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**Preparing for life beyond school  
A capability approach to post-16 education.**

Wimborne, Oliver James

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**Preparing for life beyond school:  
a capability approach to post-16 education.**

Oliver James Wimborne

PhD Education Research

**King's College London**

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## Summary

The aim of this thesis is to explore how post-16 education prepares young people for life beyond school. It does this by drawing on the work of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum to develop a capability approach to education, which pays specific attention to the freedoms and achievements that young people secure through their education. The thesis argues that post-16 education is uniquely well-positioned to support capability development for individual students and that under the current policy framework this aspect of education or schooling is underappreciated.

This thesis draws conclusions from an empirical study carried out at an inner-city London academy sixth-form. As part of this study, 20 students participated in a series of interviews that explored their day-to-day school experiences and their reasons for valuing particular 'beings and doings' related to their post-16 education. These interviews are analysed with use of Grounded Theory and evaluated with use of a capability approach framework. The discussion focuses on how each of these student narratives reveal the ways in which the post-16 setting can serve to enhance and diminish the quality of life of students: making available or withholding resources and opportunities for capability development.

The discussion of the thesis presents the ideal form of post-16 education as an autonomy-building process, in which young people are encouraged to be agents in the post-16 setting. On this account, the post-16 setting acts as a site for 'identity work' in which multiple forms of agency are made possible in order for students to explore what kinds of life they value. A line of argument is developed that presents capability development as consisting of deep practices of agency, which are dependent upon the quality of freedom and opportunities available to them. Here, emphasis is placed on the need for schools to be highly individuating institutions, where the development of young people can take place in social-ecological niches. In this regard, there are important structural forces created by the school that condition the kinds of agency students might practice and can therefore advantage or disadvantage student capability development. Beyond this, an account of internal capabilities is offered, arguing that these furnish students with a relational view of the world: assisting them with determining where they stand in relation to their past, their community, their present commitments, their imagined future, and the things they have reason to value. A 'good post-16 education', therefore, is one in which individual students are able to develop their internal capabilities in an environment that recognises individuality and autonomy as fundamental to preparing young people for life beyond school.

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## Introduction

‘We imagined ourselves as being kept in some kind of holding pen, waiting to be released into our lives. And when that moment came, our lives – and time itself – would speed up. How were we to know that our lives had in any case begun, that some advantage already gained, some damage already inflicted? Also, that our release would only be into a larger holding pen.’

Julian Barnes. *The Sense of An Ending*. (2012, p.14)

### 1.1 Preparing for life beyond school

When we urge young people to remain in school it is important to justify why we think this is important. Thinking critically about and reflecting upon the aims and values of education is a vital exercise for ensuring it remains alive to the needs of young people and to wider society. Not least because, for many students, the experience of school is akin to being ‘kept in some kind of holding pen’. As the English system raises the participation age for education and training to 18, it is important we justify this decision.

In spite of the anticipation to be ‘released’ from school, our educational experience often remains the most important phase of our life. The effect of our schooling, or more broadly our educational experience, is sustained well into adulthood. During this time, as Barnes’s narrator rightly notes, critical and defining moments are present: damage is inflicted, advantage is gained. School has a powerful capacity to shape our sense of self, our concept of community, and the way in which we choose to carve out our place in society. Indeed, the purpose of this study is to concentrate on exactly these aspects of school life.

The social context of schooling has transformed dramatically in recent years and it is now unlikely that young people will pursue a single career trajectory, remain living or working in one place, or settle into ‘adulthood’ soon after leaving school, as was once the case. In this shifting context, old educational ideals are challenged by changing social expectations. Dilemmas are pressed upon young people: aged 16, they are right to question whether academic study or employment will have greater value for them, if good grades or work experience will benefit them more in the long run, and whether their life as a student will correspond to a life they value. Not only students but also wider society remain uncertain about what might lead to a successful or flourishing life in the future. As the social landscape continues to change, and ways of ‘succeeding’ beyond school continue to variegate, we need to reconsider why young people should remain in school and away from the wider world we are supposedly preparing them for.

