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Young Participation in Higher Education in  
the Parliamentary Constituencies of  
Birmingham Hodge Hill, Bristol South,  
Nottingham North and Sheffield Brightside

**Report to HEFCE by the University of the West of England and  
the School of Education of University of Nottingham**

# Acknowledgments

This summary report is a collation of the findings from individual studies of four parliamentary constituencies with low rates of young participation in higher education: Birmingham Hodge Hill, Bristol South, Nottingham North, and Sheffield Brightside.

The authors of this combined report would like to acknowledge the authors of the original reports and their work:

*Young Participation in Higher Education (Birmingham Hodge Hill)*

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# 1. Introduction

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) set out a policy framework for higher education (HE) in the White Paper *The future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003) with several key priorities. These included the expansion of higher education provision with the aim that 50% of those aged between 18–30 would participate in some form of higher education by 2010, and that there would be improvements in fair access aiming to broaden participation to all those who have the potential to benefit, regardless of background.

The current rate of participation of 18–30 year olds in HE is around 42% with this figure remaining relatively stable over the last few years (DfES, 2006a). Research has shown that there is still an under-representation of the lower socio-economic groups in HE and a persistent polarisation of participation by socio-economic status (Gorard et al, 2006). Although the lower socio-economic groups represent nearly 50% of the population of England (Census, 2001) they represent only 28% of young full time entrants to first degree courses (HEFCE, 2006a). It would also appear that young people from professional backgrounds are five times more likely to enter HE than those from unskilled backgrounds (DfES, 2003). Those from the highest socio-economic groups are more likely to go to the more selective universities to study subjects such as medicine and they are also more likely to go at a younger age, with older students more likely to come from the lower socio-economic groups (UUK/SCOP, 2005).

In January 2005 The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) published *Young participation in higher education* (HEFCE, 2005a) that set out in detail patterns of young participation in HE over the period 1994-2000. The report identified that 'there are broad and deep divisions in the chances of going to HE according to where you live' (p10) and that 'many cities and towns are educationally divided, containing both neighbourhoods where almost no one goes to university and neighbourhoods where two out of three or more will enter HE' (p11).

Whilst the report confirms what might be expected e.g. that people living in areas of low young participation in HE are also disadvantaged on many other social, economic and educational measures, it also acknowledges the need for further research to elicit 'a fuller explanation and interpretation of the processes leading to these patterns of participation' (Forward: Sir Howard Newby).

HEFCE subsequently commissioned in October 2005 (HEFCE, 2005b) local studies of four parliamentary constituencies with very low young participation rates: Birmingham Hodge Hill, Bristol South, Nottingham North and Sheffield Brightside. The projects were commissioned in order to understand better the local and situated nature of the processes that appear to be producing the low rates of progression to HE. The associated research brief identified the following objectives:

- to establish what is already known through a review of existing local literature;
- to build on existing knowledge to determine attitudes, perceptions and experiences of young people that are not participating in education;

- to establish the availability and the appropriateness of the post-16 educational offer;
- to determine the nature of the information, advice and guidance that young people receive with regard to progression to post-16 provision and subsequently higher education;
- to identify examples of good practice in reaching out and engaging young people in post-16 and higher education provision.

It was anticipated that these local studies would provide well-grounded evidence for evaluating interventions to improve the current situation.

Those constituencies with the lowest participation rates are shown below, with the highest rate included for comparison:

**Table 1: POLAR data on Young Participation in Higher Education by Parliamentary Constituency**

Parliamentary Constituency	Mean YPR	Rank L→H
Nottingham North	8%	1
Sheffield Brightside	8%	1
Bristol South	10%	2
Leeds Central	10%	2
Kingston Upon Hull East	11%	3
Dagenham	12%	4
Salford	12%	4
Tyne Bridge	12%	4
Kingston Upon Hull North	13%	5
Birmingham Erdington	13%	5
Birmingham Hodge Hill	13%	5
Kingston Upon Hull W & Hessle	13%	5
Thurrock	13%	5
Kensington and Chelsea	69%	529

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/polar/nat/data/parlcon>

All four area reports were finally published by April 2007. The following summary report consolidates the main findings of the individual reports with an emphasis on highlighting the common issues with a view to making overarching conclusions and recommendations. It is hoped that the findings from these four studies may be of interest to other local areas with very low rates of young participation in higher education.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Research design**

Each of the four area studies produced a research design that entailed the use of a number of research tools. All reports triangulated evidence from a variety of sources and drew on primary, secondary, qualitative and quantitative data. A starting point for all studies was the review of relevant local literature related to aspects of the constituencies, including plans for community regeneration. The quantitative data used in the studies included socio-demographic and educational statistics for the constituencies as well as key variables at ward level and by educational institution.

All the research teams used semi-structured individual and focus group interviews to collect the qualitative data. A range of young people, parents/carers and educational professionals living or working in the area were interviewed. Young people interviewed included those identified as part of Aimhigher cohorts in schools and colleges, young people who had successfully progressed to higher education, and young people being educated out of school or who had dropped out of education. Parents/carers interviewed were sometimes also local professionals working in education or community work. Professionals included: headteachers and teachers; Connexions personal advisors (PAs); youth and community workers; Aimhigher staff, mentors and tutors; FE and HE representatives; and local authority representatives.

In addition several other more innovative approaches were also used for gathering local perspectives.

Birmingham Hodge Hill research team interviewed children in primary schools, as well as young people in secondary education, in response to the need identified by their participants to address aspects of low participation through early intervention.

Bristol South used an independent organisation – Knowle West Media Centre – to produce a short film on DVD recording insights and capturing the voice of local people. It was felt that participants might talk more frankly to people who were part of their community rather than those seen as outsiders. Bristol South researchers also drew on interview data from another research project exploring the experiences of young people who had left school with no qualifications at all, to try to determine why so many young people in the constituency appear to disengage with education. They were also able to revisit outcomes from a detailed attitudinal questionnaire that had been used with all young people in year 8 and 9 in 2003, matched to later outcomes.

Nottingham North asked the young people to annotate a map of the constituency and of the city using 'post-it notes' to show where they go and what they do in their local area. This was very useful in determining the mobility of the young people and also the types of activities they took part in.

Sheffield Brightside used visual qualitative methodologies such as asking participants to draw where they lived and representations of their educational journey in the form of a tree: the roots representing the past; the trunk representing the present; the branches representing the future. Some participants were asked to write a rap/poem/play or picture representing what

education meant to them. Sheffield Brightside also used questionnaires with current participants in higher education.

The research teams met several times throughout the research process to develop their respective research designs and to discuss emerging themes. Whilst there was some sharing of approaches, in practice the four studies were undertaken with a fair degree of autonomy. They also were undertaken over different time scales – ranging from 9 months (Birmingham Hodge Hill), 12 months (Sheffield Brightside), 15 months (Nottingham North) and 18 months (Bristol South)<sup>1</sup>. Where relevant, we have indicated where evidence relates to only some projects and not others. The original reports should be consulted for more detail and specificity.

## 2.2 A sociocultural framework

Studies on widening participation frequently use the metaphor of ‘barriers’ to participation, citing ‘situational’, ‘institutional’ and ‘dispositional’ dimensions that need to be removed or alleviated for participation to occur. Whilst the concept of barriers is a useful one, especially in locating the issues affecting educational engagement and disengagement out-with the individual, it provides rather limited purchase on the sociocultural dimensions to understanding behaviours and outcomes (Gorard et al, 2006).

Indeed, there is a wide body of literature that points to the multiplicity of factors affecting young people’s views of HE as an option (Archer et al, 2003; Ball et al, 2000; Reay et al, 2005). Callender, in her study on attitudes to debt and HE, captured the more complex interplay of sociocultural forces in the creation of learning cultures, identities and trajectories.

The notion of the ‘poverty of aspirations’ is unhelpful in explaining peoples’ rejection of HE. It individualises non-participation, assumes the individual is lacking, and fails to locate individuals in a world shaped and influenced by structural, social, and cultural forces. Prospective students’ decisions were structured both by the culture and values informing their schooling and family environment and by different opportunity structures, including their cultural and social capital. These influenced their attitudes towards HE and the way they framed and made their educational choices. Non-entrants, by rejecting the values and culture of HE, rebuffed a student identity. They did not buy into the whole idea of HE, what it stood for, or what it offered, and devalued its benefits. Instead, they opted for the identity, social status, and income derived from employment (Callender, 2003, p. 14).

This was reflected in a comment by a professional in Sheffield who problematises the fundamental principles that underpin the widening participation debate.

*It reminds me a little bit sometimes of the old studies of you know archaic working class communities...where the whole*

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<sup>1</sup> The original time frame for the studies was late 2005 to July 2006, but some studies were subsequently extended as they were able to secure small amounts of additional funding or staffing from their home institutions.

*middle class thing of achievement as an instrumental means to an end is much less important than family and relationships and boyfriends and girlfriends and being happy with your mates and so on and you know there is a certain level at which you think "well hang on, who has got it right?"* (Interview with professional: Sheffield)

The studies of all four constituencies to various degrees adopted a more sociocultural approach, in order to understand better from within any specific setting the significance of:

1. *historical/material contexts* for contemporary cultural practices;
2. *cultural resources* that people are drawing upon in constructing their learning identities and trajectories;
3. *interactive processes* by which learning identities and trajectories<sup>2</sup> are sustained or transformed over time;
4. *dominant discourses* that shape perceptions of the issues and guide actions in response.

In relation to the last of these, it is important to recognise the multiple ways in which working class young people, families and communities are regularly positioned in policy texts, professional dialogue and popular culture as 'feckless', 'lacking moral responsibility', carrying some 'deficit' (Gewirtz, 2001; Gillies, 2005), or as a 'spoilt identity' i.e. an identity defined in terms of lack of certain qualities or of failure (Reay and Ball, 1997). In one conversation between two teachers in Bristol South, for example, the local community was referred to thus:

Teacher A: *It's a forgotten community – an excuse community.*

Teacher B: *Yes...a Vicky Pollard<sup>3</sup> community.*

Or a rhetorical question heard in a school staffroom:

Teacher C: *Well what can you expect? They come from a limited gene pool on this estate.*

Such discourses shape what we perceive, how we interpret what we see, and how we respond (Raphael Reed, 1999); they are constituted in relation to experience, but are profoundly constitutive of that experience.

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of 'trajectories' itself is contentious in debates on widening participation – where recognition that lifelong learning pathways may be circuitous rather than linear is an important part of reframing perspectives on progression. However, the term is used in this summary report in recognition that young people's experiences by the age of 16 have implications for immediate options – and failure to thrive in the education system at that age, sets young people on a pathway where progression to HE in two to three years time is deeply problematic.

<sup>3</sup> 'Vicky Pollard' is a character in the television comedy series *Little Britain*; a caricature of a white working class Bristol girl with endless excuses for her behaviour and her failure at school.

Participants regularly referred to the effects of such positioning.

*We never thought we'd amount to anything because of the area we come from.....No one on the outside would give you that chance and you can't believe that you would actually gain that chance. (Interview with young person: Nottingham)*

Reframing the narrative of working class engagement with education is – we would suggest – an essential part of transforming the current situation (Quinn et al, 2005).

The study of all four cities also reminds us not to oversimplify or over-generalise the issues. As Connor et al (2001) remind us, there is no one overriding factor affecting the learning identities and trajectories of students from lower social class backgrounds. Rather we need to understand the complexities and diversities of processes within real sociocultural settings. This also implies that we need interventions and initiatives to improve educational engagement that are not one-dimensional, and that relate to the specific sociocultural contexts within which they are intended to apply.

What we do know, however, is that low participation of young people in HE reflects levels of aspiration, participation and achievement throughout the years of compulsory and post-compulsory education and training. As such, it is the tip of a much more significant 'iceberg'. To various degrees all four studies have enquired into the reasons for this systemic failure to engage many young people at all stages of education in their respective constituencies in an attempt to understand better how educational outcomes, and young people's learning identities and trajectories, reflect the dynamic interplay of cultural, social and economic factors across space and time.

## **2.3 Attitudes to debt**

The cost of going to HE remains an issue for many working class young people, in spite of the government's introduction of a funding strategy which they believe will support under-represented groups. Callender's study (2003) provides both a review of the international literature and a thorough survey of attitudes in the UK. Major issues reported in that study were differential attitudes to debt, the existence of debt aversion amongst lower earning families – something which very much figured in the four local studies – and the impact of this upon their experiences once in HE.

Debt aversion deterred entry into HE, especially for the very groups the government most wants to attract. Debt aversion was also the key determinant of potential student loan take-up. Debt averse entrants were intending to trade off term-time employment against debt accumulation through student loans, once at university, which is likely to negatively effect their academic achievement (Callender, 2003, p. 13).

However, another major issue found in the Callender report was one which also appeared to be evident in the four cities research – i.e. the impact of lack of information coupled with the complexity of student financial support system.

The lack of information on student financial support and poor dissemination of the information were obstacles to entry. The complexity of student funding arrangements was an impediment

to entry and made the interpretation of information supplied difficult... (Callender, 2003, p. 13).

Whereas government policy is intended to stimulate participation by low income groups, Callender suggests current policy initiatives might not be the most effective strategy for doing this. In all four studies there were examples of where the cost of going to HE acted as a disincentive and/or had a powerfully determining effect on the choices young people made.

*Yeah I think it is finance with a lot of families, you know they feel that they can't afford the thought of student debt and paying for courses and things. (Interview with education professional: Sheffield)*

*That's the reason why my daughters have chosen to go to Sheffield University because they didn't want the student loans. J's never had a student loan; she has always worked well as much as she can inbetween to pay for whatever she needs and she has had to pay her fees up front in the September before she does the following year. We had to pay the first one and then she saved up for the rest of them. But there's no way she could have done it if she had gone away to university cos you have got your accommodation and your travelling and everything...(Interview with parent/carer: Sheffield)*

*There are lots of negatives: time consuming, no money, too much debt, the living conditions. A lot of my friends want to go quite far to get away from Nottingham and experience a few years out of Nottingham but a lot of them haven't got a choice. They have to stay in Nottingham because they can't afford to live any where else. (Student Focus Group: Nottingham)*

Financial concerns were frequently cited as influential in choosing an HE institution. Of the Nottingham North students spoken to and who have gone on to HE, all except one lived at home whilst studying at university.

Whilst overall there is as yet no strong empirical evidence indicating that student finance arrangements are putting off applications from young people from less affluent backgrounds – these local studies provide multiple examples of financial aspects having considerable influence. However, the studies also evidence that for some young people, student finance is not the most powerful, or the sole influencing factor; the factors that shape young people's predisposition to engage in higher education are more complex and multi-dimensional.

## 3. Local Contexts

### 3.1 Local geographies and socio-demographics

#### *3.1.1 Multiple deprivation*

Whilst all four cities show stark differentiation between constituencies within the respective city boundaries in terms of affluence and deprivation – and associated polarisation in terms of educational attainment and participation – within the low participation constituencies they share several common features. All contain areas with high levels of multiple deprivation as recorded on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) with significant areas of social housing – and three (Bristol South, Nottingham North and Sheffield Brightside) are predominantly white by ethnicity though Sheffield Brightside has 22% of the population in one ward from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds. Birmingham Hodge Hill is more ethnically diverse, although that ethnic diversity is unequally distributed between wards, ranging from 8% to 57% from BME groups; it also does not exhibit quite such low levels of young participation in HE. The intersection of issues of class, gender and ethnicity in relation to educational participation in these constituencies is something to consider further.

The context of multiple deprivation impacts on these areas in particular ways, not least through the presence of multiple regeneration initiatives, sometimes not fully coherent in their strategies and always time-limited in their duration. Each study highlights the need for more long term and stable investment in projects and interventions in the areas.

However, what the studies also show is that these parliamentary constituencies are not homogenous in terms of socio-demographics, and differentials across ward boundaries are significant. This heterogeneity is also expressed in terms of identification with 'local community'. Parliamentary constituencies and ward boundaries are political fabrications and do not necessarily reflect lived social boundaries. In a number of ways there is not one single 'community' in each constituency but multiple 'communities', reflecting their recent social and economic histories, but also reflecting people's lived associations with particular local spaces and social networks. Such associations and identifications with 'neighbourhoods' are also differentiated by age; young people and adults do not experience their local areas in exactly the same way.

It is also the case that each city has areas other than the constituencies studied with similar high levels of multiple deprivation, but with slightly different patterns of young participation in HE. Whilst there is an obvious association between high levels of multiple deprivation and low participation, it is important not to be reductive.

[Low HE participation] may be partially explained by the deprivation indices which indicate that Nottingham North has the highest level of deprivation of the three constituencies, followed by Nottingham East and Nottingham South. However, the difference in IMD scores is not that great, particularly between Nottingham North and Nottingham East. This suggests that, although relative deprivation may have a significant influence on higher education participation...it is by no means the only factor involved (Kerrigan, 2006).

Exploring these other factors would involve detailed statistical modelling using multivariate analysis. This has not been within the scope of this study. Here we report the experiences of young people, their parents and carers, and their teachers, to establish in-depth insights into the particular processes that underpin the low rates of constituencies in these constituencies.

