B had a failed attempt at A-levels, spent six months unsuccessfully looking for an apprenticeship. Both of her parents work in blue collar jobs. This indicates that ‘privileged’ should be added to ‘talented’ and ‘luck’ as factors in finding an apprenticeship (see appendix i).

Apprenticeships are part of the world of FE, and the interviews suggest they

are something that these young people aspire to. They were also seen as a preferred option for those who had aspired to higher level courses. Young person B had a conditional offer of an apprenticeship in accountancy if he could pass his Functional Skills in English at Level 2. He had initially started an A-level course. Young person C, who was also looking to start an apprenticeship, had been undertaking a Level 3 course before leaving without gaining the qualification (see appendix i).

These two learners had adjusted their aspiration to an apprenticeship. They saw this as an alternative pathway for the children of white collar professionals who had been unable to follow the A-level and university route. For both these learners it was due to finding the A-level/Level 3 courses too difficult. Both had been able to arrange interviews for an apprenticeship with support from graduate white collar professional parents.

For the middle classes or white collar professionals, apprenticeships, perhaps maintaining some larger memory of the youth training schemes of the 1980s (Allen & Ainley, 2014, p2), were seen as an option only for working class children. However, comments made by the Minister for Skills Nick Boles in 2014 (Telegraph, 2014) shows a shift in how apprenticeships are perceived by the white collar classes who want to see their children progress into a career without being stigmatised by the term NEET.

Overall, for this cohort of learners, apprenticeships were part of their aspirations. However, this aspiration was not as strong as aspirations for Level 3 courses, especially when a progression route was clear and offered by their current training provider. However, for a few of the learners they offered the

opportunity to progress into a skilled blue collar or white collar profession. This was an important factor in the way they talked to themselves about their future careers.

vi. Aspiration for study at Level 3 or A-levels.

A-levels have been seen the traditional route for learners who want to 'stay on a school' after they have completed their GCSEs. These are academic qualifications that need a learner to have gained at least a grade C at GCSE in the subjects they wish to continue to study. For vocational and technical subjects, A-level equivalents are available in FE institutions in the form of BTEC national diploma qualifications (see appendix v). These vocational qualifications can also offer access to university.

Academic A-levels are held in higher regard and renown, with Ofsted (2013, p13) and the Department for Education (2015, p5) stating that A-levels are the 'traditional' route for school leavers who wish to continue studying after they finish school.

Of the ten young people, three had experience of studying A-levels or other Level 3 qualifications (see appendix i). This meant that they were now studying at two levels below the qualifications they were doing when they left school. This indicates that the stereotype of underachievement that can be attached to NEET young people does not sufficiently take into account the constraints and enablements that young people can encounter when they complete school and start to make decisions about where to study next. These learners had achieved sufficiently to be allowed on to A-level or equivalent courses, but had been constrained for a variety of reasons, including the difficulty of the course and poor

advice and guidance.

Young person I chose to study A-levels at an FE college rather than a sixth form college because they offered her a free bus pass. Her internal conversation was informed by financial support available to her family rather than the quality of the education she would receive. Government commissioned research identified the cost of transport having a direct impact on young people engaging in education or training (Spielhofer, Benton, Evans, Featherstone, Golden, Nelson & Smith, 2009, p69). For many NEET young people the economic cost of learning can be too much to afford.

At training provider one, young people B and D stated they would like to continue on to a Level 3 apprenticeship. Young people A and E also made reference to continual study at an FE college. This meant that for this cohort of young people, progression on to a Level 3 vocational course was how they framed their aspiration, with no interviewees stating they wanted to progress on to A-levels or take an academic pathway. At training provider two, all of the interviewees were planning on or considering progressing on to the Level 3 course as soon as they had completed Level 1 and Level 2 (see appendix ii).

The learners at training provider two had been offered a structure where they did not have to make a choice about what to do after they had finished their course. For any agency the young people sacrifice at this point of their studies, they would be rewarded with access to Level 3 vocational qualifications, work experience, and to a career they have aspired to since starting at the training provider on a Level 1 programme of study.

None of the young people aspired to academic A-Levels. Some had initially

held this aspiration and had begun to study A-Level programmes at either a general FE college or at a school sixth form. However, the lack of qualifications, and that A-levels were not a feature of any of the external conversations they were having with peers, parents or teachers, meant that A-levels had never been an aspiration for most of the learners interviewed.

Both of the young people who had begun A-levels felt that they were more difficult than they expected. Young person B, who had decided to stay at his school sixth form, stated that he had been told that doing A-levels were harder than doing the first year of a degree. He reflected on his experience, remarking:

“A-levels are, are literally harder than probably the hardest thing ever because I thought A-levels were going to be easy, quick, fly by. But you have to break it down, you have to do more studying, you have to do more research, you have to do more find more information about things. You have to do a lot of things with A-levels. A-levels tend to be, people say A-levels are harder than getting a degree, it’s harder than GCSE. When they were saying it to me I was thinking, that can’t be true, it’s not that hard. So then I sat it and I was like, people are right, it’s hard because then you realise that the work that you are doing, you are not putting in enough. The work that you were doing at GCSE, the hour and two hours that you are doing, you have to put in seven hours of work. So I was doing graphics and I was putting in like eight hours a day.”

Young person I found them to have too much content, stating they were “*too much*”. Both young people’s experience of A-levels indicates that schools are not preparing some learners for the rigours of A-level study, especially if they have been previously categorised as being more suited for vocational education or the school does not have a history of pupils progressing on to A-levels.

The perception gained by these two young people of A-levels being too difficult is similar to how they were viewed by all of the young people who were

interviewed. A-levels were considered to be too difficult for them by six of the young people. This perception has already put a constraint on these young people, who believe they are not capable of achieving A-level qualifications. Young person J stated that she did not have the knowledge to do A-levels, whilst young person A stated they were “*really really hard*”. He noted that he had friends that were doing A-levels and that it “*will really pay off*” for them. He felt that academic A-levels had more value over the vocational qualifications that were available to him.

What is significant is that, exclusive of the six young people who stated that they thought A-levels were too difficult for them, three young people did not express any opinion on them at all due to having no experience of A-levels. They did not appear in any conversations they had about educational choices. Young Person E, who had a career aspiration to work as a bricklayer, stated that he did not have any experience of them nor did he know anyone who had done them. Young person H saw them as a “*whole different world*”. These young people did not express this in terms of discrimination nor did they feel that they were being excluded from academic pathways.

A-levels were not an option that these young people reflexively considered when they were deciding what to do after completing their GCSEs. They were not part of their internal conversations they were having with themselves when considering what they wanted to do next nor were they part of the external conversations they were having at home or at school. Thompson argues that:

“One obvious explanation for the increased likelihood of being in FE for lower social classes is that these young people may not have the educational qualifications necessary to pursue higher status courses in other institutions, and therefore seek vocational

or other courses in FE.” (Thompson, 2009, p34)

Thompson notes that high achieving working class young people are likely to be able to access academic courses at sixth forms (Thompson, 2009, p35), as indicated by young people B and I starting A-level courses (see appendix i). However, as there is an increased likelihood that a working class young person will not have achieved GCSEs, they are more likely to be surrounded by external voices indicating that vocational education is more suitable for them. Bathmaker (2005, p97) also argues that participation in vocational education can limit what options these young people have after sixteen, blocking them from A-levels and privileged academic routes. This corroborates Atkins’ (2008) argument that attending a course at Level 1 socialises low attaining young people for low skilled work, which keeps them constrained within their own class (Atkins, 2008, p202), with limited educational opportunities as they lack the qualifications to study at a higher level (Atkins, 2008, p196).

Taken as a whole, access to A-levels had been blocked for all of the young people in one form or another. For some, A-levels didn’t enter their internal conversations as they had no direct or external experience of them. For others, the perception had formed that they would be too difficult for them. Some, who had progressed on to A-levels, blamed their failure to achieve A-levels on their own intellectual failings. They did not recognise other factors, such as schools failing to sufficiently prepare them for the possibility of A-Level study after completion of GCSEs or that they were considered more suited to vocational education due to their class or prior achievement.