At the heart of this study is a focus on how we prepare students for life beyond school. It is encapsulated in the concept of student ‘preparedness’, which is not a much-used term in education research. The aim is to investigate how schools might develop a capability in young people to live a worthwhile later-life. It does this by exploring the everyday ethics of education: the ways in which advantage is gained and

disadvantage inflicted on young people. The study hopes to intensify discussions about post-16 participation during a period when becomes it compulsory for 16-18 year olds to remain in full-time education or training. In doing so, it hopes to explore why young people should stay in school and what they might hope to gain from their time in the 'holding pen'.

### **1.1.1. Youth development**

In *A Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare's Shepherd laments:

I would there were no age between sixteen and three-and-twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancients, stealing, fighting. (2010 3.3.58-71, p.370)

This sentiment evokes an understanding of youth development that can be traced, in social research, to the early work of Granville Stanley Hall (1904). Hall characterises adolescence as a phase of 'some ancient storm and stress when old moorings were broken and a higher level attained' (n/p). By the 1950s, research into youth development challenged this 'storm and stress' model, arguing that young people are typically governed by less violent passions and, in general, enjoy more positive relationships with their parents, are reasonably happy, and follow social norms and rules (Westley and Elkin 1957; Offer 1969; Offer 1975; Coleman 1978). Despite this, the picture of young people engaged in 'wronging the ancients' has continued to influence the popular imagination (Arnett, 1999, 2006b).

More recent research has emphasised the elements of personal exploration that take place in youth development. In particular, the work of Erik Erikson highlights the ways in which young lives are marked by a 'search for something and somebody to be true to' (1988, p.3). He describes the youth phase as one marked by 'fidelity' (1968) where it is governed by themes of meaning and authenticity in the hope of reconciling the self with society. As the needs and norms of society have continued to change, so too have the demands of youth development. Current research emphasises that this process is no longer a linear, simple and fixed trajectory, but rather consists of transitions into adulthood that are multi-dimensional, complex and emergent processes (see: Furlong et al 2011; Côté et al 2008; Wyn et al 2012; Hodgson et al 2013; Zarrett et al 2006; Wyn et al 2002).

Jeffery Arnett has proposed a new life-phase to reflect this change that he terms 'emerging adulthood' (2000). Whilst this has been widely debated (Bynner 2005; Arnett 2006a; Côté and Bynner 2008), it has contributed to a growing literature that acknowledges the phenomenon that transitions to adulthood are becoming increasingly protracted in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Clark 2007; Beaujot 2006). Arnett proposes that during this phase, young people experiment with different possible futures, experience frequent changes or disruptions, feel 'in-between' the stages of childhood and adulthood, enjoy more freedom and less social control than they will do as adults, and have higher levels of optimism about their future life course

(Arnett 2006a). Whether or not we are inclined to accept Arnett's position that a new phase in the life-course has arisen, and many are not (Bynner 2005), we might still recognise that the changing patterns of youth development pose particular challenges for 21<sup>st</sup> century education policy and practice.

Indeed, these changes in youth development processes have already been posed as challenges in education, where research finds that late adolescents increasingly take on an active role in their own development (Zarrett and Eccles 2006; Eccles and Gootman 2002). Here, young people are tasked with: managing increasingly demanding roles; identifying their own strengths; finding meaning and purpose in the roles they take on; and assessing the need for, and making, necessary life changes. These challenges are particularly relevant to participation in education. Zarrett and Eccles assert that whilst for some youth 'adolescence continues to be a time for continued educational growth and success' for others it can be marked by 'major declines in academic performance, interest, and self-perceptions of ability and heightened risk for academic failure or dropout' (2006, p.16): concerns taken up in Chapter 5. In part, these outcomes can be attributed to a mismatch between the school environment and the student because 'when school environments do not meet adolescents' changing needs, their academic motivation, interest, and performance will decline' (p.17): a topic explored in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7.