However, since the original work in the four cities was commissioned, HEFCE has developed a statistical model (using UK wide data), illustrating that the low participation rates in these four constituencies are no more than would be expected. This means that though the four cities are *untypical* in having very low HE participation rates, they are not *exceptional* in how these rates relate to various measures of socio-economic and educational disadvantage. The findings of this study may therefore have wider applicability for other areas.

### ***3.1.2 Adult qualifications and skills***

Across all four constituencies there are significant issues in relation to adult qualification and skill levels. The 2005 response to Birmingham City Council's draft community plan for Hodge Hill reports that the proportion of adults in the area without qualifications is 48%, whilst only 7.5% of the population is qualified to degree level. Census data from 2001 identifies that 36.5% of the population aged 16-74 in Bristol South constituency have no qualifications, 18.3% are qualified to level 1, 18.2% to level 2, 6.4% to level 3, and just 14.2 % to level 4/5 (6.4% unknown). Five of the nine wards in the constituency have more than 30% of the population with low levels of basic skills in literacy and numeracy. In Nottingham North 29.4% of the residents have no qualifications and 44.5% of residents are qualified at level 2 (compared to 22% with no qualification and 55.8% qualified to level 2 in the City of Nottingham as a whole). Three of the wards from the Sheffield Brightside constituency - Southey Green, Nether Shire and Firth Park - have high proportions of adults with only entry-level literacy (between 60-79%).

Such statistics evidence the relative lack of experience amongst adults in the local populations in relation to higher education but they also have implications for the confidence and capacity of parents/carers to support their children with their learning – which emerged as a significant feature in the qualitative data. It is also worth noting that the Bristol study identified that whilst Bristol South wards score extremely poorly in the education, skills and training deprivation domain (with four of the most education deprived wards in the South West in Bristol South) they score less starkly in the employment and income deprivation domain. This suggests a degree of dislocation between qualifications and access to local employment – notwithstanding that such employment may be relatively low-skill and low-wage.

### ***3.1.3 Employment opportunities***

The four constituencies are further characterised by current high levels of unemployment and/or high levels of low-skill employment. In Bristol South, Nottingham North, and Sheffield Brightside this contrasts starkly with a historical picture of areas with access to skilled, secure and relatively well-paid employment through large-scale traditional employers (in tobacco, manufacturing, coal and steel). The decline of such local industries and traditional centres of employment during the latter part of the 20th century has dramatically reconstructed local labour markets. Some suggest that the relatively recent existence of such

employment cultures means that older family members still assume a dependency orientation towards employability, reflecting a past where they could assume ongoing employment would be available (SHM, 2004).

In Birmingham Hodge Hill, the percentage of working age residents at the last census that have never worked or who are long term unemployed was particularly stark in Washwood Heath ward (at 25.9%). This is the ward in the constituency with a significant BME population (57%), 41.5% being of Pakistani heritage.

In Bristol South, at the point of the last census, the unemployment rate amongst the economically active was similar to the wider city, with proportions of the population aged 16-74 economically inactive comparable to the rest of the city - though with higher proportions in this category looking after family/home or permanently sick/disabled. More recently the unemployment rates for 16-24 year olds and for men in the constituency have been slightly higher than comparable city-wide rates with some unemployment spikes.

The Bristol study also looked in more detail at the labour market experience of young people and found that whilst initial job opportunities for young people in the constituency aged 16-19 are in line with their peers elsewhere in the city, with the majority of those entering the workforce at this age employed in NS-SEC 4-7 occupations, equity with the wider city declines as the young people age and they have a very different labour market experience by their mid-twenties. While there is a shift to higher status occupations in Bristol South, this is significantly more marked elsewhere in the city, to the point that 33% of 20-24 year olds in the city as a whole are in professional or managerial occupations, compared with only 24% in Bristol South.

The availability of low skilled jobs for young people gives particular messages to them about the importance or otherwise of qualifications to their employment prospects. Even the skilled labour has generally been concentrated in small businesses in the construction trades, where family connections are often more important than qualifications in securing work and work-based training tends to be informal.

In Nottingham North, current unemployment rates are higher than the national average (Nottingham North 4.6%, City of Nottingham 3.7%, and national 2.3% at May 2005, source NOMIS) and the proportion of residents employed in a managerial, professional or technical occupation is only 21.7%, compared to 34.2% of residents city-wide. Many wards in Nottingham North experience higher than average rates of unemployment when compared with figures for the city and England, with long-term unemployment in some wards reaching more than three times the national average as well higher levels of those who have never worked.

In Sheffield Brightside, on the 2004 employment deprivation index, employment deprivation is generally high with a significant number unemployed and approximately 30% on income support. The following quote from a Sheffield professional captures a key concern.

*I think one of the great issues is the gulf between white collar and professional employment opportunities and the traditional and current skill set of people in Brightside. There is a gulf there, there is no question about that.* (Interview with education professional: Sheffield)

Indeed, the shift from manufacturing to the service sector in all four cities over the recent past has made competing for higher level and well-paid service sector employment even harder for the local populations in these constituencies – where good qualifications are vital. For the most part these opportunities are not located in the local area. However, a number of the studies also identify how new employment opportunities being planned within or close to the constituency are set to change the local context in relation to the visible need to have higher level qualifications in order to access local jobs.

As the Leitch Review of Skills argues (HM Treasury, 2006), sectors of the population with low skill levels increasingly run the risk of being cut off from labour market opportunities resulting in further social exclusion. This has especial significance in the four constituencies under study.

## **3.2 Community cultures, values and attitudes**

### ***3.2.1 Strong social bonds***

In all four studies there was evidence of strong senses of community, despite some deep and entrenched levels of social deprivation. Strong community bonds and stable extended family networks appear to frequently generate positive attitudes to living and working in the areas. Such findings resonate with previous studies of city communities in deprived areas (Reay and Lucey, 2002). Robson et al (2000) in *The State of English Cities*, note:

Even in the most deprived communities, there are considerable social strengths on which policy could build. Social surveys consistently show that high proportions of residents in deprived areas speak warmly of the 'quality' of the people in their neighbourhoods and argue that the problems of crime, dereliction and social disruption are caused by a small minority of residents. This suggests that almost all deprived communities still retain elements of their traditionally strong community structures. Much of this is maintained by women, and particularly middle-aged and elderly women (p25).

Gewirtz and others remind us in their analysis of the operation of Education Action Zones in England (Gewirtz et al, 2005) that the 'dense, tight-knit, homogenous social networks of family and friends' (p668), such as are evident in the four cities research, provide good examples of 'bonding social capital' prevalent in working class communities. Forms of 'bridging social capital' (horizontal social networks that give access to valuable resources and information outside one's immediate network of friends and relations) and 'linking social capital' (vertical connections that provide links upwards to powerful people, institutions and agencies) appear less well established.

Given the central importance of both of these forms of social capital in gaining access to economic and cultural capital - and being able to command associated resources and exert enhanced degrees of control and choice - such absence is significant. The paradox, evident in these four local studies is that the 'networks of intimacy' associated with bonding networks (Fuller et al, 2006) may themselves predispose individuals to eschew experiences that might build other forms of social capital and precipitate change. There are also powerful regulatory effects of strongly bonded networks – that have a tendency to exclude outsiders who are 'different' and to overtly regulate group behaviours (Portes, 1998).

### **3.2.2 Local concerns**

Whilst there were positive views expressed about the strength of family and community bonds, on the other hand there were real and shared concerns expressed in a number of the studies over the fabric of the local environment. In Nottingham North, for example, it was felt that streets were not regularly kept clean by the local authority, there was limited street signage, a lack of flowers, and benches to create a positive environment – together with a feeling that other areas of the cities received more environmental investment.

There were also some widespread concerns about aspects of crime, drug use, safety and anti-social behaviour in all areas. For some, crime and anti-social behaviour were considered to be major problems and key priorities for improvement. People claimed that the problems were created by a minority of individuals/groups/families causing problems and thereby giving the whole area a bad name.

The overwhelming attitude to their local environment expressed by young people interviewed in Sheffield and Nottingham was negative; young people viewed their area as “boring” with “nothing to do”, with gangs and hooligans, vandalism, violence, and crime. Problems were perceived as very localised, and focussed on particular streets or groups of streets. In Birmingham, a recent report from the Hodge Hill Youth Conference (Byrne, 2005a) echoed these concerns and identified a lack of affordable local facilities for young people to engage in constructive activities that aid their self-development. However, a further study (Byrne, 2005b) recognises other more positive aspects highlighted in local community plans including the richness and diversity of local cultures, the youthful profile of the local population, access to green spaces, and inward investment and regeneration projects.

Bristol City Council's *Young Person's Quality of Life Survey* conducted in Bristol secondary schools between 2002-2005 analysed findings by ward. Approximately 5000 young people aged 11-18 have responded over that time. Asked about degree of satisfaction with cultural, recreational and leisure facilities young people in seven of the constituency wards indicating relatively high levels of contentment. However, in the interview data, young people's concern about violence in the local area – and especially as a means of regulating movement between different parts of the constituency – was expressed.

Finally, there was recognition, frustration and anger expressed in all four areas that others from outside the constituencies generally view them, and particularly parts of them, in a negative light and that this may lead to lowered expectations and stereotyping of people who come from the local area.

### **3.2.3 Localised lives**

The enduring impression from the four studies is one where many people in the constituencies live intensely ‘localised lives’ (Connolly and Healy, 2004). Many young people said they would spend most of their spare time around their local area, near where they live, seeing friends, “hanging out” or staying in. Staying local may, in part, be governed by parents wanting their children to stay close to home; there was some expression of parental anxiety about their children going into other areas.

However in most cases, the young people were not as ‘localised’ as some professionals thought - with activity including “going every Saturday to town, shopping, hanging around, with mates”. In Bristol South there were differences

between young people in the wards closest to the city centre – that also had more mixed local cultures in terms of social class - and those from the very southern wards on the edge of the city in extensive social housing estates, and where there are higher levels of deprivation and poorer transport links. However the level of organised activities referred to across all studies was quite low; the young people tended to organise themselves around informal activities rather than be organised into structured activities.

Lareau, in her study of class and family life in the USA (Lareau, 2003), claims that there are different attitudes to leisure between young people and adults in working class families compared to middle class families. The young people brought up in working class families appear to benefit from what Lareau calls 'the accomplishment of natural growth' (p. 3) compared to the more highly organised lifestyles of the middle classes which she termed 'concerted cultivation' (p. 2). This includes dashing round taking their children to one organised activity after another – something many families in the constituencies cannot afford to do.

In the Bristol study there were frequent references to how travel into other areas was not 'safe'; tales of violence, either directly experienced, or as part of popular myths, were used to rationalise this.

*Yeah, well I wouldn't go down Hartcliffe, not on my own anyway. Sometimes I go visit my cousin but if I do I say I go to Hartcliffe or something because if you say you're from Ashton they're like "An Ashtoner, beat him up"! (Interview with young person: Bristol)*

Poor transport links, or sometimes the cost of travel, in some case exacerbated this sense of immobile and bounded communities. It is relevant then that the geographical location and inaccessibility of post-compulsory education provision were cited time and again as factors constraining young people's post-16 progression. We return to the significance of issues of proximity (relational and geographical) in section 5.5.3.

### **3.2.4 Gender cultures**

A further significant dimension in some of the studies is characterised by particular gender discourses and cultures. In interviewing young people in Bristol South many boys saw themselves following in their fathers' footsteps quite literally – often going to work alongside them as employees in manual trades or joining the family business. Girls interviewed frequently articulated a vision of future employment that involved "working with children", "working with animals" or "working in health and beauty". For many girls an anticipated life journey of early motherhood, unpaid domestic work and later low skilled employment once their children have grown up reflected their family narrative.

Teenage conceptions, the first step of that journey, are noted to be generally higher than average across parts of the constituencies in all four areas. Given the strongly matriarchal cultures in many of these settings, where mum and 'nan' are often powerful characters in family and community life, this choice is seen by some young women as a positive and empowering choice. Others noted that it was also a way to access economic resources e.g. housing and enhanced benefits.

In parts of Birmingham Hodge Hill with high numbers of Muslim families, the gender culture issues are notably different – with professionals claiming that certain restrictions on what is considered appropriate for daughters to do has had

some impact on their educational careers. This also appears to impact in terms of high status versus low status progression routes, where it was claimed that there is often family support for HE study by girls in professions like medicine, but less support for study in the arts.

In the Bristol study it is noted that the educational performance of girls in the area in general does not reflect the 'gender gap' in favour of girls noted as a national trend. Given the significance of gender to the changing face of young participation in higher education, where generally young women are more likely to enter higher education than young men and especially in the most disadvantaged areas (HEFCE, 2005a) this local characteristic is important and would bear further investigation. The Bristol South study suggests that these patterns of performance reflect the interplay of factors within family, community and school cultures.

### **3.3 Conclusions on the local contexts**

Whilst the constituencies themselves are not internally homogenous, and there are differences between the four constituencies studied, overall the reports have demonstrated how the economic, social and cultural infrastructures in the areas inter-relate with each other to configure relatively restricted 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson et al, 1996) for many young people living there. This is important in making sense of why so few young people in the constituencies participate in higher education. By 'horizons for action' we mean:

The arena within which actions can be taken and decisions made. The opportunity structures of the labour market both influence horizons for action and are inter-related, for perceptions of what might be available and appropriate affect decisions, and opportunities are simultaneously subjective and objective (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, 34).

The socio-demographic data paints a fairly challenging context for the residents of these areas, who tend to be poorer, less healthy and less well qualified than other areas of their cities. Employment is harder to find, or where it is available it is frequently low-skilled and low-waged. Many young people grow up in environments where they rarely encounter educational or economic success – or the relationship between the two. But this is not just a story of deprivation and deficits. The studies also demonstrate how local narratives offer pathways into adulthood that do not depend on educational success e.g. employment in small businesses alongside family and friends, or early motherhood. In this context, the motivation to aspire to higher level qualifications is not always obvious. Indeed, with stated high levels of satisfaction with some aspects of how things are, reinforced by strong social bonds and 'networks of intimacy' within well-bounded geographic areas – there can be a powerful force field maintaining the status quo.

## 4. Educational Landscapes

### 4.1 Local Authority contexts

Education league tables have consistently placed Bristol, Nottingham and Sheffield as some of the poorest performing local authorities in England. For example, in 2004 Bristol was ranked 5th from bottom and in 2005 it was ranked bottom for GCSE performance. Such performance means that these local authorities and their associated schools are under intense scrutiny with an increasing number of interventions designed to lever up attainment. Whilst such interventions have produced certain gains, suggesting a degree of school improvement is possible, there have been questions asked about the capacity of the local authorities concerned to address the deep-seated issues around low achievement in many of their schools.

The local context for provision of education in these local authorities however is also undergoing significant change with a number of Academies and/or Trust schools being planned in some of the constituencies. In relation to these plans there were some concerns expressed about the implications for coordinated planning of school provision, instability for local schools, and questions about the extent to which local families and communities had been fully involved to date as partners in these initiatives.

It is also noted across the studies that changes as a consequence of *Every Child Matters* mean significant local authority organisation under Children and Young People's Trusts.

### 4.2 Intake of the schools

Schools in the respective constituencies tend to have high numbers of young people on free school meals and higher than average numbers of young people with special educational needs. In Birmingham Hodge Hill schools there are significant numbers of learners using English as an additional language. Such characteristics pose particular challenges for the schools in question.

In all areas the issue of 'cross border flow' at primary-secondary transfer is a worrying feature. Many young people are moving across constituency and city boundaries at this point. In Bristol South approximately 15% of young people are emigrating to neighbouring authorities for their education. The figure may be much higher if we include those going to independent schools, of which there are 11 in the city compared to 16 local authority schools (the figure for the whole authority for those lost from maintained schools is 25%); in Birmingham Hodge Hill it is some 30%. In Nottingham some 20% move out (with 15% being educated in non-faith Nottinghamshire State schools).

We might also assume, as shown in the quotation below from the Sheffield study, that a relatively high percentage of these young people moving away from the constituency secondary schools come from families who value education and are concerned about the standard of education on offer; young people who are thereby likely to achieve well in school.

*If parents have aspirations for their children that do involve higher education they will do what they can to get their children*

*into schools out of the area. (Interview with parent/carer: Sheffield)*

Another issue here is that of the shifting nature of some local communities and the associated challenges that some of the schools are facing e.g. those schools in Birmingham Hodge Hill and Sheffield Brightside who have a high percentage of young people from refugee or asylum seeking families and for whom English is not their first language.