All remarked that they felt they were not suitable for A-level study, rather

than A-levels not being suitable for their career aspirations. This indicates that none of the young people had the disposition or sufficient knowledge to assess their position in the FE sector, and the relationship between A-levels and their future careers, in any meaningful way. This has been caused by biographical reasons, such as family class, schooling and achievement level. However, situationally, these young people have become NEET at a time where the jobs they would have traditionally done have gone. This highlights the need for quality advice and guidance from a younger age on the importance of qualifications and the ability for social mobility that they may bring.

vii. Aspiration for Higher Education (HE)

Higher Education (HE) is usually seen as a three year undergraduate degree taught at a university. This is seen as a desirable path to follow, especially for the white collar classes, where a degree is seen to offer better career prospects for their children (McCulloch, 2006, p704).

Similar to Level 3 qualifications where there are vocational alternatives to A-levels, Level 4 and 5 professional qualifications and Higher National Diploma vocational qualifications are offered by FE institutions (see appendix v). These are equivalent to the first year and second year of a degree respectively. Training provider two offers childcare management qualifications at Level 5 that are equivalent to the second year of an undergraduate degree. This is hidden in the narrative of FE and HE, where certain kinds of education only take place in certain kinds of institutions. This view has affected the decisions made by the young people, who may have assumed they have been blocked from the privileged route of university due to their own failings. However, these vocational and professional

HE qualifications can suffer from being seen as less prestigious as a full bachelor's degree, with academic HE being held in higher esteem.

Although there was a lack of external voices offering them guidance on the full scope of HE available at universities, FE colleges and training providers, eight of the young people expressed some desire to go into higher education, with one young person expressing a strong desire to complete a HE course of some kind (see appendix ii).

Young person G, who expressed a strong desire for HE remarked:

“At the moment I’m (hoping) to work towards my Level 3 but I want to try and work towards my Level 6 or was it 5, so I can gain my management degree.”

These would be childcare related qualifications, and only became an option due to the influence of the external voice of training provider two. This was not an aspiration when he started at the training provider, only becoming an aspiration due to his current situation. He may not have had an aspiration for HE if he was attending another training provider which did not offer qualifications up to Level 5. The clear progression route up to HE childcare qualifications offered by provider two is an enablement for this particular young person. It has changed how he has formed his aspiration. This was borne out of reacting to his learning environment and being flexible with his aspiration rather than using his internal conversation or agency to work towards HE. Training provider two offers learners a context that enables them to aspire to progress on to HE courses. This new external voice is telling them that HE is structurally now a possibility.

The two learners who expressed an ambition for white collar careers, B and I, only displayed a medium desire to go on to HE. Both had negative experiences

with A-levels and they used this to qualify their medium aspiration for HE. They both remarked that they found A-levels too hard, and any disinclination to HE may be caused by this. Both of these young people expressed aspiration for careers that could be enhanced by a degree. However, the internalised failure of their A-levels has caused them to reflexively react against an academic pathway as it may constitute further failure.

Seven of the young people expressed negative views towards HE based on feeling that they would not be able to go to university due to previous failure or other personalised factors (see appendix ii). This negativity is in contrast to the optimism for employment each learner displayed during the interviews. Relating this to the careers they were aspiring to shows some structural basis for this exclusion from HE. The skilled blue collar careers being identified by the learners would not need HE level of attainment.

The young people recognised the constraints that they faced to progressing on to HE. Young person A wanted to go to university but lacked the qualifications. He felt that he could do a degree if he worked hard and did the right courses. Some of his friends were doing A-levels and were going to be able to progress to university:

“I always wanted to go to university but the thing is you need qualifications to go to university, good qualifications. If I put my head down, put my head down properly, do the right courses to go to uni, then there is more chance of going to uni.”

As he was attending training provider one, he did not have an opportunity to stay there and complete a HE course. His current situation and lack of qualifications meant his chances of progression to HE were remote.

Young person C was in a similar position, although he had been on a

course at a college that would have allowed him to progress on to a HE course.

He remarked:

“I would have liked to have gone to university. Because of the way things gone, I suppose, I can, just not yet, you have got to work hard for that.”

He had been studying on a Level 3 vocational BTEC and recognised that if he had completed that course he may have had a chance to go to university. He remarked:

“I’ve still got friends who are there now and they are almost finishing year two now at (college) and they’ve all got uni offers, so if I’d progressed, I’d have progressed and would have ended up like those with uni offers.”

Young person J said that she always wanted to go to university but it was for ‘clever people’ and she thought she would not be able to go:

“I’ve always wanted to do university but I feel they’re for, I just always felt that they were for people who know a lot more, clever people.”

This learner achieved a grade D for GCSE English and a grade G for GCSE maths. She was on target to pass her Functional Skills and to progress on to a Level 2 course followed by a Level 3 course in childcare at the training provider, yet she felt she was not clever enough for university. This is an indication of how entrenched the feelings of failure due to not achieving GCSEs were for this young person. She believed her failure to gain GCSEs at a certain level was intrinsic to her, and people like her could not progress on to HE. For this learner, not being able to progress on to HE was a matter of individual failure and lack of ability, not structural inequality.

Young person H thought university was a:

“Gateway to...once you go to university and you like put your head down and come out with what you went there for, you can pretty much do what you need to really.”

He would have liked to progress on to a HE level course or university but he was not “*going to get his hopes up*”. He would possibly consider staying on at training provider two to do a higher level course. HE had become part of the context of learning and something that this learner could now aspire to. He still thought it was unlikely due to his previous academic performance and that HE at the training provider was not university in the traditional sense.

Many of the young people stated that they thought HE would be too difficult for them or did not express an opinion because it was outside their experience. They cited individual factors such as prior failure or not having achieved qualifications. However, there were indications of structural inequality related to class and family background that had affected the stories that the interviewees told themselves about what kind of learning and employment was right for young people like them.

viii. Influence of parental attainment or employment on the aspiration of the young people.

It has been an argument of this project that FE institutions have been seen as for working class children to learn technical and vocational skills. This is especially true of those attending courses designed for NEETs or those who have failed at school. Any attempt to combine academic and vocational education has been seen to risk the quality of education undertaken by middle class children aiming for A-levels and university. As seen by the failure to implement a policy of tertiary colleges during the 1980s, the Diploma in the 2000s, and a general belief since 1944 that segregation in education should be protected, academic routes have remained largely separate, especially in sixth form colleges. McCulloch (2006)

argues that this has allowed for protection of certain educational privileges for a middle class keen to maintain its place in society (McCulloch, 2006, p704).

All of the young people interviewed were aiming for a career that was close to the employment class of their parents (see appendix i & ii). Seven of young people were aiming for skilled blue collar work, and had parents either in blue collar work or unemployed. This desire for a career that exceeds but is within the limits of their parent's class can partly be explained by the strong external conversations that they have at home about careers, jobs and the right kind of learning. For these young people and their families, a good career can be found within the skilled aristocracy, not the middle class professions. This can also be seen in the aspirations of the children of white collar parents, especially the two learners who had mothers in white collar professions, where the idea of a professional career is paramount.

The data collected for this project shows that having white collar parents does have some effect on aspiration. It also foregrounds the notion that white collar parents are more likely to support their children to avoid being NEET than blue collar parents, enabling them to find more satisfying long term career aims. Three of the young people had unemployed parents, whilst the rest worked. Three had parents who worked in white collar professions (see appendix i). None of the children of blue collar workers or unemployed parents mentioned their parents in relation to getting a place on a course or supporting them to find education, training or work. All of the young people were in training and were aspiring to a career. All had the will to be employed. Out of the seven interviewees with blue collar or unemployed parents, five aspired to a skilled blue collar profession, with

one other aspiring to a white collar profession (see appendix ii).

Four interviewees indicated that they had at least one parent who had attended a higher education institute of some kind. Of these four young people, three learners identified their parents as having white collar careers. All three were at training provider A. Of these, two of the learners had progressed on to Level 3 courses before being unsuccessful. The other learner, young person D, had not achieved GCSEs due to a disrupted schooling.

Young person G stated that his mother had recently undertaken a nursing course at a local university. However, she was currently acting as a carer for her mother in an unpaid capacity so was considered to be unemployed. Young person G had stated some aspiration for higher education as outlined in the previous section. This indicates that for some young people, witnessing a parent attempting for social mobility via the means of gaining a degree as a mature student makes HE a possibility for them. This was also the inferred experience of young people B and C whose mothers both gained professional degrees and access to white collar careers.