There is a strong resonance between the claims of Zarrett and Eccles, in the US, and the work of Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours, in the UK, who have explored the challenges 16-19 year olds face in English education (2013). Specifically, these authors identify 6 key areas of concern for A-level student success in post-16 education (p.27-28):

1. The AS cliff-face: where the first year of A-Level study is a steep learning curve and students experience a shock because they are not well prepared in terms of knowledge, skills or attitudes to study.
2. Part-time employment: which may clash with the need to study outside of lessons and manage a more demanding curriculum. Moreover, the authors suggest that employment 'may appear more appealing than study when jobs are scarce and learners' successful attainment is not assured' (p.27).
3. Lack of support for marginal learners: where a lack of focus during inspection and curricula has inhibited and de-incentivised developing good practice in teaching at the post-16 level in schools.
4. Limited subject choice: where schools are unable to provide the various subjects that students would ideally like to take and, in conjunction with the steep learning gradient, quickly become disillusioned with their AS courses.
5. Relatively poor careers guidance: where students in the post-16 phase who struggle with academic pathways are left unsure about alternative pathways compared to the pre-16 phase.

6. AS cull: where pressures on schools to maintain high levels of attainment incentivises ‘de-enrolling’ low performing students mid-way through their courses or offering students an entirely new programme of study, which may represent a scaling down of student ambitions.

These concerns highlight a tension between the youth development process for 16-19 year olds, outlined above, and the educational settings they encounter. Specifically, each of these concerns speaks to the highly performative nature of post-16 education in England and the ‘high stakes’ environment that young people endure. We might ask whether policy reforms have attempted to ameliorate these issues, for instance by: increasing student funding or providing students, who would otherwise need to work, with a stipend; taking a critical interest in the quality of transitions into and out of post-16 education including the curricula support and careers guidance young people receive; or incentivising schools to resource and deliver higher quality learning. Unfortunately, despite the on-going pace of reform to the post-16 sector, this has not been the case.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Hodgson and Spours offer a relatively modest account of the difficulties young people face in the post-16 phase. The discussion of this thesis touches upon the challenges of developing purposeful relationships with staff, taking on greater responsibilities in the household, finding one’s place in a new school environment, and so on; all of which contribute to the experience of post-16 life and the cluster of disadvantages that some young people will encounter. This might be as well, if we supposed that such challenges stimulated a kind of growth in young people that better prepared them for life after school. However, as this thesis sets out to explore, it is highly unlikely that this is the case. In part, the failure of policy to address the changes in youth development, on the one hand, and the institutional failures, on the other hand, stem from a more basic failure to consider what the aims and values of education ought to be in England.

### **1.1.2. The aims and values of education**

The aims and values of education have long-been a topic of discussion in academia (White 1990; Marples 1999; Noddings 2008; Flinders and Thorton 2008). Whilst this has provided illuminating discussion in the philosophy of education, it has had relatively little traction in policymaking. In particular, we have never really established what post-16 education in England is *for*. In part, there is a wider concern at play where the nature of policymaking is often a ‘messy, contradictory, confused and unclear’ process (Ball 2013, p.9). Post-16 education has experienced a history where: ‘some policies were abandoned, while others were from the start internally inconsistent or flatly contradicted existing policies’ (Coffield 2013, p.2). Secondly, there is also a concern that economic aims and values not only compete with, but ride roughshod over, educational ones (Barry et.al. 1993; Gleeson and Husbands 2001; Grek 2009; Ball 2016). This is manifest in both educational processes, where an increasingly managerial environment has imported corporate values, and the measurement of educational outcomes, where achievements are

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<sup>1</sup> There is a debate, here, about whether recent reforms by Ofsted (2014) and the Department for Education have addressed these issues (DfE 2014a, b, c; 2011). In Chapter 2, a case is made that the reform of bursaries, accountability measures and A-level curricula has made little change to provision in practice.

primarily credentials for employability (see: Barker 2008; Wright 2011). A third concern relates to the short-termism that governs education policymaking where short political cycles and the quick turnover of policymakers leads to ‘policy amnesia’ (Higham and Yeomans 2007). As a result of this, the English education system, particularly at post-16, has been prone to repeat its mistakes as a result of its inability to learn from the past.

This discussion is taken up in Chapter 2, where a model of ‘policy sociology’ is applied to the historical policy trajectory of post-16 education. The aim of this discussion is to highlight a ‘policy myopia’ that has governed post-16 aims and values, where a focus on human capital precludes an interest in human development. In fact, the argument presented holds that post-16 aims and values have never really existed: instead, increasingly a brand of neo-liberal economics has come to govern thinking about the purpose of education. The discussion argues that the result of this is that concerns connected to human development, and youth development in particular, have become marginalised or lost from view. The effect of this, and the subject of this study, is that the ‘preparedness’ that young people have for life beyond school is greatly diminished. In part, this can be recognised in the challenges already facing post-16 education, discussed above.

