

Research Article

Year 7 Pupils' Views of the Future

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This paper reports findings from a study among 610 Year 7 (typically age 12) pupils at 27 nonselective secondary schools in three English regions: Cornwall and Devon, London, and Greater Manchester. Data was gathered in workshops, each with 15–25 pupils, who completed questionnaires and performed individual tasks, all related to their vocational and educational aims, their ideas on what counted as success, and the main influences on their forward thinking, then discussed their answers and results. The discussions were tape recorded. Most pupils expressed robust occupational aims, and most said that they wanted to go to university. Family class did not predict levels of educational or occupational aims, but was related to the importance attached to “the job that I want to do” in the pupils’ forward thinking. SAT scores did predict levels of occupational aspiration, ideas on what counted as success, and by whom and what the pupils were most influenced. These findings are interpreted to challenge the view, on which a raft of current policies are based, that social class disparities in educational and labour market outcomes are due to the intergenerational transmission of low aspirations in lower-class families and neighbourhoods. The paper concludes with an alternative model of status transmission processes in which attainments during secondary education are posited as the key intervening variable.

1. Introduction

Most research into young people’s future hopes, aims, and intentions has concentrated on those approaching or at the end of compulsory education. This was true in the 1950s and remains the case today (as, e.g., in [1–5]). Currently, this research is being conducted and read in a UK policy context where governments are: (i) seeking to increase participation in higher education; (ii) know that many young people who appear (from GCSE results) eminently capable at age 16 fail to reach A-levels then university (see [6]), and (iii) the “wastage” is known to be related to young people’s social class origins [7–9]. One view, on which a number of current policy initiatives are based, is that the wastage is due to a “poverty of aspiration” which is transmitted to young people through their families and neighbourhoods [10, 11]. This implies that a propensity to quit education prematurely is laid early in life. Hence, attention is currently being paid to the future aims

and hopes not only of the 14–18-year-old but also younger pupils, including those making the transition from primary into secondary education.

Many sociologists have long questioned the senses in which individuals can be said to “choose” their futures, including their future occupations. Their argument has always been that scope for genuine choice is structured, limited, by the interrelationships between family origins, education, the labour market, and employers’ recruitment practices (see [12–14]). Whether recent changes in education and the labour market, and the prolongation of youth life stage transitions, have widened scope for genuine choice (as argued, e.g., by Du Bois Reymond [15], Du Bois Reymond et al. [16], and Wyn and White [17]), is fiercely contested (see, e.g., [18, 19]). However, even sociologists who stress the determining power of opportunity structures agree that individuals do make choices, within the constraints of their particular circumstances. Orthodox human capital theory

as propounded by economists (see, e.g., [20]) claims that rational actors will tend to invest in their own human capital in so far as positive returns will accrue. Sociologists would simply add that social and psychological costs and benefits will be included in rational actors' calculations and that actors' values, derived from their cultural contexts, will influence the weights attached to different costs and benefits (see [21, 22]).

The controversial issues concern the aspects of children's and young people's contexts that produce social class differences in ambitions. The central claim in the poverty of aspiration thesis is that certain (lower-class) cultures, transmitted through families and neighbourhoods, prevent individuals from choosing and acting in their own best interests. If so, we would expect to find social class differences as soon as children are able to express educational and vocational aspirations. That children of primary school age have occupational aims is not a recent discovery. However, until recently these aims have often been bracketed off as fantasies, entertained during an exploratory stage in vocational development, and devoid of long-term implications (see [23–25]). These views are still expressed (see [26, 27]). Gottfredson [28] claims that during the secondary school years young people's aims undergo radical modification through circumscription (eliminating the least favoured options previously entertained) and compromise (realisation of what will be possible). Even so, it is impossible to dismiss early childhood experiences as irrelevant to adult outcomes. Early results from the Millennium Cohort Study [29] have found substantial social class differences in children's cognitive abilities at age three. Also, parents of primary school children are known to have very different, and social class-related, aspirations for their children's education, and different ideas as to what will count as success [30]. Intriguingly, in America in the 1950s, Norton [31, 32] found that high proportions of the careers being followed by samples of adults corresponded with the individuals' earliest recalled vocational interests. Of course, the respondents in this study might have forgotten earlier vocational interests that did not match their subsequent biographies. More persuasively, and very recently in Britain, Paul Croll and his colleagues have reported research showing that most children not only express firm and clear occupational intentions at the beginning of their secondary education, but that these expressed intentions are only weakly related to the social class positions of their families, yet are good predictors of how the young people will actually behave at age 16 [33, 34]. This creates a so far unresolved puzzle since it is well known that the career routes taken by young people age at 16 are strongly related to their social class origins. This is the background against which the research reported below was conducted.