Young people B and C both had mothers who were graduates working in the social work sector with management responsibility. Location is a factor in their employment and level of attainment. Birmingham is a large local authority that employs a large number of social workers. It has five universities and a number of FE colleges offering access to higher education courses. Young person C noted that his mother had gone to university as a mature student, going on to achieve a master's degree.

Both of these young people were aspiring to move on to an apprenticeship,

with both receiving parental support to gain a place on an apprenticeship when they had completed their current course. These two learners were the only interviewees who made reference to parents actively supporting them to find a training or collage place.

For young person B, an apprenticeship only became a viable aspiration when a teacher helped him and his mother overcome his prejudice towards apprenticeships as a type of learning that was not comparable to university in terms of standing or opportunity.

This prejudice was embedded in a family where university and a white collar career are important. As young person B remarked:

“my mom went to uni, she did social work...my cousin went to uni did civil engineering...I got a cousin who went to uni she is now a teacher in London...I got an auntie, she went uni she has just finished her degree in nursery...My cousin is starting uni, she is doing a degree in doctoring. I got another cousin in uni he is doing surgery. So my family is uni based.”

Here academic qualifications and university were seen as part of building economic certainty and a middle class social position crucial for their family and future generations (Ball, Macrae, & Maguire, 1999, p220). Technical and vocational learning was seen to endanger this position. Before his teacher's intervention, apprenticeships were for the working class to learn technical skills. However, he now feels they offer better prospects than university. That his apprenticeship is in accountancy, a white collar career, makes it acceptable for him to attend an institution deigned for NEETs as a means to an end. However, despite any advantage gained from having a professional graduate parent, he still believes that he would be unemployed if he was not studying at the training provider. His mother worked in a white collar profession and was a graduate. Whilst this brings

some cultural capital, in a stratified middle class she was not part of an upper-management class. For example, her status as a professional has been unable to influence what school he attended either through selection or the paying of fees for a private education. However, there was an advantage of having a family culture of education as a means to success. This has enabled him to be flexible his aspiration and find a pathway that suited this disposition, namely an apprenticeship in accountancy.

Similarly, young person C had interviews arranged for two apprenticeships. He found these through attending careers fairs with his mother who worked in the same profession as young person B's mother. Although the advantage given was only marginal, support in finding an apprenticeship after leaving an FE provider did make these young people less at risk of being NEET in the future. These two examples corroborate the narrative, presented in chapters two and three as part of the history of FE, where middle class parents are seen to want better than a vocational education for their children (McCulloch, 2006, p704). It also highlights a shift in how apprenticeships are viewed by the white collar classes as an acceptable alternative to being NEET (Paton, 2014). However, there may be a possible over-representation in the sample of this phenomenon due to the way the learners were recruited, with sampling based on the institution, rather than the young people. In a larger sample made up of learners from multiple FE institutions, the experience of these learners may have seemed less significant or have been further corroborated by other interviewees.

Young person I also had an unsuccessful attempt at A-levels before spending six months unsuccessfully looking for an apprenticeship. Both of her

parents work in blue collar professions. The only reference made to her parents in the interviews regarded the loss of her mother's child benefit if she did not return to education or training in some form. This is the only means by which RPA, or 'raising the participation age' (Maguire, 2013, p61), is being enforced (gov.uk, 2015); restricting universal benefits to the less privileged. Young person I had achieved GCSEs and could access the privileged route of A-levels. However, she remarked she found them too difficult. Her parents work in blue collar and skilled blue collar jobs. She remarked:

"(A-levels are) Hard. Very hard. They are interesting but they are too hard."

This is common for working class young people who gain access to A-levels. As Ball, Macrae and Maguire argue:

"Young people with little or no family history or experience to draw on, this is a frightening world but also a difficult and treacherous and sometimes confusing one which they are nonetheless determined to enter and explore." (Ball, Macrae & Maguire, 1999, p220)

This foregrounds the advantage that the children of white collar professionals have over the children of the blue collar classes, keen to have support their children to maintain social advantages.

A counterpoint to this is the experience of young person D, who in spite of having a doctor as a father did not receive any parental support. She was having to make her own decisions about careers, and had experienced being NEET. This shows the broad range of young people who can become NEET, with a middle class upbringing not necessarily protecting a young person from becoming unemployed or not achieving any qualifications.

During the interviews, no other reference was made by the young people to

parental support in finding their training place. Young person H did remark that his family were supportive of him choosing childcare as an aspiration after abandoning hopes of working in construction. This may reflect their own assumptions about how careers are viewed as gendered with childcare a 'female' profession. His family were supportive of his choice rather than giving him support to find a training place.

In the context of this research, and parents supporting aspiration, the children of white collar professionals had greater support from external parental voices in finding satisfying long term career goals. The children of blue collar or skilled blue collar parents tended to have to take responsibility and make their own decisions about their education. This corroborates the findings of Simmons and Thompson (2011b, p136). In their study, some blue collar parents were less supportive as they felt that their child should find work or that by continuing in education their child would face further failure.

To identify how far this aspiration matches with the ‘officially’ prescribed view of aspiration as defined by Government Reviews and reports.

As part of the policy and literature review presented in chapter three, it was established that an official aspiration for young people was to achieve GCSEs at grade C or above. For learners who do not achieve grade C in maths and English, this aspiration follows them into the world of FE. It was also established that the current Conservative government has promised to increase apprenticeships as a means of tackling the problem of NEETs.

i. GCSE.

GCSEs have been an important element of government policy towards young people. The literature review identified that there has been a policy aspiration, as foregrounded by the Kennedy report in 1997 and the Wolf report in 2011, for young people to achieve five GCSEs at grade C or above including maths and English. This has been used as a marker of success or failure for a young person at age sixteen, with access to A-level courses blocked for young people who have not achieved GCSEs. It can also mean that access to some A-level equivalent vocational courses is blocked. This puts a constraint on the young people being able to go on to university or a higher level course. As Ball, Macrae and Maguire argue:

“For many the ‘realities’ of GCSE performance destroy tentatively held aspirations.” (Ball, Macrae & Maguire, 1999, p221)

Most of the interviewees had scored below grade C at GCSE (see appendix i). One learner had achieved both maths and English at a grade B, whilst three other learners had achieved at least one of either maths or English at a grade C or above. Whether the learners with only one GCSE in either maths or English were

viewed a success is subjective, however they now had to do Functional Skills as a remedial to not achieving that one GCSE. Functional Skills are a 'stepping stone' qualification (Skills Funding Agency, 2014b) that were designed to develop the skills of young people towards a GCSE, and in some cases act as an equivalent qualification.

Some young people see having to keep studying maths and English as a continuation of something they failed at school. Young person I, who did pass her GCSE maths and English, had empathy for her peers who were not as successful. She remarked:

"I don't really think it's fair, well I suppose it is because you need that grade of maths and English to get anywhere, but I just think it's so long winded because a person hasn't ended up getting their GCSEs they have got to end up doing this."

The interviewees who had not achieved GCSEs at grade C or above in maths and English indicated that they felt that having GCSEs was important to meeting their aspirations and that not having them was a constraint. Eight of the learners gave negative reflections on their performance at GCSE, with one being ambivalent about their performance. The learner who passed both at grade C or above was positive about her performance (see appendix i).

Three of the interviewees did not sit any GCSEs. For young person A this had acted as a constraint, meaning he had not progressed above a Level 1 course even though he has attended two other providers before his current programme of study. As he didn't complete GCSEs, he felt that he didn't know much about them but did feel they were the 'main thing' and what you need to get on to a higher level course at a college.

Young person D was also in a similar position, having not completed

GCSEs. She too felt that this had placed a constraint on her aspiration. She stated that if she had passed her GCSEs she would have gone to college to study science, history and psychology. Instead, her aspiration was for an apprenticeship. However, she also found a constraint placed on this route due to not having achieved GCSEs. She remarked:

“GCSEs are something I would still love to do. I’m looking for a part-time college where I can, probably evenings, can do my GCSEs. In a lot of things you need GCSEs and that’s one thing that always stops (her).”