### 1.1.3. Social pathology

Clemens Sedmak (2010) notes that a social pathology could be characterised as:

a disruption of the social cohesion that makes it *systematically* impossible for individual members or groupings within a framework of a community to lead a successful or ‘flourishing’ life and/or as a disruption that makes it impossible as such for a community to exist *long-term*.<sup>2</sup> (p.7)<sup>2</sup>

We might argue that the trajectory of post-16 policy reform in England suffers from a pathological character. Indeed, Chapter 2 argues this policy-pathology is symptomatic of Sahlberg’s GERM (Global Education Reform Movement) thesis (2011), Hamilton’s pathology of reform thesis (1997), and Levin’s epidemic-of-reform thesis (1998). Critical to this view, we must accept that participating in post-16 education makes it difficult for young people to lead ‘flourishing’ lives. This is not to say that this is impossible, per se, but rather that many young people are disadvantaged by a myopic policy context. These young people experience an ‘unequal distribution of possibilities to shape (their) life’ that is ‘system-generating’ (Sedmak 2010, p.8). In other words, they gain no discernible benefit from their time in post-16 education that would enable them to live a life they value.

In this respect, the pathology of post-16 policy results in forms of warehousing young people, where they spend time in a ‘holding pen’ with no distinct sense of purpose. This ‘must be viewed as a social disease’ in the practical sense ‘when resources are squandered in such a manner as that human misery and social affliction is caused and simultaneously can be shown as being a system maintaining strategy’ (Sedmak

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this study, the use of emphasis and parenthesis in quotations is original unless stated.

2010, p.10). Indeed, the sense in which warehousing is a system maintaining strategy is explored in Chapter 2, where successive reforms have resisted opportunities for change. Moreover, warehousing is a social disease in an ethical sense because ‘when inequality is cultivated...an appreciation for wastage is produced, an appreciation for frustration that borders on the tragic’ (Sedmak 2010, p.14). The frustration here is the wastage of potential in young people who, in another possible world, would have thrived after and as a result of their education.<sup>3</sup>

The challenge, here, is that under the current policy framework, a ‘system maintaining strategy’ is in place because schools can be deemed successful for ensuring students leave with a number of qualifications, yet those qualifications have been shown to offer little in the way of reducing social reproduction patterns, economic inequality, and social fragmentation.<sup>4</sup> All too often, school-leavers are ‘confronted with the gulf between “having” and “desiring” which Albert Camus described as “absurd”...and interpreted... as the contradiction between the cry of the people and the silence of the world’ (Sedmak 2010, p.28). Efforts to raise aspirations and attainment are no doubt increasing the ‘desiring’ of school-leavers to lead flourishing lives, but they do not necessarily correspond to the conversion of ‘having’ a flourishing life (see: Reynolds et al. 2003). The present policy context, that hopes to ameliorate the issue of preparedness through academic or vocational achievement alone, is challenged by recurrent empirical facts such as ‘persistent gender wage gaps (despite growing levels of education of women), the over-education phenomenon (high skilled workers who are overqualified for their roles), and the lack of opportunities for young educated generations’ (Chiappero-Martinetti and Sabadash 2010, p.27).

#### **1.1.4. Pointless waiting and painful silence**

‘The orders have not been changed,’ said the lamplighter. ‘That is the tragedy! From year to year the planet has turned more rapidly and the orders have not been changed!’

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: *The Little Prince*. (1995, p.29).

The discussion above has sought to connect three ideas. Firstly, that the life of young people has changed dramatically over the last twenty years or so: ‘the planet has turned.’ Secondly, education policy has not responded to these changes or sought to re-consider what the aims and values of a post-16 phase ought to be: ‘the orders have not been changed.’ Lastly, this has created a pathological policy environment wherein young people are participating in a post-16 education that is not systematically invested in their wellbeing: and ‘that is the tragedy!’ In this respect, many but not all young people are like Saint-Exupéry’s

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<sup>3</sup> Space cannot be afforded here to the useful heuristic device of ‘possible worlds’ often employed in philosophical argument. Thinking of ‘possible worlds’ when considering student capacities illuminates the tragic aspect of ineffective schooling. For an overview of the theory of ‘possible worlds’, see: Divers, J. (2002).