The primary aims of the research were

- (i) to reveal the character of 12 year old pupils' occupational and educational aims and thinking,
- (ii) to identify the role of social class and other possible determinants of the above.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample. Our evidence is from 610 Year 7 pupils (typically age 12, in their first year at secondary school). They were from 27 nonselective secondary schools in three regions of England: London, Greater Manchester, and Cornwall and Devon. Neither the schools nor the pupils can be described as samples. Rather, the schools were a balanced selection from within each of the three regions: from inner and outer-cities, and mainly rural areas, and in neighbourhoods with different socioeconomic profiles. Also, needless to say, the schools were self-selected on the basis of their willingness to take part in the research. The pupils studied in each school were not samples but were selected partly on the basis of normal teaching groups remaining together, which was consistent with our need for the groups to include both higher- and lower-ability pupils.

Compared with the entire school population in England, our respondents included a much higher proportion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds: 27% reported receiving free school meals compared with 16% nationally, and just over a half had postcodes indicating that they lived in deprived areas (the bottom fifth, using a range of socioeconomic indicators). Academically selective schools and private schools were not included in this study. Among nonselective schools, the aim in each region was to secure a selection so as to include sufficient numbers of pupils whose backgrounds could be uncontroversially described as disadvantaged.

2.2. Instruments. The evidence was gathered in "workshops," each with 15–25 pupils, in which the pupils performed tasks individually, then discussed their results. One task was to rank the desirability of different destinations that young people might reach after school (training to be a doctor, plumber, etc.). Here, the words were beneath pictures illustrating what each student or trainee might be doing. Other tasks included rating the importance of various influences on their own aims. Tape-recorded group discussions about the pupils' answers and their reasons followed each task.

There was also a short questionnaire on which pupils wrote down their occupational aims, and whether they wanted to go to university. They were also asked to write down their postcodes, from which they were separated during the analysis according to whether they lived in deprived or other neighbourhoods, whether or not they were receiving free school meals, and their English and Maths scores in their most recent SATs. There were further group discussions about the merits or otherwise of going to university, staying at school after age 16, and what (if anything) the pupils knew about A-levels, Diplomas, and Apprenticeships. The fieldwork followed the government's announcement of its intention to raise the "participation age" to 17 then 18, which would affect the Year 7 pupils who we studied, and to offer Diploma and Apprenticeship in addition to the established academic route after age 14.

The views that pupils expressed in the workshop discussions are very likely to have been influenced by the context, giving the "right" answers, most likely to mean agreeing with

peers, for many comments about the schools were distinctly uncomplimentary (see below). However, these discussions followed exercises in which pupils wrote down individual answers to questions about their occupational and educational aims, what counted as success, and so forth, and these private responses were unlikely to have been primarily expressions of peer group norms.

2.3. *Analysis.* The quantifiable information from the questionnaires that the pupils completed was entered into and analysed using SPSS. The tape recorded group discussions were subsequently transcribed in summary form, using a separate spreadsheet for each workshop/school. Pupils' comments were grouped under different headings: occupational aims, educational aims, influences on my thinking, and so forth. Common themes were thereby identified, as were "exceptions to the rule."

3. Results

From the questionnaires we gathered information about the pupil's family class backgrounds (assessed by whether they were receiving free school meals and postcodes) and sex. Ethnicity and disability were not recorded in this way. Whether a speaker was male or female, and white or ethnic minority, was noted on the spreadsheets where the group discussions were transcribed, but ethnic differences are not explored in the following analysis, basically because there were no apparent ethnic differences in the results on which we focus. Occupational aims were gendered (as expected), but the following analysis concentrates on differences (and the absence of differences) that were related to our indicators of social class.