She felt that this was a barrier to gaining employment or access to higher level qualifications. Young person F, who also did not sit her GCSEs, recognised their importance and held an aspiration to complete GCSE at some point. Due to not having sat GCSEs at school, these young people are excluded from many college courses. The rules surrounding maths and English (Skills Funding Agency, 2014a) mean that for many college courses, you need at least a Grade D for entry on to a GCSE maths or English course. This means that these learners are only given the opportunity to complete Functional Skills. This gives a clear indication of the structural constraint placed on some young people who have not achieved a grade C at GCSEs for maths and English. There is no structural difference in a learner achieving a grade E or lower or having not attempted GCSEs. This renders the grading of GCSEs redundant, with a C a pass, a D a near pass, and all other lower grades a fail. This is recognised by these young people, who see themselves as a failure.

The mechanism, by where all aged sixteen to nineteen learners who have not got a grade C have to study maths and English until they reach the age nineteen, is coercive, and an FE provider may face financial penalties if they do

not enable their learners to work towards a grade C at GCSE in these subjects (Skills Funding Agency, 2014a). However, in the timescale allowed, many young people do not get to resit their GCSE. FE providers are only obliged to enrol learners with a grade D in either subject on a GCSE resit programme. Learners with lower grades are placed on Functional Skills after sitting a diagnostic test. These may take up to a year to pass at each level.

Although continual study of maths and English is framed as an opportunity for these learners to improve their skills and work towards GCSE, it exposes them to more risk of failure and social exclusion from courses and jobs that need GCSE grade C in maths and English. This is evidenced in the interviewees' responses, with seven responding that GCSEs were important to gaining a career (see appendix iii). Young person J recognised the need to resit her GCSEs but how this was not a guarantee of success, remarking:

"I think I need to redo my GCSEs but they are really hard!"

Two other respondents felt that Functional Skills would enable them to progress to their current aspirations, so GCSEs had become less important. Young person E saw the limits of the aspiration to achieve GCSEs at grade C. He remarked that he now felt that GCSEs were not that important and he did not feel they would help him to gain employment. He achieved a grade C in English and a D in maths but he had become disillusioned with GCSE and the promise of progression on to higher level courses that they were meant to offer. He remarked:

"Na to be honest, I don't think they're important. GCSEs don't get you nowhere in life".

However policy identifies GCSEs at grade C as a marker of success, and the position where young people can gain the advantages of higher level qualifications

and better paid employment. The association of social disadvantage and educational failure is echoed in the reflections of the learners, who recognise the risks and constraints that they have accumulated since they moved from school into FE at age sixteen.

ii. Apprenticeships.

There was a commitment made to increase the number of apprenticeships in the Conservative manifesto in the run up to the 2015 general election (Allan, 2016, p6). These take the form of working for a company and undergoing some form of learning at an FE institution. However, Allen and Ainley (2014, p4) cite official figures that show demand for apprenticeships from young people far outstrips the amount being offered by employers and training providers. This means that those with better qualifications are likely to succeed with gaining a place on an apprenticeship.

After 2012, there was an increase in apprenticeships having GCSEs as an entry requirement. This has led to an increase in pre-apprenticeship programmes for learners without GCSEs (Allen & Ainley, 2014, p3), such as the courses offered by the training providers participating in this project. It should be noted that courses for young people with lower levels of attainment existed before 2012, with the Entry to Employment course described in chapter three being a prominent example.

The official aspiration for young people to take up an apprenticeship is increasingly becoming for those who have met the aspiration of five GCSEs at grade C or above including maths and English. Of the six young people who remarked in the interviews that they had looked for an apprenticeship, none had

gained a place on one, partly due to their level of attainment at GCSE (see appendix ii).

Young person F had felt the constraints of not achieving GCSEs when applying for an apprenticeship. She remarked:

“I applied for an apprenticeship; I would have got it, if I had my maths and English, GCSE wise. But because I didn’t have them I couldn’t do it. I got turned down but the woman did say to me if you did pass your maths and English you are always welcome to come back and apply to us.”

Young person D, who had recently had an interview for a Level 2 apprenticeship in business and administration, remarked on the difficulty of finding an apprenticeship, especially without qualifications:

“I’ve been trying for six months and it’s a hell of a hard thing to get!”

After a number of months looking, young person B had a conditional offer for an apprenticeship in accountancy but needed to achieve at least a Functional Skills English Level 2 qualification. Even young person I, who attained B grades for GCSE maths and English, had spent six months as a NEET looking for an apprenticeship. This signals the competitiveness for places on apprenticeships schemes where the demand for places outstrips the number of companies prepared to take on new apprentices.

With the shift in apprenticeships being for those who have achieved GCSEs, they have become a privileged route similar to A-levels. As they have become a respectable way of accessing Level 3 qualifications and employment away from the working class, they have become another way that middle class parents can segregate their children into a position of privilege. For the white collar professional classes there is, to paraphrase young person B, no longer anything

wrong with an apprenticeship.

As well as apprenticeships being seen as a reasonable and acceptable vocational alternative to A-levels, they are increasingly being seen as a way to gain a profession by people older than nineteen years old. Many have the added advantage of experience and possibly being already employed by the company who is taking them on as an apprentice. Allan (2015) cites Skills Funding Agency data showing that since 2010 far more young people over the age of nineteen have started apprenticeships than the age sixteen to nineteen cohort, with the largest group of new apprentices being aged twenty five and over (Allen, 2016, p5).

Allan (2016 p7) attributes this to poor advice and guidance in schools and the misuse of apprenticeship schemes by companies who convert existing staff into apprentices. This leads to quicker payment of funding to training organisations and gives the government the ability to make claims about providing training places.

This indicates that young people like those interviewed as part of this project are being denied apprenticeships by companies who would prefer to offer an apprenticeship to older workers. They may already be employed by the company and may have already gained skills on state funded courses in the FE sector when they were younger. For companies, this may be a far less risker proposition than taking on an inexperienced sixteen or seventeen year old that had already failed at school.

Many external conversations are informing these young people that apprenticeships are the best path for learners who have not achieved grade Cs at

school to follow, especially in light of the policy pronouncements promising to increase the availability of apprenticeships as a way of tackling youth unemployment (Allan, 2016, p6). However, the young people are finding there are many constraints to following this pathway to a sustainable career. These constraints are abstract to the young people who have been told an apprenticeship will be available on condition of achievement. Some have spent time trying to find an apprenticeship, adding to the sense of failure they feel.

iii. Being in Employment, Education or Training.

NEET young people have been identified as a social problem, with the term NEET gaining pejorative connotations related to worklessness. Such is the need to be seen to be dealing with youth unemployment, successive governments continue to allow the funding of pre-vocational course at Level 1 and below, although there is evidence that the many of the learners who attended these courses returned to being NEET after completion of their programme of study (Simmons & Thompson, 2011b, p12).

As this chapter has shown, the young people interviewed wanted to change their circumstances, and had a will not to be NEET. Nine of the interviewees had attended other courses before their current programme of study without success (see appendix i). Such was the will for a better employment situation, they were willing to keep attempting new courses, taking the risk of further failure as they were offered new opportunities. This often means that a young person operating without fully formed reflexivity, and without good quality external conversations, “may opt for less satisfactory pathways as they present themselves, minimising immediate risk but sacrificing long term gains” (Simmons & Thompson, 2011b,

p138).

Yet some young people had been offered low level generic qualifications that Wolf (2011) argued “are often not valued in the labour market” (Wolf, 2011, p39). Four years after the publication of the Wolf report these qualifications were still being offered by FE institutions. These qualifications are offered by small training providers as they need few resources and can be offered to a wider range of young people who have different aspirations. This means that they can offer courses to young people even if they end up studying something with only the vaguest tangential connections to their aspiration. It also creates the possibility of warehousing where the young person moves on to another training provider to gain sector experience but ends up studying at the same level. This is something that young people A and D have experienced.

Warehousing has been criticised in the literature (Hayward & Williams, 2011, p186, Nelson & O’Donnell, 2012, p26) but academia has ultimately failed to hold policy to account. From a policy perspective Wolf (2011) was critical of the effect of warehousing. Wolf argues:

“Many of our sixteen and seventeen year olds move in and out of education and short-term employment. They are churning between the two in an attempt to find either a course which offers a real chance for progress, or a permanent job, and are finding neither.”(Wolf, 2011, p7)

In the four years since the Wolf report was published, the learners who were interviewed as part of this project have still been warehoused, attending other providers unsuccessfully before beginning their current programme of study.

The first major policy pronouncement on vocational education by the Coalition government had not been able to stop the practice of warehousing.