<sup>4</sup> For example, research has suggested that family heritage and ethnicity can be resistant to increased educational levels and that social disadvantage can persist for generations (Machin 2009). Or that further schooling may relieve aspects of absolute poverty for disadvantaged groups but that it does not seem able to relieve relative measures of social inequality, except perhaps for gender inequalities (Hannum and Buchmann 2003).

Lamplighter: experiencing a condition of pointless waiting in post-16 education until they can move on with their lives.

Indeed, Sedmak has highlighted, elsewhere, that pointless waiting can be ‘reconstructed as an absurdity’ (2016c, p.418) and this closely resembles the form of warehousing post-16 education offers. In this sense, pointless waiting involves A waiting for X, where X never arrives. To apply this to our discussion: a post-16 student is waiting for resources and opportunities that will support a flourishing life, but those resources and opportunities are not made available. As above, the student is faced with ‘the silence of the world’ around them, which constitutes a form of ‘painful silence’ (Macrius 1984). The tragic aspect of this form of living can be highlighted with reference to Wittgenstein’s distinction between the ‘rules of’ and the ‘point of’ a game (2009). Here, young people are obliged to follow the rules of the game (participating in post-16 education) without there necessarily being a point to it (a form of life they have reason to value). A point worth re-emphasising is that the argument set out here is not that *all* students will be subject to pointless waiting or painful silence. Indeed, many young people might find meaning and value in their time in post-16. Rather, the argument is that those who do find this meaning do so contingently or by luck, not by intention: the system is not *designed* to confer the kinds of advantages that we might think about when we consider the development of young people. It is in this tragic space that we might begin to think about the ways in which some ‘advantage is gained’ and some ‘damage inflicted’ in the lives of 16-19 year olds.

## **1.2. Capability for life beyond school**

Moving on from this critical assessment of post-16 policy and practice, the direction in which this thesis moves is towards adopting a capability approach to post-16 education. The features of this approach to social justice are outlined in Chapter 2, and it provides a lens for analysis across the study as a whole. In general, this approach encourages us to think about whether or not social arrangements enable individuals to live a life that they have reason to value. In this sense, it protects us against the tragedies of social pathology.

There is an inherent difficulty with achieving this in practice, especially when thinking about how to support 16-19 year olds during their schooling. As Andrew Halls, a school Head, suggests:

A good head of sixth form has a miraculous rapport with 16-18 year olds, able to keep good discipline without causing alienation, setting standards, without allowing often highly sophisticated and ambitious young men and women to feel patronized or unnecessarily chivvied. (2013 p.91)

From this, we can summarise that the ‘lived experience’ of post-16 education requires ‘miraculous’ work in order to support the development of students. This goes beyond thinking about what young people should achieve at the end of their education and encourages us to think in terms of the process of their

education as a whole. The forms of interaction students have, the sense of belonging they develop, the aspirations they form, and the confidence with which they leave school with an understanding of the kinds of life they hope to live: these are the kinds of concerns that are being pursued here.

The capability approach is used in this study to investigate how post-16 education supports capability development in students. In particular, it uses the notion of ‘preparedness’ to talk about the importance of treating young people as an ‘ends rather than a means’: in other words, improving their wellbeing by enlarging their capabilities *during* their education as a form of preparing them for life after school. This contrasts with thinking about their education in terms of instrumental value, where our interest is in what they will achieve *in place of* their education once it is finished.

### **1.2.1. As a theoretical perspective**

The capability approach offers a rich and complex theoretical framework for understanding wellbeing (Robeyns 2003; Walker 2005; Terzi 2007; Unterhalter 2009; Hart 2012). At its core is a view of human life and development as series of transactions. Every moment of our lives we are involved in transactions of some sort where we expend resources or take up opportunities in order to achieve something we value. These transactions range from the very small, such as how we might travel to a local shop or make our dinner, or they might be big, such as graduating from university or securing employment. In every case, what we do requires weighing up the resources we have available against our situation and what we would like or are willing to achieve. Those who are disadvantaged will have fewer resources to use, fewer opportunities to make use of, or a smaller range of possible achievements they can value. Being in a disadvantaged situation entails that you might need more resources than others to achieve the same kinds of things (a middle-aged man in a wheel-chair may require more resources to move around than an able-bodied child) or have fewer opportunities to achieve the same kinds of things (a person who is not in possession of an email address will have fewer opportunities to find employment than a person who is). The aim of the capability approach is to make sense of our wellbeing in terms of what we are actually able to do in our lives, rather than assumed to be able to do.