3.1. *Occupational Aims.* Eighty-eight percent of the pupils said that they knew what jobs they wanted to do in the future. A complete list of these occupational aims, in descending order of frequency, is in Table 1. As in Paul Croll et al.'s study [33], our pupils' aims were not expressed flippantly. Their goals did not appear to be spur-of-the-moment or fantasies. The pupils were able to explain "why?", and 65% of those with an aim claimed that this aim had remained unchanged for at least two years. Most of the 12 year olds appeared to possess quite robust vocational goals.

I want to be an accountant. I have done since I was 8.

I want to go to college and I want to be a vet. I have known this since I was 7.

I want to go to the LSE (London School of Economics) and become a stockbroker or a lawyer. I have known this since I was 10.

I want to be an archaeologist. I am in an archaeology group already.

I want to be an animal carer abroad. I love animals and I have resilience and patience. I have known this since I was 8.

TABLE 1: List of occupational preferences.

Occupational preference	No.
Performing arts (singer/dancer/actor)	72
Professional sport player	49
Teacher	33
Vet	31
Lawyer/barrister	28
Doctor/surgeon	22
Police	23
Animal care	17
Fashion design	15
IT	13
Hairdresser	13
Engineer	10
Armed forces	10
Accountant	10
Artist	9
Chef	9
Personal trainer/Sport coach	9
Child care	7
Nurse	7
Scientist	7
Author	6
Bank manager/Banker	4
Beautician	4
Journalist	4
Pilot	4
Air hostess	3
Archaeologist	3
Architect	3
Interior designer	3
Midwife	3
Zoologist	3
Chemist	2
Fireman	2
Government advisor/Agent	2
Mechanic	2
Photographer	2
Advertising	1
Air traffic control operator	1
Astronaut	1
Business marketing	1
Businessman	1
Child psychologist	1
Conservationist	1
Counsellor	1
Dress Maker	1
Driving instructor	1
Editor	1
Explorer	1
Film director	1

TABLE 1: Continued.

Occupational preference	No.
Joiner	1
Lifeguard	1
Marine biologist	1
News broadcaster	1
Paleontologist	1
Physiotherapist	1
Plumber	1
Politician	1
Restaurant owner	1
Shop assistant	1
Stockbroker	1
Stuntman	1
Zoo keeper	1
Builder	1
Farmer	1
Upholsterer	1
Not sure	62
	610

We classified the pupils' aims into three groups (see Table 2). This was done inductively, looking through the full list of occupational titles then deciding how to classify them. There was little debate, because a three-fold typology worked well and enabled all the expressed aims to be placed. First, there were the professions (law, medicine, politics, etc.). Second, there were what we call "glamour" choices (singer, dancer, sport player, fashion designer, etc.). Finally, there were "other", mostly mid-range occupations such as plumber, fireman, car mechanic, beautician, and so forth.

Unlike Croll et al. [33], we would not describe our pupils as overambitious, unrealistically so. There were almost as many "other" as professional choices (Table 2). The pupils' aspirations appear top-heavy only if glamour and professional choices are combined (which would occur if we used a conventional social class scheme). Also unlike Croll et al. [33], we are reluctant to describe the glamour choices as fantasies. Maybe, very few of the pupils will realise these aims, but the same could apply to most of those (there were many) who were aiming to become doctors, vets, and lawyers. We have no grounds for suggesting that, to the pupils, the glamour choices were more unrealistic or unrealisable than any of the other aims that were expressed. At age 12 there is very little that most children can do to test their suitability for or potential success in most occupations. In these respects, most of the glamour choices are different. The pupils could and were attending singing and dance classes and soccer academies, and they were earning certificates for their achievements. They were being told face-to-face (as well as on TV) that they could succeed if only they were sufficiently determined and persevered.

I want to be an actor. I have known since I was 6.

I want to be a fashion designer because I like textiles. I have wanted to be one since I was 5.