*The degree of movement into this school, less so in the last year or two, but in the previous couple of years was absolutely massive and it was almost exclusively asylum seekers and refugees. We were admitting 16-20 a week at one stage. So the school population is highly turbulent...The area is characterised by a fair degree of mobility. It's traditionally been an area that people come into and move out of, either for reasons of personal aspiration, or because people are taking advantage of very cheap transient housing. (Interview with education professional: Sheffield)*

### **4.3 Access to educational opportunities**

The majority of secondary schools in the four constituencies are 11-16 in age range, reflecting in part rationalisation of small school-based sixth forms. Where local post-16 provision is available, it sometimes offers relatively restrictive choices, with a predominant focus on level 2 courses or below. Most young people who want to progress on to post-16 courses have to make a physical transition to college or school based post-16 provision outside their immediate area. Given anxieties and attachments associated with 'territory', this is significant. In turn, young people also have to make a transition in terms of learning and teaching styles – again particularly challenging given the fragility of many young people's confidence and attainment as learners by the age of sixteen. A number of educational professionals and parents/carers cite the absence of school sixth forms as a barrier to educational progression. There are also issues around limited access to high quality work-based training opportunities.

The picture of post-16 provision in the constituencies however is far from fixed. All local authorities, in response to 14-19 reform, are developing new 14-19 strategies with reconfigured forms of regional partnership and collaboration, aiming to extend flexibility and choice at key transition points and to provide a range of initiatives to ensure young people excluded or at risk of exclusion remain engaged in learning. The LSC, local learning partnerships and lifelong learning networks are also significant to new forms of provision in meeting local skills agendas. At the same time, as already indicated, there are emergent plans for new forms of secondary school organisation, with a number of schools earmarked for 11-19 Academy status. In Bristol South, there are plans to build a new flagship Skills Academy right in the heart of the constituency serving 14-19 and adult learners. Sheffield Brightside has relatively recently had a new sixth form college built in the constituency.

School activities associated with Every Child Matters and Extended School Activity also have the potential to place schools at the heart of their communities in a new way.

## **4.4 Quality and standards in local schools**

### ***4.4.1 Quality of schools***

Secondary schools in the constituencies have been through challenging times in recent years. Several of the schools in the areas are in, about to go into, or have recently come out of 'special measures'. Having said that, OfSTED reports on many of the schools, even where there are low levels of attainment, conclude that the quality of education is satisfactory or better, and contextual value added results indicate some schools are doing better than suggested by raw scores alone. Overall, analysis confirms an association between the level of deprivation of the catchment area of the school and the level of attainment of students therein. In some of the constituencies, this leads to differentiation in performance between schools which can be grouped accordingly.

### ***4.4.2 Key Stage 2 attainment***

Attainment at Key Stage 2 is varied across the constituencies.

In Birmingham Hodge Hill young people's achievement at Key Stage 2 is slightly lower than national averages but not markedly so. Although there is an improving trend, Bristol South is consistently one of the poorest performing constituencies in the city at Key Stage 2. In Nottingham North the picture was a little more positive with a rise in achievement at KS2 that exceeded the rise at local authority, regional and national level and brought achievement in line with the local authority and much closer to the regional and national average in 2005. In Sheffield Brightside, the performance of young people is lower than for the rest of Sheffield with many areas having an average point score 25% below than the rest of the city.

### ***4.4.3 Key Stage 3 attainment***

At Key Stage 3 the picture is more worrying – with low attainment in all the constituencies. In 2005 the national average in England for achievement of Level 5 or above at Key Stage 3 in English was 74%; in science, the average was 70%; in maths, the average was 74%.

In 2005, in Birmingham Hodge Hill Schools, average attainment at Key Stage 3 ranged from 46% to 64%: in science it ranged from 39% to 66%; in mathematics the range was from 49% to 66%. Bristol attainment was significantly below national standards with students from Bristol South seriously adrift in all core subjects. Bristol South is consistently one of the poorest performing constituencies in the city at Key Stage 3. This masks some variability between schools. Over the two year period 2004-2005 all of the secondary schools serving the Nottingham North area performed well below the national average in English, maths and Science at Key Stage 3 – as was the case in Sheffield Brightside schools.

### ***4.4.4 Key Stage 4 attainment***

The over-riding feature of the educational landscape in the four constituencies in terms of progression to higher education is that by sixteen the majority of young people have not yet achieved the necessary qualification levels to progress to higher education in two or three years time i.e. level 2 qualifications - equivalent to five GCSEs at grade A\*-C.

In Birmingham Hodge Hill, value added scores from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4 are better than from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4. Thus there is a strong emphasis on improving Key Stage 3 performance in the constituency. In 2002 secondary schools in Hodge Hill showed low performance in student achievement at Key Stage 4: the national average for students achieving five A\*-C and equivalent was 51.6% but schools in the Hodge Hill area ranged from 13% to 44% (average: 27.5%). This has shifted somewhat, so that in 2005, the national average was 57% and schools in the Hodge Hill area ranged from 25% to 53% (average: 39.17%).

In Bristol South, only 28.7% achieved 5A\*-C in GCSE or equivalent in 2005. Interventions during 2005-2006 saw dramatic improvements in the levels of attainment of 5A\*-C in GCSE or equivalent in the Bristol South schools with year 11 students in five of the six schools attaining approximately between 35-38% and students in the Catholic secondary school attaining 61%. However, if one includes English and maths GCSE in these results, students in community schools serving areas of highest deprivation in the constituency only attained 11-16%.

Over the two year period 2004-2005 none of the Nottingham North schools had an average point score above the national average at Key Stage 4. On average the eight secondary schools in Nottingham North were 122.53 points below the national average in 2004 and 121.45 points below in 2005. Achievement of 5+ A\*-Cs was well below the national average in all but one school in 2004 and in all schools in 2005. Whilst achievement at Key Stage 4 is improving in most secondary schools serving Nottingham North, that improvement is only marginal and achievement of 5+ A\*-C remains well below the national average.

The percentage of KS4 students achieving level 2 qualifications in the Sheffield Brightside schools in 2005 (32%) was far lower than the average percentage for Sheffield (47%) and England (57%). The percentage of students achieving Level 1 (5 or more A\*-G grade GCSEs or equivalent) ranged between 78% and 87% in Sheffield Brightside schools with an average of 82%. The percentage of students not gaining any qualifications varied between 12% and 7%, with an average of 9%. This compares with 6 % for Sheffield and 3% for England as a whole.

## **4.5 Post-16 progression and attainment**

### ***4.5.1 Birmingham Hodge Hill***

It is noteworthy, and distinctive when compared with the other areas, that the percentages of Year 11 students from Hodge Hill schools who progress into post-16 education and training are well above both regional and national averages. In Hodge Hill, progression to post-16 education and training ranges from 63.2% to 82.3%. In particular, we know that large proportions of Pakistani heritage female students from one of the local girls' schools (which is technically just outside the constituency boundaries) progress to the city FE college to study Level 3 qualifications. However, numbers of school-leavers not in employment, education or training (NEET) are far higher (in some schools around twice as high) than figures for the city as a whole. In 2004 Connexions estimated that nationally around 7.7% of 16-18 year olds fall into the NEET category; in Hodge Hill secondary schools report NEET rates among school-leavers as ranging between 10.8% and 19.4%. The patterns of post-16 progression in Birmingham Hodge Hill therefore appear more polarised than in the other three constituencies.

Data from the local Learning and Skills Council show highly localised patterns of participation in post-16 education and training for Hodge Hill. Data show that the

area of the constituency with the highest levels of deprivation also records the higher levels of post-16 participation. There are significant numbers of young people beyond the age of sixteen participating in Level 2 study in FE establishments. This suggests that young people in the area value education but may take longer than some to reach their goals.

At the same time, data from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the Connexions service suggest that those young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) are concentrated in particular geographical 'pockets'. The distribution of this group throughout the area as a whole tends to reflect the distribution of social deprivation – but it is a worrying feature that deserves further investigation.

Further work needs to be done to track the progression routes for young people leaving education in these constituencies at 17, 18 or 19. Data kept by Connexions from year 12 and year 13 leavers' surveys is only partial and is not easy to analyse by postcode.

#### **4.5.2 Bristol South**

A lower percentage of year 11 school leavers in the constituency stay in full time education than they do on average across the city as a whole. Out of 1050 young people in total in Bristol South in 2005, 62% stayed on in full-time education compared with 70% across the city and 77% in the country as a whole. This is especially pronounced for young men (only 54% of young men staying in full-time education compared with 70% of young women). Analyzing the data on a school by school basis once can see a pattern of progression that corresponds to the pattern of differential achievement between schools. Young people in schools recruiting predominantly from the eastern and southern zones of the constituency are less likely to stay in full-time education. They are also more likely to go into employment or to be NEET than young people in schools recruiting from the northern, and more affluent, zone of the constituency.

The majority of the young people in the constituency who stay in education at sixteen progresses to college rather than school-based post-16 provision, with the largest FE college as the main provider with almost half of Bristol South students enrolled initially at level 2. The trajectory established for young people in Bristol South by the age of sixteen is only partially redressed by their later educational experience.

Data from the FE college show that students aged 16-18 from Bristol South postcodes for 2005-2006 had a success rate slightly below average for the college. The average ward level pass rate in the constituency across level 1-3 courses was 69%, compared with 80% in the college as whole. However, this gives us no measure of the distance travelled in terms of prior attainment. Value added measures of performance of post-16 institutions are more difficult to gauge, as there is no one agreed national framework for reporting such outcomes. Further work needs to be done to disaggregate the specific outcomes for young people from Bristol South in post-16 education and to evaluate the types of programmes that appear to be yielding the most positive learning gains.

In some wards there still appear to be gender issues impacting on the attainment of some young women. A further notable feature of the city is the relative lack of high quality work-based learning opportunities and variable employer engagement. This is especially significant in Bristol South with its lack of skilled industry/services. Alternative routes into advanced education and training are limited.

At the point of progression to higher education at 17, 18 or 19, it is therefore not surprising to find that Bristol South retains the lowest level of young participation in the city, notwithstanding that the YPR for the constituency as a whole may recently have shown some slight improvement. As with other dimensions of experience, the segmentation of the constituency into zones is evident with some wards achieving almost a quarter of young people going into higher education and others achieving a YPR of just over 5%. Of those who do apply successfully to higher education, a slightly higher percentage are mature learners than the national average - reflecting the more extended pathway to level 3 attainment for some, or the tendency to return to study after early parenthood or experience of work.

#### **4.5.3. Nottingham North**

In Nottingham North the figures progressing to post-16 education are similar to those in Bristol South (around 60%) with the majority going into an FE college and very few progressing to the small number of school-based sixth forms.

Amongst schools' leavers, progression rates on to FE do not necessarily positively correlate with levels of attainment, i.e. low achievement does not necessarily lead to low progression on to FE. For example, at one school only 20% of school leavers achieved 5+A\*-C but 59.1% of the year group went on to a college of FE, whereas at another school 46% of school leavers achieved 5+A\*-C and 61.4% of the year group went on to a college of FE. More work is needed to understand better why school leavers who are not attaining go on to FE and why some that are attaining do not go on to FE. Overall, few Nottingham North young people are adequately prepared to progress on to Level 3 courses at sixteen.

#### **4.5.4 Sheffield Brightside**

Progression to FE college provision from Sheffield Brightside's schools ranges from approximately 40% to 70%, with an increase in the percentages from some schools being seen in 2004 and 2005 – in part as a response to the newly available college of FE within the constituency. There was some anecdotal evidence from the Head of one of the secondary schools that since the opening of the new college the percentage of pupils from Sheffield Brightside who wanted to progress to HE had significantly increased. As at the time of writing the report progression figures into HE from the new college were not available, it was not possible to establish whether these pupils had successfully secured HE places.

*I've got the figures for this year's leavers at...College for our school and the proportion wanting to go to university is nearly 20% of our last cohort, compared with traditionally around about 10%. Now that's been achieved quite quickly and that is because the kids are staying in the area in a supportive, structured learning environment. (Interview with education professional: Sheffield)*

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

One of the specific objectives identified in the original research framework was to 'determine the nature of the Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) that young people receive with regard to progression to post-16 provision and subsequently higher education'.

#### **4.6.1 Local organisation of IAG**

Radical re-organisation in the delivery of IAG is in store with the publication of *Youth Matters* and *Youth Matters: Next Steps* (DfES, 2006b). The role of the Connexions services and their relationship to forms of local organisation are changing. There will be a new set of quality standards for IAG with clear entitlements for all young people and their families. Changes to delivery of IAG through schools and colleges will form a key element of successful delivery of 14-19 curriculum and qualification reform.

In Bristol, for example, as a result of a review of IAG across the city in 2002 and as part of the city's current 14-19 strategy, a city-wide web-based guidance and support system - *Plan-it* – has been established, as well as an on-line *Futures4Me* prospectus for all 14-19 courses. Together with Connexions the local authority is piloting a new IAG framework for years 7-9 and an increasing number of schools are using individual learning plans.

In relation to current provision there is widespread recognition across the constituencies amongst educational professionals that the policy of targeting IAG through Connexions on individual young people in priority categories has meant a refocusing of advice on level 2 rather than level 3 provision, with many young people guided into employment and/or training at 16 rather than staying on in post-16 education. The net result for the constituencies, with relatively high numbers of young people in the priority categories, is that much of the Connexions resource has been absorbed by work with young people who have little prospect of progressing to HE. Whilst some additional resources have been available for work with gifted and talented young people, these students are generally those who would be progressing to higher education with or without intervention. An 'information, advice and guidance gap' is therefore perceived to have opened up for the middle band of young people who have some prospect of achieving 5 A\*-C at GCSE and thus of HE entry if motivated and guided.

In this context schools recognise the value of having other adults who can provide IAG to such students as part of their mentoring role. Many said that the presence of HE students as tutors and mentors raised awareness of the possibilities and benefits of HE, as well as encouraging young people to access it – though sustained relationships over time rather than sporadic or one-off connections were seen as having greater potential impact. Links with business mentors were equally seen as having the potential to be a useful resource in terms of IAG for young people.

However, there were also some references to concern about schools' capacities to cope with the increasing volume of people coming into the school from a number of sources all aiming to provide 'additional support'. In addition, there was a note of caution expressed about the extent to which external partners as mentors were prepared and informed for an IAG role.

Where careers advice and guidance, including choices for further study, are covered through careers education or PSHE in school there is a concern that many young people find it difficult to transfer that experience into their own individual career planning. The quality of careers education across all schools in the four constituencies is also variable – with some schools effectively appearing to not fulfil their statutory duties. This was seen by some to reflect the very high degree of pressure schools were under in relation to 'examinable subjects', and to the fact that at present schools are not required to publish their progression rates and therefore feel less 'accountable' for these outcomes as compared to young people's assessment scores.

Whilst some Connexions Personal Advisers (PAs) see a role for themselves in helping to develop the careers curriculum in schools and colleges, they recognise that resources make this difficult. In fact, far from being involved in the wider life of the schools, in some of the schools Connexions PAs have felt significantly marginalised - not knowing 'who is who' or how best to get their voices heard. This resonates with their current feelings of uncertainty about the future of the service and a degree of cynicism about the ongoing experience of what those in the Bristol study called 'living in the swamp'.

In terms of specific IAG about progression into further education and higher education, a number of issues were identified. Staff in some of the 11-16 schools acknowledged that the priority is often the immediate next step, i.e. what young people are going to do at 16 rather looking ahead to higher education and beyond. Staff in college based post-16 provision expressed concern about the need to maintain a fully impartial degree of IAG for young people choosing post-16 routes, with some belief that individual careers staff in institutions with post-16 provision tend to privilege guidance that encourages the young person to stay on there rather than move elsewhere, despite what may be best for the individual.

In Nottingham North specific advice concerning HE is provided in the Nottingham North area through Aimhigher Personal Advisors (PAs), who also work in schools. The primary focus of the Aimhigher PA role is to bridge gaps in the statutory services available to young people. In performing this function, Aimhigher PAs seek to provide targeted support to young people aged 13–19 from identified Aimhigher cohorts and their families. Whilst there is a clear difference between the roles of Connexions and Aimhigher PAs this frequently does not appear to be recognised by young people in schools. Thus when they speak of 'careers advice' they could be referring to either level of support.

In schools where Aimhigher PAs report positive impact, there is easy access to pupils and a designated teacher is a useful contact point for the organisation of activities. However, there are occasions where the advice provided by Aimhigher PAs appears to be contradicted by other staff members within schools and this undermines a cohesive approach to providing IAG in relation to HE. In terms of long term preparation for HE, it is evident within some schools in Nottingham North that although there are examples of good practice through Aimhigher and Connexions PAs, many young people do not access or have access to the types of on-going advice which could lead them to consider HE as a possible pathway. Whilst there is some very good careers advice, which demonstrates a commitment to helping young people consider future possibilities, this was not seen to be consistent across the constituency.

Some Connexions PAs identified a need for greater IAG aimed at adults in their early twenties or older that encouraged them to consider HE. Given the life journey of many young people in the constituency, who may leave school at 16 to go into employment or early parenting, such a 'second chance' approach is essential.

Finally, a number of educational professionals and parents/carers raised concerns about the volume of information coming at young people and their families, and whether they were able to mediate or understand it all sufficiently well - especially in light of literacy issues and lack of confidence within families in understanding the education system. The complexity of options and the changing nature of the qualifications on offer also present difficulties for parents/carers, teachers and young people.