Learners are continuing to be socially excluded by working towards low level qualifications that do not offer progression on to higher level qualifications.

As the history presented in chapter three identified, this is social exclusion that Kennedy and the New Labour government failed to stop, even with the policies of EMA and Success for All. These aimed to reengage NEET young people through providing financial support and bringing a parity of funding between FE institutions and universities. In each case, policy has been inadequate, indicating that this social exclusion is more structural. As Thompson argues:

“If horizontal and ‘weak’ conceptualisations of social exclusion are inadequate to the task of formulating policy, how might vertical and ‘strong’ approaches help matters? Perhaps the most fundamental questions here are first, what is being done to NEET young people and by whom; and second, what could be done to reduce the power to exclude?” (Thompson, 2011, p799)

Those who make policy towards these young people lack an understanding of their lives and how they develop aspiration. Policy makes assumptions about these young people due to the way they have already been categorised as failures with few skills and abilities.

Both the young people and politicians would prefer there to be no NEETs. However, the latter have yet to create the conditions for young people to have sustainable opportunities for study and work that enables them to progress on to higher level courses, be they vocational or academic. This is reflected by eight of the interviewees feeling that they would be NEET if they were not engaged on these low level programmes of study (see appendix iv).

To evaluate how these learners comprehend their position within the further education and skills sector when attending courses or programmes of study designed for Level 1 learners or NEETs in relation to their aspiration and career choices.

The FE sector is the most wide-ranging in terms of level of learning and diversity of student needs and aspiration. As identified in the history presented in chapters two and three, FE has been seen as a sector designed to give vocational technical training to working class young people who lacked the attainment and cultural capital of the middle classes to follow the academic path of A-level. This manifests itself in the institutionalized cultural capital of qualifications and the embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, p82) of dispositions about education, employment and the right kind of subjects to study for a prosperous life.

Broadly defined as 'post-compulsory' or "everything that does not happen in schools and universities" (Kennedy, 1997, p1), the sector traverses both in terms of age and qualifications, with FE colleges and training providers offering courses from pre-GCSE level up to degree level. Students enrolled at FE institutions include learners aged between fourteen and sixteen on release from schools, professionals studying for higher qualifications as well as adult returners and vocational learners aged sixteen to nineteen. Institutions include training providers, further education colleges and sixth form colleges. These institutions also cover the academic and vocational divide. Academic pathways that may lead to white collar careers tend to take place in sixth form colleges and school sixth forms, whilst vocational learning is offered at FE colleges and training providers. However, some tertiary FE colleges offer A-levels and some sixth forms offer

'clean' vocational trades such as media or care.

i. Parity between vocational and academic qualifications.

The parity argument between academic and vocational qualifications has been ongoing throughout the history of FE. Attempts to establish parity between the two styles of learning and qualifications have not come to fruition. This included the establishment of tertiary colleges in the 1980s and an attempt in the early 2000s to establish the Diploma as a qualification with academic and vocational content.

Vocational qualifications such as BTEC are available at Level 2 or GCSE equivalence. Some of the young people interviewed will have experienced them in school being used as an alternative to GCSE qualifications. However, it is how the young people have perceived these qualifications in an FE setting that will indicate how they feel the divide between academic and vocational qualifications positions them within the FE sector, and whether this is indicative of class and social exclusion, as suggested by Simmons and Thompson (2011b, p7) and Atkins (2010, p145).

Eight of the interviewees stated that academic qualifications were in some way difficult, with the other two interviewees being ambivalent or expressing no opinion on them (see appendix iii). Whether they were negative about academic qualifications was difficult to gauge due to the way learners expressed their feelings. This was usually in terms of difficulty rather than negativity, even for those who had attempted A-levels. Feelings towards vocational qualifications were more mixed, with five learners expressing positive views, three of who also felt they were easy. Four learners were ambivalent or expressed no opinions, whilst one learner expressed negative feelings towards vocational qualifications (see

appendix iii). Young person A, who had expressed negative opinions on vocational qualifications, had been warehoused at two previous providers and had not achieved any qualifications despite attempting a number of vocational courses. He was now unsure of the value of vocational qualifications. However, he felt that A-levels were far more difficult. He remarked:

“Few of my mates are doing A-level. The work is really hard. It’s really hard; they just give you loads of coursework.”

Young person J felt that BTEC were easier than A-levels, remarking:

“BTECs are better, I think, easier.”

“I was thinking of (A-levels) but I don’t think I’ve got the knowledge to do that.”

Three of the young people interviewed had experienced studying vocational qualifications at Level 3 or A-level equivalence in an FE setting. Two of these young people had also studied for academic A-levels alongside or immediately before studying for the vocational BTEC qualifications without success in either (see appendix i).

Young people B and I could give what they saw as the difference between A-level Provision and Level 3 Vocational provision based on experience. Young person B found A-levels difficult. He felt that BTEC and vocational qualifications are not viewed as having parity with A-levels, but were still good qualifications, remarking:

“BTEC is not...people may think it’s bad because it’s not as high as A-level, so people tend not to do them because they tend to think they are not going to get as far as everyone else. BTEC is, it’s still classed, it’s not classed as an A-level, but it’s classed as a qualification.”

Young person I switched from studying A-level law to BTEC law during her time at an FE college after she found her chosen A-levels too difficult. Young person I remarked:

“I think the A-levels were a bit too much. I enjoyed it, I really did but it was too much content.”

I think they (BTECs) are brilliant because you don't have to do an exam at the end.”

“I did study A-level law at first and then because it too much and my attendance was quite low on it I moved to the Level 3 subsidiary diploma BTEC in law.”

As she was allowed to continue studying law on a vocational BTEC, rather than an academic A-Level, there is an indication that FE colleges view BTEC vocational courses as less difficult. This is a view that is shared across the education sector. A survey commissioned in 2015 by the qualifications regulator, Ofqual, corroborates that the majority of educators working with the age fifteen to nineteen cohort, as well as the young people, see Level 3 BTECs as not as challenging as A-levels (YouGov, 2015, p60). The majority of teachers/FE Lecturers (57% to 28%), head teachers (52% to 30%) and Higher Education institutes (44% to 35%) who responded to the research felt that Level 3 BTECs were not as comparable in challenge to academic A-levels (YouGov, 2015, p60). This is corroborated in the academic literature by Hodgeson and Spours (2015, p4), who argue that school sixth forms are offering vocational courses, traditionally the preserve of FE colleges and training providers, in an attempt to recruit middle attainers at GCSE who are not academically prepared for A-level study.

This view of BTECs can influence the conversations that the young people have with themselves about academic and vocational learning. They see A-levels

as superior to the qualifications they are able to access.

Young person C corroborates this. He initially chose his Level 3 catering course as it did not have any entry requirements. He had not passed his GCSE maths and English and was allowed to study Functional Skills alongside his Level 3 vocational course. He remarked:

“BTECs are good for those who struggle a bit more. I did (Level 2) BTEC at school.”

“tough; you got to work hard for it, there’s a lot more to A-levels than there is to BTECs.”

The perception that vocational qualifications were easier indicates that for the learners the parity argument was clear; the vocational qualifications available to them were easier but less well regarded than academic A-levels, which were harder and had more renown. This corroborates Furlong and Cartmel’s (2007) argument that the academic curriculum has been treated as irrelevant to those in the lower attainment bands and although vocational qualifications are popular with young people they may be socially divisive due to their lower status (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007, p19).

It could be argued that the young people have developed the perception that vocational qualifications are inferior because they have been able to access them. They recognise that vocational qualifications are the most suitable for young people of their class and attainment.

Furlong and Cartmel argue that “while young people are provided with an incentive to maximize qualifications, a general increase in the stock of qualifications devalues the currency” (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007, p19). This is especially felt by those who hold a number of qualifications below GCSE level.

This is corroborated by young person E who reflected that he had so many certificates from school and FE institutions that he was now unsure of their value.

ii. Parity between GCSE maths and English and Functional Skills qualifications.