TABLE 2: Occupational aims (in percentages).

	All pupils
Professional	40
Glamour	26
Other	34
<i>N</i>	518

TABLE 3: Occupational aims by region (in percentages).

	Cornwall	Devon	London	Manchester
Professional	35 (<i>n</i> = 31)	32 (<i>n</i> = 27)	42 (<i>n</i> = 66)	40 (<i>n</i> = 75)
Glamour	32 (<i>n</i> = 28)	35 (<i>n</i> = 30)	34 (<i>n</i> = 53)	20 (<i>n</i> = 38)
Other	33 (<i>n</i> = 30)	33 (<i>n</i> = 28)	24 (<i>n</i> = 37)	40 (<i>n</i> = 75)
<i>N</i>	89	85	156	188

I want to be a dancer. I have wanted to for ages, since I was really small.

I want to be a professional dancer. I am very sure because I love dancing and have wanted this since I was 5 years old.

There were differences by region in the pupils' occupational choices (Table 3). There were fewer professional choices in Cornwall and Devon than in London and Manchester. There was no Manchester United effect: fewer pupils chose glamour occupations in Manchester than anywhere else. In London, there were fewer "other" choices. As we proceed, we will note further regional differences. The most plausible explanation is that these somehow reflect the economic and occupational mixes in different regions which send direct signals to children, and indirect signals via the jobs and views expressed by parents, siblings, and other relatives, plus additional adults known personally.

Our measurements of social class are admittedly weak. We could not ask the pupils about their parents' jobs. Had we done so the answers would have been difficult to interpret. Our proxy measures are by postcode (used to divide the pupils into those living in relatively deprived and nondeprived neighbourhoods), and whether or not the pupils were receiving free school meals. The latter measure simply did not predict occupational choices (Table 4). The pupils with postcodes in nondeprived neighbourhoods were slightly the more likely to choose professional and glamour occupations, while those with "deprived" postcodes were slightly the more likely to aim to enter "other" jobs. We therefore concur with Croll et al. [33] that at age 12 there is a weak, if any, association between occupational aims and family social class.

Our evidence shows a clearer, more consistent relationship between the pupils' SAT results and their occupational aims (Table 5). In both English and Maths those placed in Band 5 (well ahead of expectations at their age) were more likely to make professional choices than those placed in Band 4 (just up to expectations). There were too few pupils with scores beneath 4 to justify calculating percentages. This was despite the fact, as would be expected from the

TABLE 4: Occupational aims by indicators of social class (in percentages).

	Free school meals	Other	Deprived area	Other
Professional	41 (n = 54)	39 (n = 137)	38 (n = 81)	42 (n = 86)
Glamour	27 (n = 36)	29 (n = 102)	26 (n = 55)	30 (n = 61)
Other	32 (n = 43)	32 (n = 113)	36 (n = 77)	29 (n = 60)
N	133	352	213	207

TABLE 5: Occupational aims by SAT scores (in percentages).

	English level 5	English level 4	Maths level 5	Maths level 4
Professional	48 (n = 87)	38 (n = 67)	49 (n = 87)	37 (n = 65)
Glamour	23 (n = 42)	33 (n = 58)	23 (n = 40)	34 (n = 60)
Other	29 (n = 53)	29 (n = 50)	27 (n = 48)	29 (n = 52)
N	182	175	175	177

overrepresentation in our sample of schools in deprived areas and pupils from disadvantaged homes, that the proportions who reported achieving at least a Band 4 were beneath the 80% national average. We will see as we proceed that, across the range of outcomes examined, SAT bands were the most frequent and meaningful set of predictors.

One of the tasks that the pupils performed was rating the desirability of (training for) different occupations. Overall, there was the same ranking by every sociodemographic, regional, and educational group. Careers in the professions (doctor, lawyer, politician) were at the top, followed by art, nurses, and sport coaches, with plumbers, builders, and hairdressers at the base (Table 6). The sole variations when pupils were grouped in different ways were that vets were most highly rated in Cornwall and Devon, and boys rated sports coaches more highly than girls while girls rated nurses higher than boys. Also, those with Band 5 SAT scores in English and Maths gave the higher ratings to careers in law and medicine, while those with Band 4 scores gave the higher ratings to plumbers, builders, and hairdressers (Table 7). Studies of the adult population have also and always found that there is a consensual prestige ranking of occupations (e.g., see [35]), and by age 12 children have clearly learnt the rank order. We should note, however, that agreement on how occupations are actually ranked does not necessarily imply agreement on how they ought to be ranked.