*...filling out forms for parents to access grants and bursaries is really hard. Lots of our parents can't even read. I mean I've worked in a school all my life but I had to have someone check the forms I filled in when my daughter went to university.* (Interview with parent/carer: Bristol)

In the Sheffield study, parents noted that at times they needed information but felt they could not ask for it at parents evening because they did not want to ask in front of their children and that the information that came through the post or was available on the web did not always adequately address the issues which they were interested in.

#### **4.6.2 Young people's views of IAG**

In speaking to young people, they frequently reported variable quality of experience in terms of advice from a Connexions PA in school about progressing into post-16 education. They sometimes saw this as depending on the personality of the PA as much as anything, with some reporting a positive relationship where the PA had spent time with them getting to know them and helping them to think through their options, and others saying their Connexions PA had only taken a cursory interest and spent little time talking to them. This may also, of course, have reflected the fact that some young people may have been in a priority category in terms of targeted attention by the Connexions Service, and others not.

Young people in colleges of further education sometimes appeared unclear about the possibility of accessing Connexions support in the college although all felt it would be valuable. Indeed, their lack of clarity about how to access IAG was striking and seemed highly dependent on having a subject tutor that took an interest in them and encouraged them. Where this face-to-face relationship didn't exist there was a lack of confidence about how to seek out appropriate support. This in part alludes to issues of learners in the constituency not developing sufficient 'resourcefulness' as independent learners, in order to seek out advice.

In the Bristol study, support in exploring progression to higher education was again very variable - as was young people's confidence in using ICT to research their options. Where post-19 options had been presented to them, they claimed these were almost exclusively about going to university with a bias towards their local university. Where they had made a visit to an open day, this had allowed them to pick up specific information about courses at that university, but they were unclear about options for pursuing HE in their own college and most knew nothing about Foundation Degrees, Advanced Modern Apprenticeships or higher level NVQs. Their decisions to enter further education or their plans to progress to HE were frequently not associated with clear career planning. Their most influential sources of IAG appear to be from family and friends. Where they were considering progression to HE this was frequently associated with knowing somebody personally who had already made that choice. This was mirrored across all other constituencies.

In relation to young people in schools and their experience of IAG, many we spoke to had very unclear understanding of the options available to them at various points or felt that what they really wanted to do was not available to them. This resonates in part with a view expressed by staff that young people, even with well-structured careers lessons, often fail to transfer that learning into personal skills and motivation to investigate their own opportunities or interpret these opportunities in terms of their own lives. Where young people were motivated to seek out IAG support, they sometimes felt thwarted in not being

able to make contact easily with a Connexions PA. This may again have reflected the fact that groups we spoke to were not seen as a priority under current policies.

The studies showed variable levels of knowledge and experience of young people in schools in relation to qualification choices, pathways and possibilities of HE. Young people in Key Stage 3 in the Nottingham study when interviewed, for example, did not have a clear idea about what HE opportunities existed locally.

*What do you think of the two universities in Nottingham?*

*There's two?*

*That Nottingham University. Is it for people from all over?*

Young people in secondary education demonstrated some surface knowledge, but a lack of detailed information on location, level or nature of courses. As Lareau (2003) suggests, there are class differences in the way parents support children and those families where knowledge of HE and universities is more experiential will be able to provide clearer direct support. Where this experiential knowledge is lacking, children will then not be in a position to access the information through family networks, not only because of a lack of information, but also because the information is not shared. Ball and Vincent discuss these different types of knowledge used by parents from middle class and those from working class backgrounds – which they call respectively 'hot and cold knowledge' (Ball and Vincent, 1998). We found evidence throughout that where 'hot knowledge' through personal connections existed for young people in the constituency, this proved more compelling and attractive than 'cold knowledge'.

## **4.7 Conclusions on the educational landscapes**

What this detailed evidence overall begins to demonstrate is how a series of educational, political, economic, social and cultural factors coalesce over time and space to produce extremely low levels of young participation in HE for the majority of young people in these parliamentary constituencies. The over-riding feature in terms of progression to HE is that by sixteen the majority of young people have not yet achieved the necessary qualification levels to progress to HE in two or three years time. In addition, in many parts of the constituencies, more young people drop out of education at sixteen than elsewhere in the cities to go into work-based training or employment.

A critical finding is the downward trajectory in terms of educational attainment emerges or accelerates during Key Stage 3. In some educational settings aspects of local ethnic and/or gender cultures intersect with aspects of social class to affect learning orientations and outcomes. In particular it is worth noting that in Birmingham Hodge Hill, which has a higher percentage of families from minority ethnic backgrounds, there appear to be generally more positive community attitudes to staying in education post-16 and a number of professionals suggest that low attainment at Key Stage 3 may in part be a function of issues related to student learning needs associated with using English as an Additional Language.

Lack of confidence in the local authority and local schools by a number of more aspirant families might be inferred by the number of young people being educated at secondary level outside local authority maintained schools or the local area. The downward dynamic for those schools that lose such potential students is evident.

The majority of the young people who stay on in education at sixteen in the constituencies progress to college rather than school-based post-16 provision, with a significant proportion enrolled initially at level 2. Accessibility of post-16 provision is seen as a problem; the recent opening of a new Sixth form college in the heart of Sheffield Brightside is seen to have had a positive effect.

The pathway established for young people by the age of sixteen is only partially redressed by their later educational experience. At the point of progression to HE at 17, 18 or 19, it is not surprising to find that these constituencies have low level of young participation, notwithstanding that the YPR may recently have shown some slight improvement. Of those who do apply successfully to HE, a slightly higher percentage appear to be mature learners than the national average - reflecting the more extended pathway to level 3 attainment for some, or the tendency to return to study after early parenthood or experience of work. This has implications for future strategies.

Finally, the provision of adequate IAG for young people and their families needs to be addressed – as is already happening through high level policy reform. Embedded entitlements to IAG will be an essential to effective delivery of a reshaped 14-19 curriculum. Our studies also suggest there is much more to be done in relation to consistent IAG in relation to progression to HE. However, developing young people's learning identities and dispositions, such that they can be resourceful and resilient in accessing and applying IAG, also remain key issues to be addressed.

## 5. Learning Cultures, Identities and Trajectories

### 5.1 The dynamics of disengagement

In order to gain purchase on the construction of young people's learning identities and trajectories it is essential to examine the dynamics by which their engagement and disengagement from the educational process takes place.

#### 5.1.1 '*You and Your Future*' survey

In 2003, Raphael Reed and Croudace designed an attitudinal survey called '*You and Your Future*' for the Bristol Excellence in Cities area. Questionnaires were completed with all students between the ages of 12-14 across the city. Results were subsequently correlated with GCSE attainment to begin to tease out the interplay of a variety of factors within and outside of schools in the creation of learning identities and trajectories. Whilst this survey data was only available for one of the four cities reviewed in this summary report, it provides a model of enquiry and is suggestive of some key factors that were subsequently found to be significant in the other three studies.

Of the students represented in the *You and Your Future* survey, 29% went on to achieve the key threshold of 5 or more GCSE passes at grades A\* to C at age 16. Around three in five of these had aspirations at the age of 14 to go on to university. In other words, this suggests that 17% of the total cohort had the attainment *and* aspiration for higher education by the end of their compulsory education. Without longitudinal tracking of these precise cohorts, who would be 18 in 2007 or 2008, we cannot be certain of eventual outcomes. However, POLAR data, reinforced by later YPR data, suggests that that between 10%-16% of young people in Bristol South go on to HE. Were these cohorts to perform similarly, this reinforces the key point that level of attainment at 16 combined with levels of aspiration evident at 14 are key determinants of later participation rates, with a degree of further wastage at some point between age 16 and 18. As discussed above, a further 12% have the attainment, but not the aspiration.

Clearly this is a permeable distinction in reality; some pupils who stated that they didn't want to go to university at age 14 may change their mind in due course. Research by Golden et al (2006) suggests this is the case. However, other research suggests that learner identities and attitudes to the future evident at the start of secondary education are a good predictor of future careers (Attwood and Croll, 2006). 71% of these young people were unlikely to demand university entrance at the age of 18 based on their GCSE performance.

Two particular findings from the survey help to illuminate the way in which learning identities are constructed during this stage of a young person's educational career:

1. That there is a marked falling away of parental support for education between Years 8 and 9 (when young people are age 12 to 14), demonstrated, for example, in help with homework or attendance at parents' evenings. It might be hypothesised that this is the age at which many of the students' own parents became disengaged from school; it

may even be the point in some cases at which parents become unable to assist with homework due to their own educational confidence and level of basic skills. Evidence from the Nottingham and Sheffield studies affirms this view. This is also a period when students' enjoyment of school declines significantly, impacting on both their future aspirations and attainment.

2. Professing enjoyment of school at age 12-14 has a strong relationship with a wide range of factors relating to students' background, experiences and aspirations. It appears to represent a learning identity underpinned by parental support for education alongside an engaged, active and reflective approach to learning and development. Young people who enjoy and feel engaged with school at this point are significantly more likely to want to stay in education beyond sixteen, and to have a positive disposition to HE.

The survey analysis thus suggests that young people's experiences during Key Stage 3 (when aged 11-14) are critical to the likelihood of them progressing to HE and that by the time they reach 14 years of age their learning identities and trajectories have already been powerfully formed. In particular, young people's enjoyment of school across all 'ability' levels declines significantly between the age of 12 to 14 and especially in schools serving areas of highest deprivation – those schools with highest levels of educational need and lowest overall levels of attainment. Whilst 'more able' students are significantly more likely to enjoy school than 'less able' students, in such schools they are more likely than equivalent students in more successful schools with more diverse intake to be bored, enjoy school less and have a lower opinion of the school.

However, enjoyment of school is itself a proxy for two semi-distinct components of young people's experiences which are partially independent of their perceived 'ability': the extent of parental support for their education (which also falls away between the ages of 12-14 especially in the most challenging schools) and the extent to which young people feel a sense of *agency* as learners - knowing what they are good at and knowing how to improve. Enjoyment is therefore really about educational engagement and the home and school contexts that facilitate such engagement. Young people who enjoy and feel engaged with school by the end of Key Stage 3 are significantly more likely to want to remain in education beyond sixteen and to feel positive about the possibilities of progression to higher education. The central importance of young people's experiences at Key Stage 3 correlates with the falling away of performance noted as part of the educational landscapes.

### **5.1.2 Non-attendance and exclusion**

Schools in all four areas identified non-attendance issues and some schools openly admit they are struggling to meet attendance targets. Reasons cited by schools for pupil non-attendance include 'young people looking after siblings, caring for parents/relatives, parents taking children out of school, parents not expecting their children to go to school, truancy, boredom and more attractive alternatives to education'. School representatives talked about problems on different levels, varying between persistent and casual non-attendance. Certain groups are often targeted in an attempt to improve attendance. Inconsistent attendance obviously disrupts a young person's schooling which can in turn disrupt the classroom environment as they struggle to re-engage.

*In every year we've got about 20 or so kids that never come to school at all and you never see them. They might come in and do an afternoon and then you never see them again. So they're*

*a big drain on our statistics but then you've got those in the school, 50-60%, that's really casual attendance. That's a mixture of truancy, kids leave home but don't actually make it to school or it's condoned absence by their parents. For example, every time they've got a slight headache or their mum wants to take them shopping or they have to look after the little kids, parents let them stay at home to do it. The biggest cause for concern is that our brightest and best kids still only manage to put in less than 90% attendance...(Interview with education professional: Nottingham)*

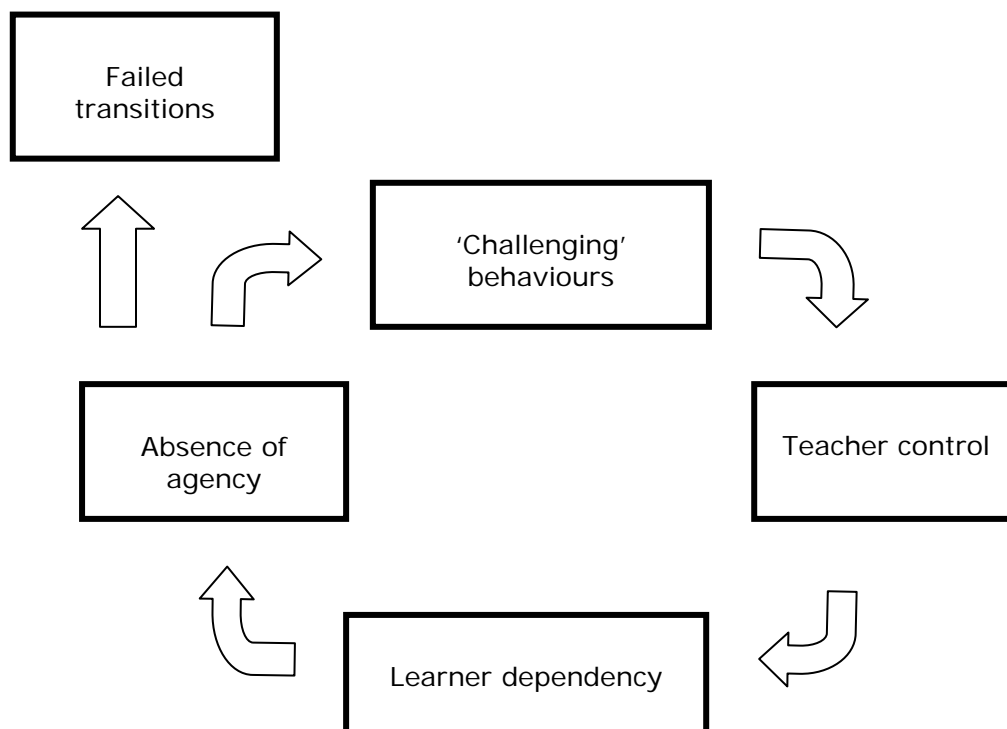
In one previous study in a Bristol South school, a major issue was seen to be young people missing specific lessons and spending some time each day self-excluding themselves from classes. Such behaviours were related closely to lack of enjoyment of lessons and poor relationships with specific teachers. This study concluded that 'corridor students are a symptom of unresolved issues around learning and relationships in the classroom' (The Grubb Institute, 2001).

Exclusion levels for a number of schools serving these constituencies appear to be higher than local and national averages, although access to this information and schools' willingness to discuss this issue was not easy to achieve.

### **5.1.3 Classroom dynamics**

The Bristol Study identified as crucial here the quality of the learning experiences that young people have encountered in school and the learning dynamics that reinforce young people's absence of agency and control in learning – subsequently misrecognised as 'passivity'. It was beyond the resource and remit of these studies to research this dynamic in great detail although it is an area that would benefit from further investigation.

**Figure 1: The learning dynamic of disengagement**



This dynamic provokes a vicious and self-fulfilling cycle. Young people are perceived to present 'challenging behaviours' in the classroom. These may be associated with high levels of emotional and behavioural needs, poor literacy skills, or powerful forms of social and verbal interaction that are seen as antithetical to developing as successful learners.

*Kids at X school in particular had what the adults in the institution perceived as a problem with boundaries. Children didn't seem to know where acceptable behaviour started and unacceptable behaviour took over. But again, that's an adult and probably a middle class educated adult's perception. I watched the children...on their way to school and that is their natural method of interaction...Physical contact, low level play fighting...name calling, teasing was actually normal - whereas teachers would like an environment where it's calm. (Interview with education professional: Bristol)*

In addition professionals identified the challenges of 'mixed ability' classrooms especially where there may be a considerable number of young people within the group who have special educational needs and require additional assistance.

*You've got mixed ability groups...with children who have got a reading age of 6 and children who have come in with good level 5 in the same group...In terms of what you're teaching and what you're offering those children lesson-wise, it's very difficult in terms of planning and getting that right, which then impacts on the behaviour. So if you've also then got weaker teachers, you just get into this negative cycle...(Interview with education professional: Bristol)*

Professionals in Nottingham identified a lack of appropriate or sufficient support for young people with special educational needs – in particular emotional and behavioural difficulties.

*We've had several young people where we have had to go and get them help in getting assessments. Now that's been fine when you've gone through the medical system and you can then get them help but you know, at school, they don't bother with that route. Then you know that something will happen and they are excluded and then something else happens and they are excluded for a longer period. Then you get a continuous cycle which they are actually quite pleased with because they are happy to go and hang around on the street and do whatever. Nobody's addressing why they aren't sitting there and learning what they need to do. (Interview with education professional: Nottingham)*

In reaction to such challenging circumstances, teachers spoke of attempting to exert high degrees of control over the learning environment – in an attempt to regulate behaviours through micro-managed classroom routines and through prioritising the building of high trust relationships to 'get young people on board'.

*Before you could teach the children at X school you had to have a relationship with them...where you would be in their gang. When I started there the Head of Faculty turned round and said 'The kids here are tribal and they'll spend the first year telling you how much they hate you and how much they liked their last*

*teacher much better than you and then they'll do exactly the same to the person who is sat in your seat next year' and it was true. But it takes an inordinate amount of time to form those relationships. One year minimum, probably 2-3 years...But then it'd be on a basis of the relationship that they'd be working, in that they're working for 'Sir' or 'Miss', they're not working for the intrinsic value of their educational experience. (Interview with education professional: Bristol)*

The wider context of pressures on schools to achieve presentable GCSE results were frequently recognised as being significant in sustaining a particular sort of learning culture – including 'spoon feeding' through 'teaching to the test'.