Functional Skills were introduced in England and Wales in 2010 aiming to support young people to improve their skills in English and maths if they had not achieved grade C at GCSE. On starting a course, learners can be placed on a level most suitable for them, determined by prior achievement or by a diagnostic test which allows a learner to show their ability level. Functional Skills is offered at five levels up to Level 2, which is meant to be equivalent to a GCSE at grade C (see appendix v). However, from 2014 FE institutions had a legal and funding requirement to enrol any young person with a grade D at GCSE English or maths or Level 2 Functional Skills on a 1 year GCSE re-sit to support them in achieving a grade C (Skills Funding Agency, 2014). This is a policy admission that Level 2 Functional Skills maths and English does not have parity with GCSE, even if it is 'sold' to learners as such. Also, employers are unsure of their purpose of Functional Skills and are more familiar with the GCSE grading system (Education and Training Foundation, 2015, p11).

Of the learners interviewed, nine were studying Functional Skills. Young person I did not have to study towards Functional Skills as she had achieved her GCSE maths and English at grade B (see appendix i). The learners were mostly positive about Functional Skills, with seven of the interviewees being positive about them, especially as they felt they would allow them to progress on to higher level courses. However, learners had mixed feelings about whether they were

comparable to GCSEs. Five learners felt they were, whilst five felt they were not (see appendix iii).

Young person B stated he had never heard of Functional Skills. He thought of them as a ‘*down-step*’ and not as good as a GCSE. He now thought he could have done Functional Skills and not needed to have re-sat his GCSE, which ultimately led to him experiencing a second failure. He remarked:

“when I first heard about Functional Skills I didn’t really know too much about it but as I learned more, I thought, I always thought Functional Skills was like down step to everybody else, I didn’t think it would be as good as a GCSE, so me doing Functional Skills now, makes me think that, if I didn’t think like that could I have done Functional Skills and got the C before and be in the position now. Because I didn’t want to sit it in year ten and year eleven, I thought me doing GCSE would give me a better ranking.”

He thought that having a C at GCSE English would be better but he has found that Functional Skills Level 2 was still classed as the same as a GCSE for what he wants to do. He felt that Functional Skills were seen as lower than GCSEs but he felt that this was an incorrect view.

The parity argument was articulated through the enablements that Functional Skills provides, and the lower risk of failure that the young people are exposed to by studying them. Young person J stated a preference for Functional Skills as they were easier to understand than GCSEs. She remarked:

“I like Functional Skills. I think it’s more understandable than GCSEs. GCSEs are very like standard, you have got to do it. But Functional Skills it’s a bit easier, helps a bit more.”

Young person G, who gained a C at GCSE English but a grade D at maths, thinks that they are improving his skills but that they are ‘easy’. Young person A had not sat his GCSEs due to being on alternative provision at a college. He felt Functional

Skills gave you 'good levels' but they were not the same as GCSEs.

Young person D articulated her mixed feelings about the constraints and enablements of Functional Skills, remarking that they are useful if you do not have your GCSEs but felt that they are not considered the same by employers or colleges. She remarked:

"(Functional Skills) do help you out a lot, because obviously when you don't have your GCSEs and you know that you can get your grades."

"At times yes but at times it seems like it would have been better if I'd have done GCSEs."

"The first thing that they ask is "what's your qualifications?" and then you are just confounded, what do I tell them? That I've only got Functional Skills?"

This learner's reflection on the parity of Functional Skills and GCSE sums up the fragile position of these young people in relation to the qualifications they are offered. Functional Skills offers progression on to other courses while representing their failure at GCSE. They offer the learner a narrow enablement in terms of educational progress, but a wider constraint in terms of employment and higher level learning.

iii. Differences between different institutions.

Although nine out of the ten learners had attended a range of providers (see appendix i) including school sixth forms, a general FE colleges, a dual HE/FE provider and training providers, and all could offer an opinion on the differences between parity of qualifications, most could not provide a complete articulation of the differences between providers. Eight of the interviewees were unaware of training providers when they finished school (see appendix iv). Training providers

are generally missing from the narrative of FE, especially those who work with low attaining NEET young people. They are largely obscured by more prominent and larger FE colleges, with careers guidance giving preference to academic routes, and, where there is one, school sixth forms.

References was made to the size of the institution by the young people, with many feeling that they got greater support at their current training provider, and that large FE colleges provided too many distractions. Young person J, who had no prior experience of any other institution in FE, purposely chose to attend a training provider due to the size difference to college. She felt that if she was not studying at the training provider, she would be “*wasting a year*” at an FE college due to the number of students and the distractions. However, none recognised the differences between institutions in terms of class, nor in terms of privileged routes, such as sixth forms that are preferred by the middle or professional classes, which since the 1980s had started to excluded “the disadvantaged and troublesome from interfering in their children’s education” (McCulloch, 2006, p698).

Young person C articulated the basic practical differences between sixth forms and FE colleges, remarking:

“Sixth forms are for people who want to do A-levels, whilst at college people can do just one course unless they need to do their maths and English. Both can lead to university but at college you are studying the subject that you want to do as a career.”

What was missing from this description was training providers offering courses to young people who had not achieved five GCSEs at grade C or were at risk of becoming NEET. Young person C had omitted the very institution that he and his peers were attending. Young person I found that Training providers were not discussed as an option when she finished her GCSEs, remarking:

“Not all of them, I thought I was, like apprenticeships, colleges, sixth forms, but I didn’t know about (training provider). No, I didn’t know about anything like this.”

As discussed throughout this project, the range of institutions offering different courses supports the idea that both Kennedy from a policy perspective and Simmons (2013) in the academic literature raise; that the learning that takes place in the sector “is the least understood” yet “further education’s reach is extensive” (Kennedy, 1997, p1). Simmons (2013) argues that the complexity of the sector contributes to social exclusion, arguing:

“The current Jungle of organizations delivering education and training is both socially divisive and incredibly difficult for ordinary people to understand.” (Simmons, 2013, p93)

The courses available to NEET young people repeat the maths and English skills that they were meant to develop while at school and are often coupled with lower level or introductory vocational or employability courses. Atkins (2013) argues:

“Level 1 learners are located at the bottom of a hierarchy of low-status vocational programmes in low-status institutions which form part of a broader system in which vocational education is held in lower esteem than academic education.” (Atkins, 2013, p146)

These courses define the young people by their GCSE grades. They place a constraint on the future careers of the learners, excluding them from certain educational pathways, including A-levels and some vocational routes (Atkins, 2008, p197). They have been stigmatised by failure and lack the attributes of class that could mitigate their lack of qualifications. As Atkins argues:

“Level 1 students form a stigmatised and oppressed group. They are structurally and institutionally constrained in terms of social class and a host of other exclusionary characteristics, as well as by perceived academic ability determined by level of credential. This final characteristic determines that they will follow an

educational path which will give them qualitatively different employment outcomes to their higher-performing peers.” (Atkins, 2013, p146)

Atkins describes the challenges that these young people face, being perceived by the public and policy makers as ‘marginalised’ and a problem to be dealt with. The common view that they all share similar pejorative characteristics adds to the sense that these young people are a part of a “problem of youth” (Colley, Wahlberg & James, 2007, p47) and “other people’s children” (Richardson, 2007, p411), with little to aspire to. The courses they attend are a political tool that acts as “social control of groups that are likely to be potentially disruptive to the running of society... disengaged, disaffected and disruptive young people” (Tomlinson, 2013, p2).

Yet these learners were optimistic that they would progress from their current course of study to something more high status. External voices were offering them an apprenticeship, higher vocational courses or a professional qualification. They saw their position as transitory and they hoped to succeed with their aspirations. These young people were aware that they had failed before. Many of them have failed more than once but felt further risk of failure was worth the possible rewards. Simmons and Thompson (2011b) argue that “they were acutely aware of their positioning in the educational hierarchy and did not expect to find employment easily” (Simmons & Thompson, 2011b, p139). Eight of the interviewees expected to be NEET if they were not on the course (see appendix iv). As Simmons and Thompson argue:

“Perhaps more than anyone, the young people themselves appreciated the limits of their agency.” (Simmons & Thompson, 2011b, p139)

The young people allow themselves to enter the structure of FE at the lower end of the qualification spectrum with an aspiration for better long term employment prospects they believe qualifications can bring. In spite of this, they cannot, through their capacity for reflexivity, overcome the structures of inequality that exist in the stories society tells about FE and skills. As Bathmaker (2005) argues:

“They cannot by themselves overcome the unequal status of vocational education, and the wider inequalities in the education system and the wider society which it reflects.” (Bathmaker, 2005, p99)

This chapter has presented and analysed the empirical research, it has used the testimony of young people studying on Level 1 courses designed to support NEET young people on to sustainable educational pathways. It has argued that young people are in need of quality external voices to engender their agency as their own internal conversations are underdeveloped. They lack experience of this new world of FE. The conversations that they have used to inform their decisions have proved unreliable. The trusted voices they rely on as a guide to the unfamiliar world of FE are bound up in class and parity arguments that have been on-going since 1945. Their voices are fragile and largely missing from the history of education. They tell the story of how FE has been seen as a place for working class children to get a vocational education of lower social worth. This has continued to affect how FE has been seen as providing lower quality vocational learning to those who have been socially excluded from privileged academic pathways.