The group discussions did not suggest that the pupils had a clear grasp of relative earnings in different occupations. By age 12 the pupils would have been money literate, receiving and spending pocket money, but nothing that was said in the workshops indicated knowledge of pay levels in different jobs, or how such sums might relate to the costs of running a household. The pupils knew that famous sport players and popular entertainers earned “a lot.” They were also likely to justify their own occupational aims (whatever these were) by stating that the jobs were well paid, but nothing that was said indicated even an approximate knowledge of the typical earnings of doctors, builders, or any other group, or

TABLE 6: Success ratings of students/trainees (max = 10).

Law	7.72
Medicine	7.15
Vet	6.63
Politics	6.60
Nurse	6.36
Art	5.25
Sports coach	4.53
Plumber	3.55
Builder	3.52
Hairdresser	2.96

TABLE 7: Success ratings of students/trainees by SAT levels.

	English	Maths
<i>Law</i>		
4	8.03	7.79
5	8.28	8.54
<i>Medicine</i>		
4	7.05	7.04
5	7.59	7.62
<i>Plumber</i>		
4	3.56	3.52
5	3.02	3.10
<i>Builder</i>		
4	3.53	3.39
5	2.91	2.95
<i>Hairdresser</i>		
4	2.99	3.09
5	2.52	2.50

exactly how earnings differed between them. Even so, the pupils knew, and agreed upon, which occupations indicated “success.” On earnings, and on occupational knowledge in general, we need to bear in mind that most adults appear to function competently without detailed and comprehensive occupational knowledge, without knowing what most people actually do in their various jobs, or what they typically earn (see [36]).

Individually and collectively, our pupils’ occupational knowledge was “patchy.” The same limited number of “public” occupations was mentioned time and again in every school that was visited. The pupils knew about doctors, lawyers, teachers, police officers, vets, and hairdressers, and also about the same bunch of celebrities. Particular pupils might mention the jobs of family members, relatives or other people known personally.

I want to join the army because most of my family are in it.

I want to be a doctor because my mum is a nurse.

I would like to be a teacher. My dad was a teacher and my mum is a teaching assistant.

I want to be a policeman because my dad is one.

Huge swathes of employment were rarely if ever mentioned: public administration, finance, hospitality, retail, and manufacturing. The occupation of manager (without any prefix such as in bank manager) was not mentioned, and there were very few references to low-level nonmanual or non skilled manual jobs. Also, there were few mentions of possible careers in information technology.

As they progress through secondary school, the pupils' occupational knowledge may increase, but if so this could be within rather than by filling in the gaps between the patches that characterised their knowledge at age 12. How many adults can map the entire occupational structure? This is a taxing problem even for labour economists and occupational sociologists. There are a variety of ways of comparing and classifying jobs: by business sector, income, and prestige, for example. Studies of beginning workers have always found that detailed knowledge of their own and cognate occupations is built up only after individuals have entered the occupations in question. It is only then that occupational choices, and occupational identities, really firm up (see [37]). Most young workers appear to decide quickly that the jobs that they have entered are "right for me" (see [38]). Occupational socialisation appears akin to civic and political socialisation in so far as children acquire ethnic identities before knowing anything about the histories and characters of the groups to which they know they belong, and may acquire party political loyalties before they know anything about the policies of the parties in question (see [39]). In other words, rather than building-up comprehensive occupational knowledge then revising their own aims, young people's maps of the occupational structure may remain fundamentally unchanged until, or after, they have committed themselves (in the short term at least) to particular occupational futures. Additional knowledge gained during secondary school careers may be about those occupations that were already being considered, and chosen, at age 12, rather than about alternatives of which the 12 year olds were completely unaware or did not know enough about to be able to aim to enter them.