*They [schools] don't spend much time educating kids; they spend a lot of time coaching as well. The prime thing is to get the GCSEs that they need to keep out of special measures. I'm not knocking schools but the easiest route for them is to coach young kids to pass exams. So over several years you've got teachers who don't get the post sixteen students; so they don't get a group that have opted to stay in education. They don't get that professional development with them; they don't get that subject development... So you can imagine how teachers, over a period of time, will fall into that fatalism that these kids are rubbish. (Interview with education professional: Nottingham)*

The dynamic of over-dependency on teacher control, or teacher-learner relationships, and the concomitant lack of student ownership and autonomy in the learning process, undermines the capacity of students to develop their resilience as learners. Resilience here refers to student capacity to tolerating confusion and frustration, and to stick at something even when it is difficult - one of the core dispositions (or 4 'R's) evident in classrooms dedicated to building learning power, along with resourcefulness, reflectivity and reciprocity (Claxton, 2002).

Evidence from those studies that picked up these themes confirms the importance of disentangling the behavioral dynamic and renewing a focus on student agency in the learning process. Where young people have been enabled to develop by the learning dispositions, or 4 'R's of 'learning power', the analysis of the 'You and Your Future' survey demonstrates that this correlates with their later achievement and propensity to aspire to HE. It also supports their ability to navigate and survive educational transitions.

#### **5.1.4 Troubled transitions**

The issue of young people struggling at the point of transition to post-16 education came across in a number of the studies. This was in part seen in relation to objective barriers to transfer – e.g. having to travel in order to attend the course they want to follow. More importantly, moving out of the local area, and forming new attachments to new organisations was identified as being especially challenging for young people whose sense of self is rooted in strong local family and community cultures – together with an indication for some that they do not feel safe moving away from the local area. Finally, the tendency for many of these young people not to develop successful independent learning dispositions, means that coping with the demands of learning environments that require greater learner autonomy can be especially challenging.

*Young people who come here from Bristol South schools often benefit from a new start but they also sometimes fail to thrive. They find the size of the organisation threatening and they find it difficult to operate as independent and autonomous learners. I wonder if the focus in some of those schools is not too much on care and not enough on personal challenge? It's also the case that our current target setting culture creates pressures on teachers to get the kids through the exams by whatever means necessary...I'm worried that in fact their learning skills are not properly embedded or internalised...* (Interview with education professional: Bristol)

Whilst the studies did not track in detail aspects of 'drop out' from post-16 education, there were several references in the interview data of young people not feeling able to make sense of their post-16 experience, or of knowing how to seek out support and guidance when they were in difficulty. This was also apparent in some interviews where young people again conveyed a sense of absence of agency in relation to researching and pursuing the possibilities of transition to both further and higher education. One response to this is a pattern of progressing to HE later on in life.

*But I would never have followed that pathway at 16; I wasn't ready to study.* (Focus group with returning learners: Sheffield)

## **5.2 Local voices: discourses and disjunctures**

In interviewing a range of young people and adults living and/or working in each constituency, the local studies have been able to further tease out aspects related to cultural contexts and the creation of learning identities. Of particular importance in our view, are a number of significant disjunctures between the accounts provided by education professionals and those provided by young people and their families. Such disjunctures highlight potent discourses that shape educational policies and practices, and that position working class young people and communities in certain ways.

Interviews were conducted with a wide range of young people – ranging from those who were predicted to have the potential to succeed educationally, and those who were significantly disengaged and unsuccessful in their learning. There was a striking commonality of themes in young people's accounts across all groupings – alongside a tendency at times for some professionals to over-generalise their comments about those young people and their families.

*There is a very strong cultural dynamic going on in some of these settings which makes it very hard for even dedicated teachers who believe that they can and should make a difference to sustain that...There's a very strong dynamic going on that's holding things in quite a stuck position...It will be very interesting to see how much...new initiatives do make a difference.* (Interview with education professional: Bristol)

In the Birmingham study, the researchers noted that 'there was a determination on the part of participants to avoid framing low participation as an issue to be considered in isolation'.

At the same time there was a notable tendency for professionals most closely associated with schools in the most challenging circumstances to initially locate

the 'problem' of low aspiration and attainment 'out there' with family and community cultures, rather than initially within education. In part this was seen as a defensive response by schools in reaction to being labelled through league tables. In addition, there was evidence that some professional interpretations of young people – their behaviours, attitudes and intentions – were shaped strongly by the dominant and sometimes deficit discourses around working class cultures. The more nuanced and often painful experiences and insights articulated by young people and their families were not always easily recognisable in the representations of professionals.

We are not 'blaming teachers' here; to do so would be unhelpful and only serve to patronise the many committed professionals working in these communities. Nor are we suggesting that inequalities and challenges related to educational engagement in areas of high deprivation can be reduced to issues of discourse alone; there are real material and structural factors that professionals, parents and young people have to negotiate and these have a profound impact on their lives including their experiences of education.

Many have recognised before us, that schools serving areas of high deprivation face daunting challenges, placing intense pressures upon staff (Riddell, 2003) and sometimes both educational standards and quality suffer as a result (Lupton, 2005). Teachers and pupils are often working in an environment where they feel stigmatised by underperformance, poor reputation and a lack of investment. It is therefore no surprise that staff morale was reported to be low in a number of schools and turnover of staff, including head teachers, reported to be high (e.g. in the Birmingham and Nottingham reports).

In addition, the behavioural learning dynamic – referred to earlier under 5.1.3. - establishes an iterative set of interactions that reinforce the educational disengagement of young people over time. All participants - young people, parents/carers and professionals - are caught up in this dynamic. However, there is also evidence that where professionals consciously or unconsciously hold deficit beliefs about young people and their families, this provides a powerful reinforcing factor. Such deficit beliefs may themselves be 'confirmed' by the experience of the behavioural dynamic.

By focussing in this summary report on some key disjunctures in the accounts and perspectives of key players, we highlight aspects that require further attention, including new forms of dialogue and re-shaped actions in order to make a greater difference to the educational experience of young people in these areas. For example, by triangulating the professional perspective with the parental perspective, we are able to examine aspects of synergy or dissonance in their accounts. This provides some purchase on the thorny but significant issue of how best to engage parents and carers in the educational process including progression to HE, and in understanding more fully the degree of dislocation that exists between home and school cultures in the constituencies.

## **5.3 Perspectives from education professionals**

### **5.3.1 '*Passive*' learners**

Education professionals frequently characterise young people as 'passive learners' who 'lack confidence in exercising responsibility and taking the initiative' (OfSTED, 2006). This is closely associated with characterising local cultures as lacking resolve or backbone, and in young people having problems in relation to sustained application or deferred gratification.

*Independence...is one of the major nuts that we have got to crack for raising standards here...they are very, very passive learners... (Interview with education professional: Bristol)*

*They're terrible learners (again I'm generalising) but they go into the classroom to be entertained and expect you to do the entertaining and get bored when they have to do the tasks...I don't think they have the energy...the commitment to actually drive through any realistic attainment that they could get. I think it's because they are spoon-fed at home with, "Don't worry about that, as long as you're happy", that sort of approach. All the parents really want is to replicate where they are now. (Interview with education professional: Bristol)*

Professionals in the Nottingham study talked about young people lacking in self-confidence to take risks as learners and associated this with circumscribed cultural experiences and limited horizons for action.

*I think it's because they find their own self-confidence comes from their immediate locality and that's particularly true of the kids and particularly true of the boys. Most of the time they walk round with a swagger in school but ask them to get on a bus to go on a work experience placement in another part of the city they will find all kinds of reasons not to get on that bus. We find that very common. (Interview with education professional: Nottingham)*

In the Sheffield study professionals claimed that families were 'over-protective' of their young people, reflecting parents lack of experience of the 'wider world' and that this impacted on young people's confidence to take risks.

*One of the other aspects of this area is that they (parents) are over protective...they actually are very frightened of the notion that their young person is leaving that household and moving out to another city or something else and they are very protective because they haven't had the experiences themselves. (Interview with education professional: Sheffield)*

Young people across the studies were frequently referred to as lacking in the ability to look ahead, to sustain application to learning or to see the value in deferred gratification.

*They can't see long term; they are living from day to day and often it is an economic thing. Often they don't plan things because they haven't got the money to plan things so it's a question of survival for some people. They can't see long term and that is what higher education essentially is. If I see someone who is bright and I am talking to them about their future and I talk to them about higher education and university they can't see it; they can't think about that. (Interview with education professional: Nottingham)*

*You're trying to get across...all the time about deferred gratification, about exercising one's will power...but it's a long, long, long hard slog to get them outside of the notion of instantaneous gratification. (Interview with education professional: Bristol)*

### 5.3.2 'Apathetic' and 'complacent' cultures

Whilst a number of professionals gave sophisticated analyses of why parents found it hard to engage with education, others articulated a more limiting and judgemental view. Some Nottingham education professionals characterised local cultures as 'apathetic'.

*There is a lot of apathy - people think they are not going to get anywhere. They are just going to get a basic job somewhere and that's about as high as their aspirations go and it is a lot of work to try and actually get them to engage. (Interview with education professional: Nottingham)*

Professionals in Bristol interviews frequently characterised parents, families and communities as 'complacent', not valuing education and having restricted aspirations.

*The biggest problem facing South Bristol...is the lack of aspiration, the lack of understanding of what opportunities are available for students, if they really push themselves to aspire to things outside of their communities in terms of their educational experience and their future job and employment opportunities. It's their acceptance that mediocrity...the continuation of what they've got...is acceptable - and they don't want to actually achieve more than where they are at the moment. (Interview with education professional: Bristol)*

Where there had been a recent history of full employment, such attitudes were seen as rooted in the reality that work did not depend on qualifications.

*This area was traditionally full employment; you didn't have to do well at school to get a job. Between 1975 and 1990 you could almost certainly get a job in this area. Three main employers - Boots, Raleigh and Players, the pits. My teaching was that if you don't get on and get your qualifications you end up on the scrap heap. It didn't happen here. The imperative to work in school wasn't as great in Nottingham North as elsewhere. (Interview with education professional: Nottingham)*

In the Sheffield report, professionals questioned whether local people who went on to HE had the ability or skills when completing their degrees to compete in a competitive job market place – giving examples of where local communities saw evidence of the failed promise of what higher level qualifications might deliver e.g. where local people who had taken degrees ended up back in the very jobs with the same status as they had been before taking their degree.

*It has certainly happened to me three times in the last couple of years - I have had taxi drivers who have said they have been on for higher education and are back driving a cab and working in their Dad's shop. And the worst thing of all is getting that negative perception of the value of higher education back into the community... (Interview with education professional: Sheffield)*

Bristol professionals recognised that on-going access to local employment – either low skill, or through family connections, provided an ongoing rationale for why young people and their families did not feel the necessity to 'aspire'.

*South Bristol is a place where there isn't massive unemployment and they are complacent for that reason. (Interview with education professional: Bristol)*

In an interesting comparative study of a group of young people in Bristol South compared with a group of young people in Birmingham (SHM, 2004) it was claimed that the Bristol young people attached a lower value to school than the Birmingham young people. The Bristol participants saw their world as 'highly structured: they only had to find their place in it, and achieving beyond the minimum requirement for that place is of no benefit to them'. Their world-view according to the authors was characterised by 'unchangingness and complacency'. Birmingham young people saw their world as 'fluid and uncertain, with educational achievement an important tool for making the most of opportunities and threats throughout life'. Their world-view was characterised by 'change and agency'.

Causes of these differences in the SHM research were seen to relate to culturally specific factors. Young people in Bristol South live predominantly in a monocultural, parochial setting – with strong geographical boundaries around 'tribal' cultures, a history of paternalistic labour relations and quite high levels of satisfaction with social networks and opportunities, even on low incomes. Family networks provide acceptable models and contacts for future lifestyles and entry-level employment and many young people are not aspirational to 'do better' than this. Activities that motivate them to engage are predicated on 'pleasure' and positive social interactions with the teacher or peers. Raising achievement initiatives do not connect easily with their existing world-views.

Birmingham young people in the SHM study by contrast live in multicultural communities where families have experienced migration and multiple change and they perceive the world as containing barriers to be overcome by hard work and effort. They are also less satisfied with the status quo, and have aspirations to find a life that is different and distinct from their parents. This more performance-orientated model recognises an important role for teachers and schools and raising achievement initiatives more easily connect with their existing world-views. To some extent, the higher levels of participation in post-16 education in the Birmingham ward with high levels of BME families, may be an illustrative example of this phenomenon.

In contradiction to the SHM study however, we also have evidence emerging in the four cities' research of young people yearning for change and self-advancement, but feeling the weight on their shoulders of a normalising culture sustained, in part, by the dynamic between teachers and students. We also recognise that almost all young people we spoke to – engaged or disengaged from education – identify or exhibit a desire to exert more choice and agency over their lives. The characterisation of these young people as 'passive' or 'complacent' is - in our view - a misrepresentation. We need to understand the relationship between attitudes to 'effort' and 'risk' in a more nuanced way.

### **5.3.3 Family expectations and self-esteem**

Professionals in the Nottingham study questioned the value many parents place on their child's education.

*A lot of the parents aren't particularly engaged with education, they're not particularly openly supportive of youngsters coming in and doing well. (Interview with education professional: Nottingham)*

In one Bristol interview, the perceived gulf between home and school cultures was expressed forcefully.

*White working class communities are highly intimidatory communities. You have to be able to both take it and give it...We quite physically lock out the street behaviour and therefore our expectations around learning and uniform we've cranked up... [Some people have asked] why the school is not more involved in the community? Because actually the community will destroy this place... (Interview with education professional: Bristol)*

Across all studies professionals argued that parental experience of education may have been poor and that this had consequences in terms of parental expectations and self-esteem. It was suggested that many parents have low aspirations and expectations for themselves and have similar aspirations and expectations for their children. Such messages it was claimed will undoubtedly be passed onto children whether consciously or subconsciously and impact on their development. In particular this was expressed as perceived class differences in parenting and interactions around literacy, language and play.

*It's basic research that says that it is mum who will read to a child and if mum is on her own and she might have several children already so I can understand that mum is pushed but then the child suffers because she is not reading to them or playing with them or helping them to become engaged. (Interview with education professional: Nottingham)*

In the Sheffield study professionals claimed that there were two types of parents: those who wanted a good education for their children and those who saw education as having very little value.

*You know certainly the discussions I have had at school is that there is quite a lot of commitment from parents to their children's education (but) of course there are a lot of dysfunctional families and a lot of people who you know... just see (education) as a chore really something they have to go to. (Interview with education professional: Sheffield)*

Professionals in the Bristol study, where underachievement of girls in some of the schools is a key issue, also sometimes saw the dominant gender culture as problematic - especially for girls. Further work needs to be undertaken to explore the inter-relationship between levels of achievement, gender identities, school ethos and family culture. However, underachievement of girls in some schools was again represented as primarily an outcome of low expectations and low self-esteem.

*Girls' self esteem is so low that they're always looking to boys for approval, they don't want to embarrass themselves in the class - this is gross generalisation because there are some very confident girls out there - but they're looking for this approval of boys and they're quite happy to under-perform in learning as long as they've got their make up on...They're not worried about [working] as long as they're able to go through the usual way of bringing up children, having a family and being with a man. We really feel that the girls have no idea of what they could achieve. (Interview with education professional: Bristol)*

Some teachers identified a particular challenge related to dominant girls.

*The girls are far, far more difficult to deal with and are at least as likely to be the most difficult and troublesome pupils in the whole of the school. They are far more frequently involved with bullying...far more frequently involved in walking out of classrooms and abuse of staff...They're not the slightest bit afraid of talking up for themselves, particularly when they feel they are in the right and there is a wrong to put right...There is no lack of confidence when they confront their teachers and they'll tell their teachers in no uncertain Anglo Saxon terms where to go.*  
(Interview with education professional: Bristol)

Such gender-based challenges to adult authority cause a degree of confusion in professional responses. Sometimes such behaviour was spoken about as an expression of '*inappropriate self-confidence*', sometimes as an expression of '*low self-esteem*' and sometimes as an indicator of '*emotional disturbance*'. It was seldom interpreted as a real indicator that young women felt disempowered and angry about their experience of schooling including their lack of choice and ownership over the learning process, or lack of respect from teachers – explanations that a number of young people articulated.

In the Birmingham study, which has a significantly more ethnically diverse population than the other three constituencies, a traditional gender culture of Asian families expecting their daughters to leave school at 16, or restrictions on accessing post-16 education in mixed gender settings, was highlighted by professionals as being influential. This attitude, they suggest, has begun recently to change with the local all-girls secondary school now seeing over 80% of its leavers progressing to post-16 education

#### **5.3.4 Vocationalising the learning experience**

Education professionals were acutely aware that curriculum irrelevance is undermining young people's engagement with education. For some, their identification of dimensions of 'relevance' was wide-ranging.