These young people have been categorised by policy as a failure, and placed on a curriculum that even they see as easier. They do not see this in terms of class or social exclusion. They do not recognise the constraints and

enablements caused by such a stratified and diverse sector that they are attempting to navigate when they have to make decisions about their own education at age sixteen.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

“There is here a vital challenge to our educational system. For the training and preparation appropriate to the times must and can extend far beyond the statutory school-leaving age. There are no frontiers to education, a truth that has now become a guiding principle in the public service of education.” (Ministry of Education, 1947, p5)

This project is about young people who have ‘failed’ at school and are at risk of becoming NEET. However, they remain optimistic, aspiring to gain qualifications that will lead to employment. It has been the story of how these learners’ lives are entwined with the FE sector and how it has developed as a place for working class young people to learn vocational and craft skills.

Chapter one provided an introduction to the aims of the research, asking what do young people who studying at the lower end of the FE sector aspire to and where they locate themselves in the wide and diverse FE sector. It asked how close this was to an official aspiration, seen in policy pronouncements. Two themes of the research were also defined. Firstly, did the vocational or pre-vocational learning these young people were undertaking have parity with academic learning, and did FE have parity with other parts of the education sector. The second theme was aspiration, of the young people to gain skills, jobs and careers, and of the FE sector to gain recognition in society.

Chapter two then gave a narrative of how the sector developed from 1945 as a place to learn new skills up to 1992, when the sector underwent a semi-privatisation. During this period young people became increasingly seen to be at fault for their own unemployment.

Chapter three acted as a review of policy between 1997 and 2010. Vocational education was still regarded in lower esteem, despite some notable

attempts to bring parity. Young people being seen as at fault for lacking skills became formalised into a view that not achieving five GCSEs at grade C or above including maths and English meant that a young person would be unsuccessful in their career. Throughout this period, policy associated poor achievement at school with future social deprivation. This normalised view meant that all those who did not achieve this benchmark could consider themselves a failure. This chapter also provided a discussion on the imprecise nature of the terms NEET and aspiration as they are used in policy, and the difficulty academia has had in tackling the assumptions of policy.

As the findings from the interviews show, the young people were unable to rely on their own internal conversations to make decisions during their time in FE. Removed from the world of school or their own social world, they lacked experience of how to make decisions about their education. They relied heavily on the external voices of family, teachers and schools careers guidance. These external voices were found to be unreliable, leading nine out of the ten young people to start one or more courses before their current programme of study.

These unreliable voices were listened to by young person B, who was advised to stay on at sixth form, and young person A, who moved between training providers on the promise of an apprenticeship. Young person C started a catering course on the recommendation of a teacher and the college saying he could do the course without any GCSEs. Although he felt that catering was not the right career for him, he trusted these external voices which proved to be unreliable.

This meant that these young people were accumulating more failure as they continued their education. The external voices guiding the aspirations of these

young people were bound up in the class of their parents, and historical assumptions about achievement and the correct kind of learning for working class young people. This has set most of these learners on vocational rather than academic pathways. It has also led to them changing their aspirations, sometimes repeatedly, as new constraints and enablements reveal themselves along the way. This was mainly rooted in their failure to achieve GCSEs and an assumption that academic education was not suitable for the children of working class parents.

Many felt the constraints of their position, with three of the young people remarking on how difficult they had found finding an apprenticeship. This included a learner with GCSEs at grade C or above. Even an apprenticeship pathway, supposedly there for young people like these, is often blocked due to educational biography and situational conditions. One learner, during her interview, remarked that her lack of GCSEs always held her back, but at the same time there is a situation where there is a lack of supply of apprenticeship places. These young people internalise this as their failure, rather than see fault with the economy to provide more apprenticeship places.

Most of the young people did not have any experience of some of the educational privileges that the middle classes benefit from. These young people were excluded from certain educational routes that can facilitate economic success in later life (McKnight, 2015, piii). This includes sixth form colleges and familial experience of university, along with the educational expectations placed upon them by parents. In Birmingham, this also includes selective grammar schools. The evidence from interview data provided by young people B and C suggests that the middle classes have the ability to use certain privileges of

position, such as higher education, to support some lower attaining children to better future economic wellbeing than some high attaining children from poorer backgrounds. For example, young person J, who also started A-levels before becoming NEET, had been unable to secure an apprenticeship. Her parents work in blue collar and skilled blue collar professions, and her family stood to lose benefits if she became NEET.

This is compounded by the way the sector has been set up to teach vocational education of lower social worth. The lack of parity that exists between vocational and academic education in society is ingrained in how these young people perceive the qualifications they are allowed to study for. They see academic qualifications as too hard, whilst vocational qualifications are easy and attainable. The interviewees remarked that they saw the vocational qualifications that they were studying to be of less worth. This is how the curriculum categorises them, with lower abilities and lacking the disposition for white collar professional careers. Even the learners with aspirations for white collar professions were following vocational pathways after failure to complete academic qualifications.

Arising from this research are areas for potential further study. Firstly, the effect of socialisation on the individual for poorly paid low skilled employment that has become a persistent element of courses aimed at NEETs. This is taught through employability and personal and social development courses. This therapeutic education is designed to remedy supposed deficiencies within the young people who find themselves NEET. This does not tackle the social conditions that make a young person more likely to be unemployed. The second suggested area for further research is the effect of social mobility on a child's

education status, where a parent's class is defined by location, local authority graduate jobs, and the availability of local higher education. Two of the interviewees had parents who had entered graduate local authority jobs. It was inferred implicitly by learner B, and explicitly by Learner C, that their mothers had returned to learning as adults. On leaving school, their children both accessed A-levels or other Level 3 courses, even if ultimately they became NEET.

Similarly, young person G had a parent who had gained access to a nursing course at a university as an adult, even though she was currently unemployed due to caring responsibilities. Young person G aspired to completing a Level 3 course followed by degree level childcare management qualifications.

Although causality is difficult to identify, with a possible over-representation in the sample of this phenomenon, the possible relationship between a parent accessing graduate public service jobs, higher education and adult education, and the kind of education that their children are able to aspire to at age sixteen, is an area for further research.

This project has shown that young people who are NEET or have few qualifications do aspire to a career. Aspiration has become a flexible notion for these young people. Nine out of the ten young people had changed what they were studying and had to be flexible with what careers they aspired to when their first career aspiration became constrained. Often they perceived this due to their own failure, through finding a course too difficult, or making the wrong choices. They have found their internal conversation, and the important external conversations from schools, FE providers and careers guidance to be unreliable. These young people are aware that they have failed. Many of them have failed a

number of times. Yet they have adapted to the precarious transition from school to FE, and are willing to be flexible with their aspirations. The young people adapt to these constraints, and respond to new enablements offered in the shape of courses aimed at NEET young people. This indicates that for learners who have few qualifications, flexibility in aspiration is a necessity, especially when they are attempting to avoid being NEET. They allow their aspirations to be guided by the structures of these courses, and of FE and vocational learning, which retains the historic association of vocational learning being seen as less worth. Yet they feel an optimism that they will be able to gain qualifications that lead on to a sustainable career of some kind.