3.2. Educational Aims. The pupils were asked whether they "wanted" to go to university and just over three quarters said "yes." Most of the remainder were unsure; only around 10% gave a definite "no." Croll et al. [33] found that just under 60% of their 12 year olds "planned" to go to university. "Planned" probably indicates a stronger level of commitment than "wanted." "Wanting" can mean anything from "sounds like a good idea" to being "desperately keen." Our respondents' feelings were clearly towards the former end of this continuum. Their wanting to go to university was different from the ways in which they wanted to become doctors, footballers, and so forth. They knew what doctors and footballers did (or thought they knew), but had no equivalent insights into the life of a university student or, as we will see, how to enter a university, or the kinds of employment to which university education normally led. However, for our purposes the key points are that no one asked, "What's that?" and there were no comments that said or implied that, "Universities are not for people like me/us."

As in our own enquiry, only 10% of Croll et al.'s respondents said definitely not: most of those who were not planning to go to university were unsure.

In the past, it may have been the case that large numbers of secondary school pupils had never heard about or considered university. This is clearly no longer the case. The workshop discussions in our research were unequivocal that it was good to go to university. The 12 year olds equated going to university with being successful, making your parents proud, and getting a good job. They were aware that there was a hierarchy of universities with Oxford and Cambridge at the top (so they had decided to go there). Pupils were likely to be aware of, and may even have visited, a local university (which was not as good as Oxbridge). A "top 10" was mentioned, but no one referred to the Russell Group or any of the other consortia.

I want to go because when I go for a job interview, if I have degree on my CV it will look good with the interviewer.

I want to go because it will give you a head start in life and give you a much bigger variety of jobs. Also you could specialise in your favourite subject. I want to go to Oxford.

Yes, because then I will have a better education and more chance of getting the job I want. I also might not like being a child doctor so I will still have the qualifications to be a mid-wife.

The job I want to do requires the skills you get from university.

I want to go because I want to get a diploma in acting and would like to go as soon as possible to an acting school.

I want to be an engineer and you need the university qualifications to do that and to have done a lot of learning.

More girls than boys wanted to go to university (Table 8), but the expected relationships with our proxy measurements of social class were not found. Pupils from deprived neighbourhoods and on free school meals were more likely to "want to go" than their comparator groups. Needless to say, these were not the results that we had expected. Wanting to go to university was unrelated to whether the school was 11–16 or 11–18. It was also unrelated to SAT scores. However, it was related to the pupils' occupational aims. Over 90% of those aiming for professional jobs wanted to go to university, and only 1% said "no." However, around two thirds of those with glamour and "other" occupational choices also wanted to go to university, and only one in ten was definitely against.

Croll et al. [33] found that only just over 60% of their sample planned to stay at school after age 16. We found a difference depending on whether the question was about staying at *school* or staying in *education*. The workshop discussions revealed majority opposition to *having* to stay

TABLE 8: Percentages who wanted to go to university.

Boys	68
Girls	82
Deprived neighbourhood	85
Other	68
Free school meals	79
Other	75
Type of school	
11–16	77
11–18	74
Occupational aim	
Professional	92
Glamour	63
Other	68
SAT bands	
English 4	76
English 5	83
Maths 4	78
Maths 5	79

at school. The same complaints were voiced time-and-again: don't like school, waste of time, boring. Some of the 12 year olds thought that it should be possible to leave at 15 or even 14. However, many of those who wanted to leave school at or before age 16 (if they could) found "college" an acceptable alternative. We infer that there will be substantial numbers of recalcitrants if raising the "participation age" in the UK means enforcing school attendance, and far wider willing compliance if young people have the alternative of college or workplace-based "participation." Views on whether young people *could* or *had to* stay at school after age 16 were related to whether the school was 11–16 or 11–18, but were unrelated to whether individuals themselves *wanted* to stay at school after age 16. In most cases the pupils' intentions were congruent with their stated occupational aims, but there were exceptions who were aiming for university and professional careers but wanted to quit school at 16 because, for example, "staying would slow me down."