*In the classroom there is a certain 'steely resistance to learning' because the curriculum's not that relevant. We now factor our course choice through, basically four criteria: Is it relevant? Is it practical? Can we overcome the barriers to literacy? Is it personalised? 'Relevant' is interesting, [not just] directly relevant to jobs, no, but in terms of exploring inner feelings and a sense of worth and a sense of self, and a sense of the world you live in ...*  
(Interview with education professional: Bristol)

Such perspectives intersected with professionals' views that the main styles of teaching, learning and assessment were not well matched to the 'preferred learning styles' of young people in the schools.

*There's that element of children who like to move around, like to do different stuff not just sat in the classroom, you lose them. You have kids that are good at sitting exams but the system [fails] who can't do that.* (Interview with education professional: Nottingham)

However, a dominant view was that a more work-related and vocational curriculum linked to local employment opportunities was the key to improving educational engagement. This was frequently connected to the emerging priorities in relation to adult skills development signalled in the Leitch Review of Skills (HM Treasury, 2006).

*My personal observation is that we focus on the academic study at Key Stage 4 and that does not suit a large number of children and that a more vocational diet would engage them in a way that they are not being engaged currently. Now there are steps in the right direction with...introducing [a more] vocational curriculum. So it's not just about the bright ones doing the GCSE's and the not so bright ones doing the vocational. It's about what the student wants to do. (Interview with education professional: Nottingham)*

*Specialised diplomas will help - they will let us accredit what these young people want to be doing. They want to be working - that's the point. At the moment for example, work experience in the school is a real motivator. (Interview with education professional: Bristol)*

*Employment is quite key...we have talked to the airport and the port authority and new hospital - they are key employers coming into the area and if we don't do something now you will have the booming economy in South Bristol and it will draw its workforce from other parts of Bristol and the situation of residents in South Bristol, and of young people, will not be improved. (Interview with education professional: Bristol)*

*GNVQ's have been really important in upping the success rates and you know some people moan about that but I believe they can serve different students very well. I mean my son's a high flyer - he's at Sheffield University now - but he did a GNVQ in computing and it was great because it was 'hands on' and it suited his form of learning. He's actually not a million miles away from the lads who want 'hands on' learning. They want, you know, they want something a bit more tangible...they want to see some results, they want something to be a bit interesting. (Interview with education professional: Sheffield)*

Professionals in all the studies also highlighted the need to address adult learning needs, especially to improve adult basic skills and to draw them back into learning in a positive way. Concerns were also raised about the impact of current funding methodologies on being able to offer programmes that are attractive to adults and do not stigmatise them.

### **5.3.5 Changing the school profile**

Finally, professionals recognised that improving confidence in the local schools, including attracting back some of the higher attaining young people from more aspirant families who currently are sent out of the constituencies, would alter the learning culture of the schools. However, there was also recognition that this might displace members of the local community and where schools are serving well-bounded geographical areas this is not unproblematic.

*We went to a school on the Wirral that in many ways is like us but is seen to be successful...It's south of Birkenhead, we're south of the city; it's on the edge of the Wirral, we're on the edge of Dundry; they've got tower blocks like we've got....[But] it's a different world. You know, they're fantastic...In their OfSTED report there are no issues. But when you start trying to unpick it a) it's been a 16 year journey and b) the 'scallies' (as they say) don't go there any more. So actually it isn't the same as us at all. It's massively over-subscribed and it isn't serving its whole community; it's serving the aspiring elements of its community and it's pulling in from everywhere else. Part of what we're saying to our governors is, "You have to make a decision. Is...your vision for the whole of this community or is it for some of them?" (Interview with education professional: Bristol)*

In the Sheffield study one professional proudly stated that the secondary school for which he was a governor should be seen as 'successful' because it promoted a very high level of self respect amongst students, and that this was valuable in and of itself, even though the school's levels of attainment remained low.

*I think one of the keys to the success of my school is that it encourages a sort of self respect. I mean it goes back to what's the nature of Brightside. It might be a poor place, it might have a place with a lot of challenges but it's not a place that lacks self respect... (Interview with school governor: Sheffield)*

## **5.4 Perspectives from young people**

Whilst the dominant perspectives articulated by education professionals, fleshed out in greatest detail in the Bristol and Nottingham studies, characterise young people, their families and communities as 'passive', 'apathetic', 'complacent', 'lacking in self-esteem' and 'disinterested in learning' - interviews with young people captured far more complex and painful perspectives on their relationship with education and learning. Listening to their voices allows us to re-think the issues associated with engaging them effectively in the educational process.

### **5.4.1 Choice and agency**

Rather than appearing passive, young people frequently spoke of a desire for more control over their learning – and were able to identify positive occasions (sometimes outside school) when this had felt possible.

*[This kind of experience] makes you feel more responsible like, you can choose what you want to do and you feel like...But in school they're like "do this, do that...but with this they said 'what do you want to do?'" (Interview with young people on ASDAN/Aimhigher activity: Bristol)*

Indeed, in the Bristol study researchers witnessed and heard accounts of the ways in which the 'normal' experiences of education felt disempowering and even humiliating and degrading.

*[A teacher comes in and shouts at students for not being in their lesson...] This is what the school is like...they say we behave badly and don't show no respect but it works both ways...They keep taking us out of lessons because they are trying to do*

*special things to get our grades up, but then they realise it is not working so they put us back in again, but we have missed parts of the work so don't know what to do and the teacher gets annoyed with us because they are being mucked about as well...It is not our fault. We just do as we are told but we don't get no choice!* (Interview with young people: Bristol)

In this latter case, young people were highly perceptive about the intense performativity pressures that teachers were under, especially in light of the high stakes interventions in the local authority as a consequence of their perceived failure to deliver an adequate standard of education, and the impact this had in the creation of a school climate that generated such forms of 'poisonous pedagogy' (Raphael Reed, 1998).

A further contrast with professional interviews was the fact that young people were not asking for a more vocational curriculum as narrowly defined – but rather for more diverse choices, linked to enjoyment and personal interests. Such options should facilitate more enjoyable, engaging, creative and kinaesthetic learning experiences – not ones linked narrowly to the employability agenda. They also make frequent reference to the significance of their 'out-of-school' learning – whether through sport and leisure activities, or through family responsibilities and community actions.

*The school should give you more options to choose from...You have to do X because it is an X school, but that's not what interests us...Yeah, I'd like to do media studies...But we don't get enough choices here...some things we can't go on and do later because we never had the options earlier on...Some of my choices I can't do because there were not enough people, like dance, so I had to do something else....I'd like to do psychology but it is not an option...I'd like the school to be a sports college.* (Interview with young people: Bristol)

One key theme that mirrored a theme in professional accounts was a stated preference for learning that was more 'hands on' and not just straight academic 'book based' learning, as they described it.

*Science is the best...Because it's got practical things and people like doing practicals...We still learn, you don't have to write in your book all the time. It gets interesting.* (Interview with young people: Nottingham)

Throughout the interviews comes a sense that young people were seeking to be able to exert greater agency in their lives - including through their experiences of education.

Finally, whilst many professionals believe young people in the constituencies have limited aspirations and only aspire to stay in their locality, the Nottingham North study found a number of young people were hungry for new experiences - to see the world and meet new people.

*I just want to get away from the house, somewhere like, I don't want to live where I live right now. I want to travel the world. Now I want to go to college, out of Nottingham. I want to do languages, media, journalism. I'm going to take 'A' levels.* (Interview with young person: Nottingham)

### **5.4.2 Violence and regulation**

Young people also gave powerful accounts of the experience of multiple forms of violence – both emotional and physical violence – used to regulate their behaviours and to police their identities. In both the Bristol and the Sheffield study young people referred to feeling pushed around by adults - receiving little respect from teachers, adults assuming they were up to no good and getting "done" by the police as everyday occurrences.

Particular forms of violence also operate within peer groups through bullying and 'outcasting', frequently interwoven with gender and social class dynamics. In particular, these behaviours are used to undermine 'academic effort' and aspiration, to normalise attempts to be different and to exert a form of 'collective agency' in pursuit of socially valorised goals (Bandura, 2000).

*If you are different...if you want more than their idea of smoking on the corner and drinking cider at night, then you are out in the out group...It's the mental stuff that's really horrible. You are always being secluded, always 'outcasted' from everybody else.*  
(Interview with HE student: Bristol)

Young people sometimes spoke of how it was just easier to 'fit in' and to give up trying to work hard.

*I started off trying to work hard, but when some of them started messing around, I decided I was wasting my time.* (Interview with young person: Birmingham)

The sense of feeling an outsider – and being judged accordingly, did not necessarily leave young people even if they were successful in progressing to HE (see Section 5.4.6)

### **5.4.3 Resilience and resistance**

In interviewing young people from the constituencies who had progressed successfully to HE, a number of the studies identified some common features. Many spoke of the need to resist peer pressure, as signalled above, or to go against the tide of bad behaviour in school. Frequently they came from homes where they had a high level of parental or sibling support for their progression (although the Sheffield questionnaire showed that only about 50 per cent of HE student respondents felt that their parents were key influencers when making their decision to progress to HE).

Whilst across the studies some identified the positive impact of a teacher that believed in them still others talked of having to overcome the low expectations that some seemed to have of them.

*If anybody told me I can't, I just have to prove them wrong. To be honest I was constantly being told... "You'll never really make it" all the time and that made me want to do it so much more.*  
(Interview with young person: Bristol)

### **5.4.4 Shame and regret**

An interesting theme that emerged in a number of young people's accounts clusters around feelings of shame. Shame is a social emotion i.e. it exists with

reference to how we anticipate others may see us and reject us - but it is experienced as internalised disappointment with self i.e. it exists with reference to how we judge our own shortcomings, feelings of failure or inadequacy. Feelings of shame thereby signal issues of self-esteem but also a 'threat to the social bond' (Scheff, 2000). Shaming and avoidance of shame operate to maintain both individual identities and social relationships.

In the interviews with young people in the Bristol South study there was evidence that the 'social bond' at risk and social relationships to be maintained are not singular but plural in the context of schooling. Some young people attempt to 'maintain face' within their peer groups by countering efforts to shame them. Others adopt a 'Jack-the-Lad' persona to avoid the shame of finding learning hard and needing to seek support.

*With French I was just a little shit really, because I really struggled with French and I got angry inside. That used to come out in me being naughty 'cos I couldn't do the work. I used to say "I can't be bothered with this", like Jack-the-Lad, but now I am thinking "what a little shit you were". (Interview with HE student: Bristol)*

It is also clear that the ongoing and *regular* experience of schooling – with the constant risk of failure and of being judged by some teachers as 'lazy' or worthless – has the potential to induce humiliation and shame. Where education should be about personal growth and the expansion of possibilities, it is too frequently experienced as a 'shameful' experience, confirming young people's inadequacies and undermining their self-respect (Sennett and Cobb, 1993). The experience of being in a school that was deemed to be failing was especially demoralising.

*We don't want to stay on. We feel crap. Everyone knows this is a failing school, so what does that make us? (Interview with young person: Birmingham)*

For some young people, alternative pathways for expressing their sense of agency and control over their lives then become far more understandable – whether through 'bunking school', seeking early employment or teenage parenthood.

However, parallel to representations of shame we found poignant expressions of regret. This is especially significant since it signals the sense of dissatisfaction with previous articulations of self through 'disaffected' and disengaged actions and behaviours - and disillusionment with the consequences of these actions and behaviours in terms of current and future life chances. Regret here tells us that young people frequently wish that things might have been different. Far from a culture of 'complacency' we see evidence of young people seeking *restorative justice* - to be able to make amends for their previous actions, but also to have their own self-respect restored to them. The multiple 'hurts' endured by many participants, both adult and child, in the drama of school failure call out to be healed.

*Soon as I left school I started to regret things. I wanted to go back to school and redo my last few years. I absolutely hate to think about how I messed those last few years up...I hate the jobs I do now. They're all sort of minimum wage and you've got to work so hard to climb up the ladder from the bottom... It seems too late now...For myself I have always wanted not to be*

*a 'stat'. I didn't just want to be another number in the government's eyes. I wanted to be my own person but to me all I am is another cog in the machine. I always wanted not to be a cog in the machine. I wanted to be the driver if you know what I mean.* (Interview with young person who left school with no qualifications: Bristol)

#### **5.4.5 Trust and attachment**

There were equally moving accounts of the impact of challenging personal circumstances – and the ways in which school seemed unable to provide a safe or responsive environment to cope with such issues.

*My dad died when I was 15, but I had never really known him. When my mum and dad got divorced I was only three months old and then I didn't meet my dad again all through primary and secondary school until I was aged 13...He had blocked arteries to the heart from prolonged use of cocaine and smoking weed...It made me not care about anything, and I think that was the point where I just gave up caring. And I gave up really worrying about teachers bothering me and stuff. I don't think my school ever knew about my dad.* (Interview with young person who left school with no qualifications: Bristol)

Such examples, drawn from a parallel study by Wetz (2006) illustrate the central importance of issues of trust and attachment in the formation of young people's identities including their learning identities. In Wetz's study, a number of young people in the constituency, in particular amongst 'disaffected' young people who fail to thrive in school, demonstrated attachment anxieties arising from the quality of relationships with significant others since childhood. Aspects of poverty, drug use and family breakdown are implicated in these young people's narratives. Such issues of 'affection' impact on their learner identities and their resilience to cope with their schooling experience, especially in secondary school. Where school cultures communicate a lack of trust in young people and in their parents this further undermines young people's capacity to form an attachment to the learning experience.

Furthermore, for many young people, their cultural identity privileges the importance of social bonds and networks; attachment to family and friends is at the heart of their sense of 'well being'. Learning experiences perceived to threaten such attachments, including potential progression to higher education, cause anxiety and invoke defence mechanisms.

*I don't want to leave Knowle. All my friends are there. I won't be able to make new ones...They'll be different from me. If you go away to university you leave all your friends and your family...then you have to make all new friends and then you have to leave them when you come back home again...and I'd miss my mum.* (Interview with young person: Bristol)

This highlights the importance of positive relationships for engaging young people in education. The Birmingham study, for example, found evidence that raising the motivation to learn was profoundly affected by the quality of supportive relationships for young people; of having somebody who believed in them, and to whom they could form a sustained and supportive bond over time.

### 5.4.6 Effort and risk

We also found a recurrent theme amongst a number of young people is that investment of effort does not necessarily bring reward; indeed their experience suggests that bad behaviour gets rewarded rather than consistency and application. Personal effort is often deemed too risky given previous experience of recurrent failure, or a feeling of being invisible.

*What's the point in being good if you don't get nothing back for it? They just give stuff to the proper lairy, little mouthy, proper little gits. (Interview with young person: Bristol)*

*Bad kids get to go out of lessons and good kids like high achievers get to go on things but average kids like us get naff all. (Interview with young person: Nottingham)*

The ongoing balance between effort and risk, recognised in other studies of class and higher education (Archer et al, 2003), was very evident in interviews with young people who had gone into HE. They graphically illustrated aspects of 'risk', including risks to identity, associated with moving between worlds. The 'benefits' of higher education come with some costs - material, social and psychic - and the effort of 'identity work' for these working class students in maintaining a degree of self-worth and a positive learning trajectory whilst in higher education appears significant.

*I don't think I like a lot of the students and their way of life...They've got very different ideas and values and stuff to me, and they do look down on my area which really bugs me and lots of people make lots of comments about South Bristol and the area and it really pisses me off. They don't know anything about it... (Interview with HE student: Bristol)*

Rather than young people who are endemically passive or uninterested in learning, the interview data provides evidence of young people yearning for change and self-advancement, but feeling the weight on their shoulders of a normalising culture sustained, in part, by the dynamic between teachers and students. We also recognise that almost all young people we spoke to – engaged or disengaged from education – identify or exhibit a desire to exert more choice and agency over their lives. The characterisation of these young people as 'passive' is - in our view - a misrepresentation. What we do see however are a set of contradictions and tensions in the formation of complex and changing learning identities embedded in particular cultural contexts.

## 5.5 Perspectives from parents and carers

### 5.5.1 Confidence and capital

By contrast to representations of local community and family cultures as complacent, local parents and carers articulated the issues as being profoundly connected to confidence, intersected with issues of cultural and economic capital. Parents and carers see an absence of parental positive engagement with education as an issue of poor prior experiences and low levels of *confidence* in how to effectively take part. Many parents have had very little experience of higher education themselves. Even if they have done well in their Level 3 qualifications they are more likely to have progressed directly into jobs e.g.

women going into the nursing, secretarial and retail sectors, rather than to have gone into higher education.

*I mean, you know, working class girls just weren't encouraged to even think about university. The minute I said I wanted to be a nurse that was it. It was like you know it was like 'Off you go to nursing school' and I didn't even know that you could do nursing at university; it wasn't even talked about. (Focus group with parents: Sheffield)*

In addition, when the rules of the game and the skills to take part appear alien and unattainable, then disengagement is a rational response. Alternative actions e.g. encouraging early employment rather than educational progression consequently arise out of familiarity and affinity rather than complacency i.e. social actions coalesce around recognisable norms.