Appendix i: Table A: Biographical Data

Young person	Training provider	Have spent time as NEET	What are they studying at the training provider	School type last attended	Number of previous post 16 providers	GCSE English Grade	GCSE maths Grade	Reflection on own GCSE	Highest level of qualification achieved at school/post 16 provider	Highest level of qualification studied at previous post 16 provider	Occupation of Parents/Guardians	Parent/ guardian with a degree or HE Yes/No
A	1	Y	L1 FS	B	2BB	No	No	N	L 1V	L 1V	U	No
B	1	Y	L1G FS	A	1D	D	B	N A	L 2A	L3A	WC/ SBC	Yes
C	1	Y	L1S FS	A	1E	D	G	N	L1A	L3V	WC	Yes
D	1	Y	L1G FS	D	2BB	No	No	N	L1V	LL1V	WC	Yes
E	1	Y	L1G FS	A	1A	C	D	N	L2A	L2V	BC	No
F	2	Y	L1S FS	B	2AA	No	No	N	L1V	L2V	U	No
G	2	Y	L1S FS	A	1A	C	D	N	L2AV	L2V	BC/U	Yes
H	2	Y	L1S FS	A	2DB	E	E	N	GCSE	L1	U	No
I	2	Y	L1S	A	1A	B	B	P	L2A	L3AV	BC/ SBC	No
J	2	N	L1S FS	A	None	D	G	A	L1AV	N/A	BC	No

Key

What they are studying at this training provider

L1S=L1 in sector specific qualification (E.g. Health and social care or childcare).

L1G=L1 in generic qualification that can be applied across sectors (E.g. business and administration).

FS=Functional skills.

School Type

LEA/Academy = A.

Alternative provision = B.

State selective (Grammar schools) = C.

Other including private and overseas = D.

Number of previous post 16 providers

Number attended 1, 2, 3, 4 etc.

FE College= A.

Training provider= B.

Sixth form College=C.

School Sixth form =D.

E=Other FE provider including dual FE/HE institutions.

N=None.

Reflections on GCSE grades

P=Positive: They feel they are sufficient.

A=Ambivalent-not sure that achieving GCSEs will enable them to progress.

N=Regret at grades received or not doing them.

Highest level of achievement/studying

L3= Level 3/A-Level

L2= Level 2/GCSE at grade C or above

L1 = Level 1/GCSE at grade D or lower

V=Vocational.

A=Academic (GCSE/A-Level).

Parental career

WC=White collar: Professional career where higher level qualifications are needed (L4 or above) analogous with Middle class.

SBC=Skilled blue collar= Skilled job requiring some form of training and qualification at L2 or L3 analogous with skilled working class.

BC=Blue collar=Job requiring general employability skills such as customer service but no specific job related skills.

U=Unemployed.

Parental Graduate status

Y: Undergraduate degree or level 4 professional qualifications or higher.

N: No undergraduate degree or level 4 professional qualifications or higher.

Appendix ii: Table B: Aspiration Data

Young person	What they want to do next/current aspiration	Have they changed aspiration since completing GCSEs Yes/No	Initial aspiration on leaving school	Reason for not meeting initial aspiration	Aspiration in 5 years' time	Aspiration for HE	Feelings about aspiration to HE	Aspiration for apprenticeships	Has at some point wanted an apprenticeship Yes/No
A	Q	Y	SBC	PA	G	M	N	M	Y
B	A	Y	WC	DNC	WC	S	P	S	Y
C	A	Y	SBC	DNC	SBC	M	N	S	Y
D	A	Y	WC	PA	BC	M	N	S	Y
E	C	Y	SBC	DNC	SBC	N	A	N	N
F	C	Y	BC	DNC	SBC	M	N	N	N
G	C	Y	SBC	PA O	SBC/ WC	S	P	N	N
H	C	Y	SBC	PA DNC	G	M	N	M	Y
I	P	Y	WC	DNC	SBC/ WC	S	N	M	Y
J	C	N	N/A	N/A	SBC	N	N	N	N

Key

What they want to do next/current aspiration

P=Level 2 then Level 3/A-level qualifications leading to a white collar career or degree.

C=Level 2 then Level 3/A-level qualifications leading to skilled blue collar career.

Q= Level 2, with a possibility of a Level 3 qualification, leading to a blue collar job or generic employability skills.

A=apprenticeship.

G=General work related to qualifications or blue collar job with transferable skills (I want to work in administration).

J=aspiration for undefined job/career.

Initial aspiration on leaving school

P=Level 3/A-level qualifications leading to a professional career or degree.

C=Level 3/A-level qualifications leading to skilled career.

A=apprenticeship.

S= Specific job/career (E.G. I wanted to be a ...).

G=General work related to qualifications or job with transferable skills (I want to work in administration).

J=aspiration for undefined job/career/profession with economic well-being.

Reason for not meeting initial aspiration

PA: Prior-achievement: not achieved GCSEs or Entry qualifications.

DNC: Did not complete course leading to that aspiration.

D: Found qualifications too Difficult.

U: was unsure that the qualification/career was right for them.

Aspiration for 5 years

WC (White collar)= Professional career where higher level qualifications are needed (L4 or above) analogous with middle-class.

SBC (Skilled blue collar) = Skilled job requiring some form of training and qualification at L2 or L3 analogous with skilled working class.

BC (Blue collar) = Job requiring general employability skills such as customer service but no specific job related skills. Jobs where you can enter without qualifications including ones where qualifications are available (E.g. administration).

G (General)= aspiration for undefined job/career/profession with economic well-being.

Higher Education

S=Strong =Medium N=None.

Feelings about aspiration to HE

P=Positive A=Ambivalent or no opinion N=negative

Apprenticeships

S=Strong M=Medium N=None

Appendix iii: Table C: Reflections on the sector data

Feelings towards vocational/BTEC	Feelings towards academic: A-levels and university	Functional Skills comparable with GCSEs	Feelings towards Functional Skills	Feelings towards GCSE	Apprenticeships work /learning	Feelings towards Apprenticeships	Young person
N	D	N	P	I	W	N	A
A	D	P	P	N	W	P	B
E P	D	P	P	I	W	P	C
A	D	N	N	I	W	P	D
P	A	N	P	N	W	A	E
A	D	A	P	I	W	A	F
E P	D	P	P	I	W	A	G
A	A	N	N	I	W	A	H
P	D	P	A	I	W	N	I
E P	D	P	P	N	W	A	J

Key

Feelings towards Apprenticeships.

P=Positive A=Ambivalent or no opinion N=negative.

Feelings towards GCSE.

I=Important N=Not important.

Feelings towards Functional Skills.

P=Positive A=Ambivalent or no opinion N=negative.

FS comp with GCSEs.

P=Positive A=Ambivalent or no opinion N=negative.

Feelings towards Academic inc A-levels and university/Feelings towards BTEC/Vocational.

P=Positive A=Ambivalent or no opinion N=negative E=Easy D=Difficult .

Appendix iv: Table E: Making their way in the world of FE data

Young person	Felt Aware of all the options when leaving school Yes/No	Reflection on if they felt they were aware of all the options Yes/No	How optimistic they are at much choice feel they will have when finishing their current course	How optimistic they are at having choice /aspiration for a career	What they would be doing if they were not at the provider
A	N	N	3	4	N
B	Y	N	3	3	N
C	Y	N	3	3	N
D	N	N	4	4	N
E	Y	N	3	3	E
F	N	N	2	3	N
G	N	N	4	4	N
H	N	N	2	3	N
I	Y	N	3	3	N
J	N	N	4	3	T

Key

How optimistic they are at much choice feel they will have when finishing their current course.

1=No choice 2= a little choice 3= a lot of choice 4=total.

How optimistic they are at having choice /aspiration for a career .

1=No choice 2= a little choice 3= a lot of choice 4=total.

What they would be doing if not at the training provider.

N=NEET E=Employment T=Education or training.

Appendix v: Qualifications comparisons for GCSE/A-level/HE equivalence.
(gov.uk 2016)

Level	examples
Entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Entry level Skills for Life - Entry level award, certificate and diploma - Entry level Functional Skills - Entry level Foundation Learning
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -GCSE (grades D-G) -NVQ level 1 -BTEC award, certificate and diploma Level 1 -Foundation Learning Level 1 -Functional Skills Level 1
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -GCSE (grades A*-C) -NVQ Level 2 - BTEC award, certificate and diploma Level 2 - Functional Skills Level 2
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - AS and A-level - NVQ Level 3 - BTEC award, certificate and diploma Level 3 - BTEC National Diploma - International Baccalaureate
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Certificate of higher education NVQ Level 4 Professional award, certificate and diploma Level 4
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -HND (Higher National Diploma) - Foundation degree - NVQ Level 4 - Professional award, certificate and diploma Level 5
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Bachelor's degree - Advanced Professional award, certificate and diploma Level 6
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advanced Professional award, certificate and diploma Level 7 - Master's degree - Postgraduate certificate/diploma
8	PHD/Doctorate

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