Very few of the pupils appeared to have clear ideas about the options that they could face at age 14 and 16. They were most likely to have heard of A-levels and knew that you took these "if you are clever" and "if you are doing well."

If you get good grades at school and do well you do A Level.

A test preparing you for college as certain colleges then only accept you.

The clever teens do A-Levels.

They are a bit harder and you have to have done well before to be able to take them.

Few had heard about Diplomas or the government-planned and backed apprenticeships. When apprenticeships

TABLE 9: Mean scores (max = 10) of influences on "How I think about the future".

Encouragement from parents/carers	8.29
The job I want to get one day	6.59
Teachers' views on what I am good at	6.01
Whether I enjoy school	5.99
How hard I find school work	5.73
What I see on television	5.11
Older siblings: how well they have done at school	4.79
What I read on the internet	4.48
What I read in magazines	3.84
What my friends think of school and how they behave in class	3.70

were discussed the pupils were invariably thinking about traditional apprenticeships: where you have a mentor, watch a skilled worker, follow a role model, do a job and get training. A very small number realised that apprenticeships could be an alternative 14–19 route, which they regarded as a combination of school and college. This level of knowledge appeared to depend on whether the schools had briefed their pupils. The situation was similar with diplomas. The minority who were aware of diplomas thought that they would be similar to the form that 14–19 apprenticeships would take, where you combine school and college. However, the majority were simply unaware of these possible new routes. Most knew where they wanted to be at and beyond 18 plus: at university leading to preferred occupations, but they were unclear, in fact near totally ignorant in most cases, about the routes that they could and would need to take in order to reach their preferred destinations.

3.3. *Influences.* We do not go as far as Croll et al. [33] in claiming that jobs are the main consideration in 12 year olds' thoughts about their futures. Our research design excluded references to future plans for marriage, parenthood and home life. The pupils were asked (from a list) to rate different possible influences on their thinking about the future (Table 9). Parents and carers were the most highly rated influences. "The job I want one day" came second. We agree that jobs are major considerations for young people in making future plans, and in formulating hopes and aims. Jobs were followed by a set of school-related influences (teachers' views, whether I enjoy school, how hard I find school work). Television followed, then siblings, who were ahead of the internet which was just ahead of magazines. Friends were at the bottom of this league table. Of course, the influences would no doubt have been ranked differently if we had asked about tastes in music or clothes to wear for a party. However, in contemplating major life decisions, the digital generation, like its predecessors, appeared to be most influenced by parents, their schools, and the jobs that they hoped to enter.

"The job I want one day" was given a higher ranking in Cornwall and Devon than in either London or Manchester (Table 10). Once again, it appears that local/regional

TABLE 10: Mean influence ratings of “The job I want to get one day”.

<i>Social disadvantage</i>	
Deprived area	5.58
Other	7.50
Free school meals	5.75
Other	6.91
<i>Place</i>	
Cornwall	8.55
Devon	8.97
London	5.82
Manchester	5.07

TABLE 11: Mean influence ratings by SAT scores.

	English 4	English 5	Maths 4	Maths 5
Older brothers and sisters	5.23	4.27	5.42	4.22
What my friends think	3.80	3.43	3.89	3.39
How hard I find school work	5.53	6.17	5.70	6.00
Encouragement from parents/carers	8.18	8.74	8.25	8.75

environments, either directly or indirectly via families, neighbours, schools and peers, were exerting some influence on how the young people thought about their futures. “The job I want one day” was ranked most highly by pupils who were *not* receiving free school meals, and who did *not* live in deprived neighbourhoods. These differences may indicate that those from the less deprived backgrounds would prove the most steadfast in holding on to their ambitions while pupils from more disadvantaged backgrounds would be more likely to relinquish lofty aims if and when they encountered obstacles.

SATs were consistent predictors (see Table 11). It is noteworthy that pupils who had been placed in the 5 band in Maths and English consistently attached greater weight than the 4s to the influence of parents and their schools. The 4s attached greater weight to the influence of friends and siblings. This evidence could indicate an emergent (at age 12) sub-cultural division between higher and lower achievers, the former attaching the greater weight to parents’ and teachers’ opinions and advice, and the latter becoming more peer-oriented and responsive.