*I think parents want what's best for their children, but they just don't know how to support them to get what's best...Plus filling out forms for grants and bursaries is really hard. Lots of our parents can't even read...plus there are real worries about debt... In the end it is just let's encourage them to become a hairdresser or go into the family business because at the end of the day they're confident with telling their kids that. (Interview with parent/carer: Bristol)*

Parents were also aware that even when they had managed to get their children into schools outside of the local area their children were still stigmatized because they lived in the area.

*My son, you know at X school [a school in the best part of Sheffield]...has got a nickname; he is called Chav because of where he comes from and he takes it in good part and good humour and I am sure they don't mean it in a malicious nasty way - but that's what he has been labelled as. (Interview with parent/carer: Sheffield).*

Indeed, despite issues of confidence, there were a number of interviews that challenged the view that parents did not want wider opportunities for their children. Some parents actively claimed that they want their children to do better than they had done themselves. As one parent stated:

*My daughter said to me, "I want to be a cleaner just like you". I thought I've got to change my job. They look up to me. I don't want that for her. I'm ready to do something else for me, when I'm ready. (Interview with parent/carer: Nottingham)*

And the message one Year 10 student got from her mum was:

*My mum said I have to go to university. She said she messed up her life - kids at 16 and stuff - and she wants me to have a better life than she did. (Interview with young person: Nottingham)*

However, matched to issues of confidence were regular references to concerns about resources. The issue of debt, and anxieties about the financial aspects of going to university, were a feature of both parental and young people's

interviews. However, both talked not just of the risks associated with incurring debt, but also the loss of other immediate earning potential.

*My mother-in-law will still say the same, and all her sons. "Sixteen, you leave school, you get a job and earn your own money otherwise you're out of the house". That mentality is still there today. (Interview with local resident: Nottingham)*

Many young people, from low-income families in particular, look more toward economic independence and getting a job.

*Yeah at 16 you don't want to carry on studying. You want to get some money, you know so that's the big thing. (Focus group with mature students: Sheffield)*

This is supported by research by Connor et al:

The cost of studying is not necessarily the main reason why potential younger entrants decide against entering the HE system. More important is the 'pull' of economic independence offered by employment, frequently in a chosen career that does not require a higher education qualification (Connor *et al.*, 2001 cited in Callender, 2003, p. 24).

Parents mainly saw continuing education beyond 16 as the route to getting a higher paid job. They were therefore opposed to courses and training programmes which did not directly lead to a job.

*I think going on training schemes where there is no permanent job at the end of it is potty. (Interview with parent/carer: Sheffield)*

*Yeah well three years at college and she was doing travel and tourism - to me this is a waste because she is not using it now. (Interview with parent/carer: Sheffield)*

Parents/carers and professionals across a number of the studies suggested that shorter two-year or work-related Foundation Degree programmes might be more attractive – as might apprenticeships routes into HE (although knowledge about such options was only variably understood). Parents in the Sheffield study recognised that limiting choice to a local university in order to be able to afford it by living at home, in turn may restrict young people's options to do the course they really wanted to do.

### **5.5.2 Negative labelling**

Parents and carers reflected similar views to young people that we spoke to – that they felt judged negatively and disregarded as a consequence of coming from the local area – and had to constantly battle against the low expectations of others.

*I suppose the fear of looking stupid has been really big for me because there are a lot of assumptions made when you say you grew up in Hartcliffe...that you must be stupid...I have to reconstruct myself a little bit every time I go into a meeting with people from other parts of the city. (Interview with community worker and parent: Bristol)*

A number of parents raised issues about how young people do not show their potential – but that school initiatives (e.g. Aimhigher or Gifted and Talented activity) tended to focus resource on some groups to the exclusion of others. In particular there were concerns that ‘middle of the road’ children get overlooked. They expressed the view that it is very hard for a young person to overcome the label that they ‘would not amount to much’. Concerns about teacher expectations in general emerged in a number of the accounts.

*My daughter is in infants and one of her teachers said, “She is university material, push her as far as she can go”. And they would say it to her as well. Then obviously you get teachers who just go in and do their job and they don’t take the interest in looking at the kids individually and saying what they’re good at. It takes a special person to take their time to sit down with the kids and encourage them individually. (Interview with parent/carer: Nottingham)*

Some parents remembered being labelled themselves at school, something that instilled a negative feeling about education.

*You need to break some of the bad memories that many of the parents have about the place where they failed. People whose general experience in school is not a good one, it’s labelled them as unable - why would they want to go back e.g. for a social evening? (Interview with other professional: Nottingham)*

### **5.5.3 Geographical and relational proximity**

Parents and carers made a strong case for requiring educational opportunities to be provided in the local area in order to support young people’s progression into post-16 education and beyond. The plea for greater proximity was both geographical and relational.

*My second son dropped out of an IT course at college and is now shelf stacking at TESCO’s...I think if they’d have had a 6<sup>th</sup> form at school...and it was local. Even though it was no problem getting into town...I think had there been local 6<sup>th</sup> form provision then he would have known the boundaries. If he was struggling, we could have gone and got support. If he wasn’t doing enough work or whatever, they’d have been able to tell him because they would have known him for the last 5 or 6 years. (Interview with parent/carer: Bristol)*

The Sheffield study identified that approximately 80 per cent of the applicants from Sheffield Brightside who went on to higher education chose universities in their local area (Yorkshire and Humber) rather than other locations. The local effect was also highlighted by the questionnaire study in that 74 per cent of the young respondents were still living at home with their families. As questionnaires had been posted to all Sheffield Hallam University students who had a home or term time address in Sheffield Brightside, this finding indicates that young people entering higher education from the Sheffield Brightside area are likely to continue to live at home with their families whilst studying.

Various reasons were given for the local effect including financial considerations and family support.

*But people stop within their zone because financially that would be a lot easier to live at home and still be supported within the family income, and the family are less nervous about that as well. (Interview with parent/carer: Sheffield)*

These findings highlight the need for universities to cater for the needs, interests and capabilities of their local population, as otherwise these potential students may choose not to progress to HE.

In light of the significance of high trust relationships to young people's engagement in learning, and given the cultural bias towards inscribing emotions onto familiar and trusted spaces, greater attention to all forms of proximity in more supported transitions is an important priority. This means looking more closely at the relationships that can support transitions, and the physical location of opportunities to progress. It also highlights the importance of ensuring appropriate pathways for progressions, where incremental small steps can eventually take young people from where they are today, into higher education in the future.

#### **5.5.4 Widening opportunities**

Parents and carers recognised that planned reforms of secondary education in the local areas might open up some new opportunities. However, like the young people interviewed, a number expressed a desire for wider opportunities to be provided than just a narrow and instrumental focus on work-related skills. Some were anxious that their children and their communities should not be trapped in a vocational silo.

*My only concern is...three establishments are now looking at having 220 place post-16 centres...[and] all are thinking of offering the same type of courses, which is the construction courses, the childcare, the hairdressing and again, not the...academic courses...We've got kids that want to be a lawyer and kids that want to be a teacher...so that obviously needs to be an option...It all seems to be vocational, vocational, vocational. (Interview with parent/carer: Bristol)*

In a number of ways throughout the interviews, young people and their families articulated a more complex concept of learning than educational professionals; one that represented learning as being '...about social biographies and identities...about self-realization rather than futurity...about meaning and difference, about struggle, disappointment and imagination' (Ball et al, 2000, p10).

#### **5.5.5 Diversity of parental responses**

The Nottingham research highlighted that parents are not a homogenous group but tend to have different types of responses to, and types of engagements with, formal education. Parents themselves in many of the studies took pains to distinguish 'different sorts of parents and families' in their local area, frequently distinguishing 'good' from 'poor' parents. The Nottingham team, based on their interviews, suggest a four-part typology:

- **Planners** - organise their choices and patterns of expenditure and engagement with schools and schooling, taking control of interactions and decisions. Such parents understand the system, are confident at taking initiative and control and engage to achieve the best for their children.

- **Aspirers** - aspire for better outcomes for their children and try to work for them to do better than they did. Such parents go out of their way to seek information that can support their children and have reasonable financial resources.
- **Hopers** - hope things will work out but do not have the knowledge to manipulate and engage in the system to bring it about. Such parents encourage their children, but do so without recourse to the school and usually without accurate knowledge and information. Such families have limited financial resources.
- **Rejecters** - sit outside and reject the system of higher education (and possibly education more generally) as not for them. Such parents may have struggled in and failed at the education system themselves when young, and find relationships with schools difficult. Typically such families experience a range of social challenges.

Such an approach to differentiating parental responses and relationships with education were mirrored in the Sheffield Brightside study. It is suggested in these studies that professionals need to devise ways of acknowledging and working with diverse parental perspectives, rather than expecting all parents to fit into a single mould. The Birmingham and Bristol studies on the other hand, were more circumspect about using any such attitudinal representations and classification of parents and carers. Instead they argue that a failure to understand the contexts that influence parental engagement with education, and the dominance of a set of deficit discourses around working class cultures, tend to reproduce an oversimplification and reification of parental feelings and responses to education and educational professionals.

## 5.6 Conclusions on learning cultures, identities and trajectories.

The rich qualitative evidence in the interview data, triangulated with the analysis of the 'You and Your Future' survey, allow us to understand with greater confidence the complex sociocultural processes within the four constituencies by which young people's learning identities and trajectories are created and consolidated over time. By listening closely to young people's voices we can begin to understand more fully *from within the cultural milieu* the relational and interactive issues that impact on the formation of their learner identities and learning trajectories. By identifying points of disjuncture between professional, parental and young people's accounts, we can also highlight underlying discourses affecting actions and raise issues that require further attention.

Whilst conditions located outside the direct influence of schools impact on young people's orientations to education, a powerful interactive and relational dynamic operates within schools and this dynamic sustains the cycle of disengagement. All participants - young people, parents/carers and education professionals are part of this dynamic. At the heart of the vortex of educational disengagement and underachievement, though by no means the simple or singular 'cause' of the dynamic, are deficit beliefs held by some educational professionals about young people, their families and communities. These beliefs are often unconscious and implicit, and are reinforced by the ongoing experiences of working in these settings.

Evidence from these studies demonstrates how disengaged learning identities, or a particular 'habitus', are consolidated for many young people by their experience

of schooling, where experiences of violence, humiliation and shame reinforce a sense of worthlessness, and where disengagement and/or disaffection represents in part a strategy for the protection of self-worth. Intersecting with their experiences within family and community contexts we begin to see how relatively restricted 'horizons for action' are shaped and reinforced over time. Whilst individual young people are able to resist the inscription of such learning identities and to 'escape' foreshadowed learning trajectories, this has only been possible for the determined few and does not provide a model of engagement that can reach out and empower the majority.

In particular, the studies allow us to identify the importance of enhancing young people's enjoyment of school, especially in the early years of secondary education when disengagement occurs or accelerates. Of critical importance is the need to promote strategies that empower young people with a greater sense of *agency* in their own learning and build parental confidence to provide their children with ongoing support and encouragement. All three of these conditions are strongly associated with young people developing a learning identity where they want to stay in education at sixteen and have positive attitudes to higher education. They are also closely associated with young people achieving success at level 2 by the age of sixteen and thereby being set on a trajectory that facilitates their progression into HE.

It is suggested that strategies to make a difference to educational engagement must be based upon *respect*. Achieving conditions of respect entails mutuality, dialogue, recognition and a commitment to empowerment.

Treating people with respect cannot occur simply by commanding it should happen. Mutual recognition has to be negotiated (Sennett, 2003, p260).

Such strategies to enhance enjoyable engagement are seen in partial form in some parts of the constituencies and in some aspects of practice within all schools.

## 6. Evaluating Interventions

The research objective to 'identify examples of good practice in reaching out and engaging young people in post-16 and higher education in the constituency' has necessitated a consideration of significant strategies and interventions to raise attainment and enhance engagement throughout young people's education, but in particular during the 11-19 phase. We make no apologies for this interpretation of the research brief. The deep and entrenched disengagement from education of young people in the four cities calls for new ways of understanding the issues, which only such a holistic evaluation can provide.

### 6.1 Evaluative criteria

The Bristol study concludes by proposing a set of clear context-specific evaluative criteria (Table 2) to help us consider the potential impact of a range of educational interventions aimed at improving educational engagement. This is important, since the absence of sound research-based evidence about the impact of existing interventions is deeply problematic. A recurrent feature of educational interventions in these constituencies, as in other areas with entrenched underachievement, is a tendency to seek out new 'solutions' without fully evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of existing strategies or the evidence base for the benefits of proposed changes. Where such evaluation exists, it often fails to look at impact over time, appears to be based on questionable quantitative analysis, does not disaggregate the impact on specific learners, or is not independent.

The value of the proposed evaluative framework is that it allows us to consider *in advance* the likely success of planned interventions, and to highlight aspects in current or planned interventions that may benefit from greater consideration or more explicit attention in order to maximise success. Reviewing the other three local studies, it is apparent that the framework derived from the one study has equal relevance to other areas.

**Table 2: Criteria for Evaluating the Potential of Existing and Planned Interventions to Increase Educational Engagement including Young Participation in HE**

Successful interventions will:

1. Recognise that one size will not fit all as there are different needs and motivations within different parts of the constituency, between different groups of young people and at different stages of their lives.
2. Communicate high expectations and belief in young people's capacity to achieve in every aspect of their educational experience, and challenge preconceptions based on restrictive gender, ethnic and class stereotypes.
3. Promote as a priority the creation of dialogic contexts for learning and listen to, engage with and learn from the voice of young people and their families and communities, modelling respect and empowerment.

4. Reach out to parents/carers of young people, aiding them to raise their own educational expectations, confidence and skills, and engage them proactively as partners in their children's education.
5. Build on community funds of knowledge, recognise the significance of informal and out-of-school learning, and develop a culture of active citizenship through education.
6. Develop positive and stable relationships as the basis for effective learning including attention to emotional literacy, and aspects of attachment and affect.
7. Develop a sense of enjoyment, 'agency' and active ownership in the learning process including through negotiated and personalised elements of the curriculum, use of new technologies as a tool for learning, and interactive pedagogies.
8. Develop 'assessment for learning' so that young people know how to improve, and use assessment practices that reward participation and key skills development as much as acquisition of subject knowledge.
9. Develop learning dispositions and strategies to build 'learning power' and enhance young people's capacity to face learning challenges and risks.
10. Support literacy and numeracy development for young people and adults, engaging them through social and personal identity projects not just technical and functional skills development.
11. Enhance the development of decision-making skills and enable access to high quality and well-informed IAG available in various ways and at various times to best fit a variety of needs.
12. Target interventions at critical points where disengagement occurs e.g. between years 8 and 9, and enhance social, emotional and study skills support for young people at key points of transition.
13. Recognise the significance of social bonds and networks, acknowledge the importance of relational rather than individual learning to young people and adapt the learning opportunities in FE and HE in recognition.
14. Increase opportunities for choice in educational pathways, including creative and kinaesthetic opportunities, high quality academic and vocational programmes and multiple points for re-entry to learning.

15. Connect vocational and work-based learning to aspirational futures, including new employment possibilities and vocational programmes in higher education, Foundation Degrees, and HE in FE.
16. Locate a wider choice of academic and vocational learning opportunities at every level within the constituency, housed in quality buildings.
17. Provide a range of opportunities to experience positive learning situations outside the locality, raising awareness of alternative possibilities.
18. Promote positive role models, including from within the community, who build sustaining relationships and enhance linking and bridging forms of social capital.
19. Align educational, community and business interests in extended forms of partnership in support of educational improvement, including a visible presence for FE and HE in the constituency.
20. Ensure clear access to all forms of financial support for learning.
21. Provide professional development support for staff in schools and colleges that builds their capacity as reflective and extended practitioners to meet the challenges.

## 6.2 Classifying interventions

Considering key current and planned interventions, the Bristol study argues it is possible to identify a certain clustering of attributes. A number of existing interventions (including ASDAN, Aimhigher, Gifted and Talented Activities) are what one might call *programmatic interventions* i.e. ones that focus on specific tools or programmes to encourage engagement, participation and progression. Each has something important to offer, but they necessarily are rather limited in their reach.

The second set of interventions are what one might call *systemic interventions* i.e. ones that focus on systemic change at the level of whole organisations and their practices, subsume programmatic approaches as useful tools en route, but in particular align new forms of extended partnership in the governance and leadership of schools. Examples include new Academies, new Trust school partnerships, and in Bristol at least, a planned new Skills Academy in the heart of the constituency offering 14-19 and adult learning from pre-entry level to HE level programmes. One particular emerging trend to note is that local universities are involved as direct partners in some of these systemic interventions, in a more embedded approach to improving educational engagement, participation and progression, including widening participation in HE.

An alternative way to cluster current or planned interventions would be around the extent to which they arise from and evidence respect for communities – valuing existing community funds of knowledge and current forms of social capital – as a starting point for building individual and collective ‘agency’ through social action and educational change. Examples include family learning projects and community action/activity centres. These we might refer to as *agentic interventions*. Evidence from the four cities research suggests agentic interventions may offer some important insights into the context-for-action that might empower people within the constituency to engage in the kind of ‘identity projects’ associated with a capacity for lifelong learning (Biesta and Tedder, 2006).

## 6.3 Examples of good practice

The research across all four cities shows that the reasons for low uptake of HE by young people in these contexts are complex. Consequently, there is not one simple way to address the situation. Specific examples of ‘good practice’ were found in all studies, and the original reports should be reviewed to see the full range of exemplars. However, common examples included the following.

### 6.3.1 *Diversifying pathways into HE*

All the studies to some extent argue the need to support and develop diverse pathways in post-compulsory education and training. These include, but are not restricted to, the provision of vocationally orientated pathways and for recognition of the need for work-related training and qualifications – linked to the strong driver to be in employment. For example, ‘apprenticeship’ pathways were identified both by young people and careers staff in the Birmingham study as a preferred way forward and it may be that there would be higher levels of engagement in post-compulsory education and training if there were a substantial increase in the number of available apprenticeships. Vocational routes for adults wishing to obtain degrees at a later stage would also be welcome. Better links with employers might help this process. Government and schools should give equal status and support to students wanting to progress via vocational routes, as well as to those opting for a more traditional HE route.

HEFCE recognise that a priority for widening participation is to improve the rate of progression of learners through vocational and work-based learning pathways into higher education. Currently, only 50% of young people with vocational qualifications at level 3 (BTEC Diplomas and Certificates, AVCEs, NVQs and professional qualifications) progress to higher education compared with a figure of about 90% for those with traditional academic ‘A’ levels (HEFCE, 2006b).

One strategy to encourage this has been the establishment of Lifelong Learning Networks and the Bristol study explores the contribution of the Western Vocational Lifelong Learning Network (WVLLN). The key strategic focus for WVLLN includes:

- **Progression** – agreeing and extending progression mechanisms across the network, notably progression accords and pathways, and publishing them in an interactive database that relates learners’ experiences, qualifications and aspirations to opportunities.
- **Provision** – developing new curriculum ownership arrangements centred on subject strands in order to respond to training needs, ensure

geographical coverage, and fill skills and progression gaps.

- **Support** – commissioning an enabling curriculum that facilitates the progression opportunities that will be made available to vocational learners, including the sharing and extension of innovative teaching and learning practice. The objective is also to provide practical support for learners. This may include bridging and transition programmes, on-line guidance, and referral to face-to-face support.

The network will find out which vocational courses are lacking in the region and will help to set them up in partner universities and local colleges. Additional Student Numbers dedicated to the network to support courses have been agreed and the particular focus for the WVLLN is on targeting work-based learners. The development of Foundation Degrees, which have the potential to attract some students who might not otherwise enter higher education, is one obvious part of such a strategy but other means of supporting and accrediting work-based learning will be significant too. The network will also have key role to play in ensuring higher education institutions are making appropriate changes to the HE curriculum and qualifications to reflect associated changes in the 14-19 phase of education, especially the development of specialised diplomas.

In relation to young people, educational professionals and parents/carers - all four city studies note how much work there is to be done on informing them of these new developments and opportunities. There will also be a need to ensure that university staff and Aimhigher tutors and mentors are fully aware of the changing nature of higher education opportunities. Those who have experienced higher education tend to assume that their experience is typical and to use that experience in representing higher education to others. Changing young people's concept of what higher education means, and what it might be like, is an important part of changing their interest in accessing it.

### ***6.3.2 Family learning strategies***

Professionals across the four studies repeatedly emphasised the importance of working with children and families at an early stage, in order to build the kinds of social and cultural capital that would minimise educational disengagement and support long-term development towards lifelong learning.

Several notable examples of good practice are programmes aimed at encouraging a positive family engagement in education. Examples from the Birmingham study include Pyramid Clubs set up to support groups of 'vulnerable' children in primary schools; the ID Service, which provides individual and group mentoring for children and families; Family Learning Workshops, which are offered by many schools and provide an informal opportunity for parents to learn how best to support their children's learning by working alongside them.

Many of the services offered locally by disparate agencies are now being located through Sure Start and in Children's Centres. With the development of Extended Schools, these services will continue to expand at a local level, offering families more immediate support and access to a wide range of opportunities and services.

In the Bristol study, an evaluation of the work of the Families and Schools Together (FAST) team in the constituency as part of a small Excellence in Cities action zone highlighted the importance of developing family learning strategies that were respectful of families, non-judgemental and fun.

### **6.3.3 Raising achievement interventions**

There are a number of current initiatives that either target pupils who may, even tentatively, be considering HE pathways, or pupils who are at risk of becoming disengaged from secondary education and thus at risk of never realising their potential for higher study. Increasingly, such strategies are drawing upon the role of universities in supporting attainment-raising. These include:

- mentoring programmes that involve university students supporting students identified by schools as 'under-achieving';
- 'booster' revision courses often targeted at those who are just below targets for SATs or GCSE grades;
- a wide range of out of hours activities, which target pupils needing extra support and those who are high achievers; these includes master classes and summer schools;
- a programme of 'teacher adoption' at one school, whereby named teachers have responsibility for particular pupils and take a keen interest in their overall performance; this one-to-one attention is paying off in terms of higher levels of attainment.

### **6.3.4 Making HE aspirations 'real'**

Ball et al (2002), drawing upon Bourdieu, discuss the extent to which the culture of HE is 'unreal' for young people from 'non-traditional' backgrounds who are considering applying to HE. Their perceptions of HE are 'unreal' in that such pupils have little direct, inside experience upon which to draw, in contrast with pupils in whose families and communities there is an established tradition of participating in HE. Thus most 'non-traditional' HE applicants are reliant on the 'cold knowledge' available from prospectuses and websites, as opposed to 'inside information' from friends and family who have direct experience of HE.

When staff involved across all four studies spoke of raising 'aspirations' among their pupils, often they were, in fact, referring to embedding initiatives that might provide more 'direct' experiences of the 'culture of HE' and, in the longer term, suggest HE as a viable, accessible route. For example, current initiatives highlighted in the Birmingham study include:

- school visits to universities and visits to schools by university staff and students; these often involve local university students and have helped to foster good relationships with local universities;
- awareness raising events, curriculum days, visiting speakers, attendance by pupils at conferences and exhibitions;
- mentoring and 'role model' programmes, several particularly aimed at BME pupils considering applying to HE;
- making careers education a central to the curriculum and giving early and ongoing access to careers information to students and parents, including use of software packages.

Narratives of individual young people bring this to life. *Student A* is a final year undergraduate who provided an intriguing model of how local success stories can feed back into school system via mentoring.

### **Case study: Student A**

*Student A* is a young female undergraduate in her final year at one of Birmingham's universities. She attended school in Hodge Hill before going on to do A-Levels at a local sixth form college. Her father is an unemployed die caster, her mother a housewife; neither parent studied beyond school. She passed ten GCSEs and chose her college on recommendation from family members and because the smaller atmosphere appealed to her. There she achieved three A-Levels. A tutor at her college was highly supportive, particularly in advising her on HE courses. Her family were most influential in her decision to enter HE and she rejects traditional notions of male dominance within an Asian household, as her mother also had a strong influence. She also notes that having a Muslim woman among her college tutors offered a positive role model.

A had a good network of friends at school and most of her peers went on to post-compulsory education. She notes that those of her peers who have chosen vocational post-compulsory routes have also had success and she now feels that 'you don't have to go to university'. Now that she is approaching the end of her course she is focusing on a future career path; she hopes to train to teach at primary level. *Student A* now participates in the Aimhigher mentoring programme because she wants to be able to inspire others in the way that positive role models inspired her. The most important aspects of her education were receiving high levels of individual attention, having teachers who strongly believed in her ability and studying in environments in which her ethnicity and beliefs were 'respected but not all-defining'.

### **6.3.5 Aimhigher activity**

The four studies were not resourced to undertake sound evaluations of local Aimhigher interventions in each constituency, although each report acknowledges that many important and influential strategies have been promoted and resourced through Aimhigher, including some of those identified above.

Evaluations of Aimhigher regionally and nationally tend to focus on attitudinal and aspirational change immediately after the experience of a particular event or intervention. There is more limited evidence, though the evidence base is increasing, of the impact on attainment (Morris et al, 2004). Establishing firm connections, let alone causal relationships, between widening participation activities and the ways in which learners subsequently develop and the choices they make is notoriously difficult (HEFCE, 2006b). This is especially challenging in light of the fact that young people in target cohorts are subject to multiple initiatives and interventions aiming to change their educational careers.

National evaluations of Aimhigher have generally indicated very high levels of 'user satisfaction' with the following Aimhigher activities: summer schools; campus visits; mentoring; subject related taster events, and IAG - especially when these activities form part of an on-going and coherent package of support. One-off activities, such as roadshows, and to some extent masterclasses are considered less effective (Aimhigher, 2006). However, some studies also highlight issues that were raised through interviews with educational professionals in the four local studies e.g. the feeling that 'there appears to be limited attention paid

to a systematic sequencing of activities for young people' and 'bringing the positive experiences back into the classroom to discuss and reinforce them...is far from universal' (Ekos Consulting, 2006, p iv). We also noted that there was a limited focus in promoting awareness of HE through Aimhigher on HE possibilities through FE colleges or work-based learning.

Evidence about the impact of Aimhigher activities in the Bristol South constituency, for example, shows high levels of satisfaction with the experience but is much less secure about evidencing impact on attainment. The Bristol Aimhigher Annual Report for 2005 notes that 'the evidence base needs strengthening and making more secure'. Some achievement gains were recognised by the local small action zone as part of Excellence in Cities - claiming a 200% improvement in Key Stage 2 SAT results amongst a level 5 group who took part in range of activities including one that involved series of activities with a local university culminating in a university 'graduation ceremony' for the children attended by their parents/carers (Williamson et al, 2006). However, given the multitude of interventions impacting on children in the schools in the constituency, it is hard to claim causation.

The following issues about the ongoing provision of Aimhigher activities were raised by the team investigating Birmingham Hodge Hill. These points arose from discussion with Aimhigher staff in universities and the teachers who co-ordinate the Aimhigher plans in schools:

- There is a lack of visibility of Aimhigher in schools and colleges. In schools the allocations per school are, in some cases, very small, which tend to mean that Aimhigher funds are combined with other monies to fund activities. Staff are not always aware of the source of the funding.
- There is a need for more effective 'marketing' of Aimhigher as a 'brand' within the school sector, so that practitioners become more aware of the quantity and breadth of what is being funded through Aimhigher. An example given in interview was that school letterheads are now littered with achievement awards and funding marks but are not required to acknowledge the funding from Aimhigher.
- At a time when other schools initiatives are receiving more funding, the amount available to Aimhigher is being reduced. This means that precise targeting of resources has become much more important and acute. An increasing emphasis on delivering cost-effectiveness is challenging when undertaking work that inevitably takes time to show results.
- Although evidence suggests that decisions are taken about the attainability of HE at a much younger age than the later stages of secondary school, funding does not facilitate work being concentrated at the level of primary schools, which are more numerous, disparate and therefore more resource intensive.
- Engagement with employers and work-based learning providers remains deeply problematic with Aimhigher appearing to have little influence over employers who seem reluctant to fund their employees to enter HE or to encourage their staff to leave to go into further study.
- Some programmes that do support adult returners within the community, such as the Reachout programme, have not been supported within the new planning framework. It is argued that the cost per learner

intervention is too great to be justified. This is set against a background in which college providers are reducing their own adult education provision.

### ***6.3.6 Changing policy context***

Finally, it is worth acknowledging that the policy landscape impacting on educational engagement in the four cities continues to change, and even since the inception of this research, the context has shifted considerably. In particular, the Leitch Review of Skills (H M Treasury, 2006) means that widening participation in the future will be more closely associated with the provision of vocational and work-based higher education targeted through the skills and employment agenda. It also shifts the focus significantly from young participation in higher education, towards higher education for the adult working population.

This will be highly relevant in low participation areas such as those investigated in the four cities research, where one might assume the continuation of more extended timescales for gaining level 2 and level 3 qualifications in the first instance, and a tendency to choose employment or early parenthood as an initial pathway into adulthood.

The Every Child Matters agenda also continues to reshape the context within which educational services are provided for children and young people, and within which improved educational engagement might occur. In particular, the parameters of Every Child Matters legitimate a focus on supporting young people's wellbeing, and not just their attainment, in a way that chimes with the findings of these reports.

However, one emerging issue to consider is the extent to which the policy focus on higher education and skills development on the one hand, versus a focus on supporting family, community and children's well being on the other – may become disarticulated and thereby potentially dysfunctional. The most recent decision to separate the Department for Education and Skills into two distinct government departments (Department for Children, Schools and Families, and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills) could be considered a concrete expression of this. In practice, practitioners across the constituencies note the already existing complexity around regional bodies and networks concerned with young people's learning, education and skills development (e.g. Schools, Colleges, Universities, Local Authorities and Children's Trusts, Learning and Skills Councils, Regional Development Agencies, Government Offices). Whilst the overall drive is to develop joined-up policy and provision for young people, it is not entirely clear that existing mechanisms truly facilitate this.

## 7. Conclusions and Recommendations

### 7.1 Conclusions

The aim of the research projects reported on here has been to establish in-depth and situated insights into the particular processes that underpin the low rates of participation of young people in higher education in the parliamentary constituencies of Birmingham Hodge Hill, Bristol South, Nottingham North, and Sheffield Brightside.

By adopting a sociocultural approach we have provided a rich and complex picture of the processes involved. Educational outcomes in the constituencies reflect the dynamic interplay of cultural, social and economic factors across space and time. These interactive processes are implicated in the formation of learning cultures, identities and trajectories in the constituencies. A detailed body of evidence has allowed the development of a well-grounded evaluative framework. This framework is offered as a formative tool that might aid in the development of current and planned interventions aimed at enhancing educational engagement, including those designed to encourage progression to higher education. In particular, we argue for the establishment of *respectful* and *relational practices* as the basis for improving educational engagement.

In conclusion, the research studies present a case for higher education institutions to embed their support for widening participation and school improvement directly within the educational provision for the constituencies in question and to promote situated forms of action, based on a sound understanding of the local areas. This, amongst other things, speaks of a different relationship and new forms of partnership between schools, local authorities, further education, higher education, business - and young people, their families and the wider community.

Going forward, the priority...for institutions...is to move progressively beyond isolated widening participation interventions to a planned programme, integrated with the activities of the wider learning community of schools and colleges (HEFCE, 2006, p4).

We hope that this summary of the four local studies goes some way towards providing the in-depth understanding that will be necessary to facilitate such a process of change.

### 7.2 Recommendations

1. Policy makers and practitioners at all levels need to listen carefully to what young people, parents/carers are saying, challenge deficit beliefs about these communities and promote *respectful* and *relational* strategies for improving their engagement with education.
2. In order to achieve this, it is essential to make the learning experience, especially in secondary schools, more relevant and enjoyable, support transitions and build young people's sense of *agency* as lifelong learners.

3. The role of parents and carers is crucial to young people's engagement in education and strategies must pay particular attention to aspects of parental engagement, learning from the best of what already happens. As part of this, consideration needs to be given to ensuring the promotion and funding of skills development and learning for the adult population living in low participation areas.
4. Education professionals require sustained and high quality professional development in order to enhance their capacities to engage effectively with young people and their families, and to give effective leadership at all levels in the schools.
5. The curriculum available to young people needs to be rich and diverse, including but not limited to new 14-19 pathways with enhanced aspects of vocational and work-related learning.
6. The language of lifelong learning must become common place, with a focus on 'aiming further' as well as 'aiming higher', and encouragement for adult and mature learners to return to study and further qualification.
7. Access to high quality IAG is a priority - available to all young people and their families, embedded in their learning experiences and used as the basis for on-going action planning. As part of this there is a need to ensure IAG in relation to HE is up-to-date and relevant, and that multiple opportunities are created from an early age for young people and their families to experience HE so that their knowledge is 'hot knowledge'.
8. New forms of HE must be provided and promoted (e.g. Foundation Degrees, accreditation of community activity and active citizenship; support for social enterprise, HE in FE), located within these areas and contributing to their regeneration.
9. New local employment opportunities must be provided and connected to higher level qualifications, including links to apprenticeships.
10. As part of their wider community engagement strategies, HEIs need to consider how they can facilitate a coherent and sustainable presence in low participation neighbourhoods and the ways in which they can make significant and measurable contributions to the social, educational and economic transformation of these areas. This should be part of aligning the interests and resources of a range of partners committed to supporting widening participation opportunities, and building sustaining relationships and networks in support of educational engagement (e.g. the local universities working alongside and embedded within the local communities in support of school improvement).
11. The LSC is able to provide wide-ranging data on patterns of progression – but overall, data on progression and achievement from compulsory through post-compulsory education and training is not well co-ordinated. More extensive information sharing should be developed to ensure that this information is widely available to planners and policy makers, particularly within 'Aimhigher' and local universities and colleges.
12. Criteria for the evaluation of current and planned interventions should be based on sound understanding of the local area (as suggested in Table 2).

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