4. Discussion

The main outcomes from this project are hypotheses that require interrogation in further research. This could be a panel study, tracking the same pupils’ aims during their progress through secondary education, but in such a project there would be a strong danger of Hawthorne effects, and it would be necessary to wait for five or more years for the results. The preferable alternative, in our view, would be a one-time cross-sectional study of all year groups

from Year 7 to 11 in the same secondary schools, thereby holding constant regional and other environmental and sociodemographic factors.

Current government policies in England are underwritten by a theory alleging that different levels of aspiration are transmitted to children from different social classes through their families and neighbourhoods and that an outcome is social class differences in ambitions which lead to differences in attainment in secondary school, different participation rates in higher education (19% in the bottom quintile, grouped by postcodes, against 57% in the top quintile in 2009, see [40]), and hence very different employment prospects. Attempts to intervene in this cycle include enlarged and strengthened careers information, advice, and guidance in primary schools then throughout the secondary school years, and university coordinated AimHigher programmes which endeavour to generate more applications among young people from underrepresented groups. An alternative theory (or model of the status attainment process) which is consistent with the evidence from our research, and also from the similar study by Croll and his associates [33], starts with weak (at best) social class differences in pupils’ educational and occupational ambitions at age 12. In other words, at that age, pupils from all social classes are more or less equally likely to want to go to university, and eventually to enter professional and “other” kinds of employment.

In the research reported above, SAT bands predicted pupil’s occupational aims, their views on the extent to which entering different kinds of occupations counted as “success,” and who and what the pupils were influenced by. Primary school SATs are an infrequent and fairly gentle indicator (to pupils) of how well they are doing compared with peers. During secondary education such indicators become more frequent and stronger, usually ending up with setting from age 14 or even before. Social class is known to predict performances in secondary education (as well as during infancy and at primary school), and in our alternative theory this is how social class and pupils’ aspirations become related. Our evidence shows that pupils from deprived families and neighbourhoods attached less weight than other pupils to “the job I want in the future” in influencing their forward thinking. Hence, during secondary education pupils (and parents) in middle class homes might well prove the more steadfast in holding on to high aspirations in the face of modest performances at school. Middle class pupils who were aiming for “other” jobs at age 12, who prove capable of doing better, may be persuaded to raise their sights. Our evidence also found that SAT bands were related to the strength of other influences on pupils’ thinking about their futures, parents’ and teachers’ views on the one side, and those of siblings and friends on the other. Working class low achievers in secondary school may attach more and more importance to the opinions of friends and siblings rather than parents and especially teachers, leading to a split between pro- and antischool subcultures.

Needless to say, identifying education as a causal agent in the intergenerational reproduction of socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages, is anything but original (see [41–43]). The currently controversial issues concern exactly

when and how educational processes trigger class disparities. Our alternative model points to the secondary school years when (social class-related) disparities in educational progress become normal daily experiences of school life. Careers education and advice in primary schools, which has been strengthened in recent years, may have been at least partly responsible for widening horizons and encouraging pupils from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds to aim higher. Advice, information, and guidance, whatever their form and frequency, may find it far more difficult to sustain these outcomes during secondary schooling, as currently organised in the UK. Also, as recognised in the final report of the government-appointed Panel on Fair Access to the Professions [44], information and guidance will need to be accompanied by changes in opportunities that are structured by the recruitment practices of higher education institutions and employers.

If endorsed in further research, the implication of our alternative model will be that, rather than a potential cure, at present UK secondary education is largely responsible for translating social class origins into class-related aspirations and outcomes at ages 14–16 and beyond. We are not disputing that there will be much circumspection and compromise [28], and changes in young people's ambitions during the secondary school years, and that at age 18–20 few may occupy the positions that they were aiming for at age 12. The aims of the 12 year old may or may not predict their future behaviour (they surely will, to some extent), but irrespective of this, these aims are of theoretical importance and policy relevance, capable of endorsing or challenging the thinking that underlies the accounts of the intergenerational transmission of class positions on which a range of current interventions are based.

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