The capability approach is widely used in development studies to investigate cases of extreme poverty and inequality instead of traditional measures, such as GDP indexes (Sen 1992, 1999, Stiglitz et.al. 2010). It might be contended, therefore, that an application to post-16 education in England is misplaced. However, the strongest argument for adopting the approach is that it encourages us to think about the complexities of human life as it is actually lived and there is no good reason to suppose this is not of interest when investigating the lives of 16-19 year olds anywhere in the world. A useful example, found regularly in the writings of Amartya Sen, who first proposed the capability approach, is the ‘capability to go about in public without shame’ (Sen 1999; 2000b; 2009). For Sen, this capability is both basic and complex. It is basic because all people are entitled to it no matter what, but it is complex because the

conditions needed to secure this capability are relative to the societies in which we live. To illustrate, Sen quotes (1999, p.73-74) from Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*:

by necessities I understand not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the customs of the country renders it indecent for credible people, even of the lowest order to be without. A linen shirt, for example, is strictly speaking, not a necessity of life. The Greeks and Romans lived, I suppose, very comfortably though they had no linen. But in the present times, through the greater parts of Europe, a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty which, it is presumed, nobody can well fall into without extreme bad conduct. Custom, in the same manner, has rendered leather shoes a necessity of life in England. The poorest creditable person of either sex would be ashamed to appear in public without them. (1976, p.469-471)

The critical point here is that a social analysis that ignores the personal and social context in which commodities are used is incomplete. The question is not 'what do people have' (and post-16 students might have more than most, in an absolute sense), but 'what are people able to do with what they have.' And this question is as relevant to an inner-city student in London as it is to a homeless man in Mumbai, if perhaps less urgent. In either case we are interested in the real opportunities that people have to live a life they value, and everything else in our analysis is understood in relation to this. In this light, Sen argues, the focus has to be 'on the freedoms generated by commodities, rather than on the commodities seen on their own' (1999, p.74).

### **1.2.2. 'What do I want to be and do?'**

Central to an application of the capability approach, therefore, is an interest in what individuals want to be and do in their life. To understand the opportunities that they have, we need to consider the kinds of goals, aspirations or achievements that they value. In this sense, when we think about the quality of post-16 education we are interested what young people really want to be and do with their lives, and the degree to which their education gives them an opportunity to do this.

A difficulty here, however, is that if our analysis only focuses on the extent to which individuals achieve things that they value, then we lose sight of the conditions under which they achieve those things: the role that they play in the process. When we assess achievements, we are also interested in the agency of individuals to bring about those achievements. In Chapter 5, the discussion focuses on the agency of students and the question of 'what do they want to be and do.' One of the central challenges in this study is making sense of the uncertainty that is followed when you ask a 16 year old this question (see Chapter 4). Yet, the study does not argue that there are specific 'beings and doings', or achievements, that all students ought to aspire to. Rather, it posits a framework of identity practices as a way to understand the agency of 16-19 year olds, where their agency is bound up with the processes of youth development.

Here, 'preparedness' in young people consists in enabling them to explore and expand their capabilities for identity formation in order to come to know what they want to be and do in the future. A critical point in this analysis is that these identity practices, as forms of agency, need to take place under the condition of freedom. In other words, we are interested in the freedom that young people have to make use of resources and opportunities around them to do the kinds of things they hope to do and become the kind of person they hope to be.

Consequently, Chapter 4 speaks to the socialization pressures that young people face in modern societies that problematize positive identity formation and connect to the changing context of youth development processes, discussed above. For example, James Côté (1996) discusses the issues of 'immediate-gratification orientation through consumption of mass media, music, technology, and drugs, which may enhance one's self as deemed appropriate by others' (p.417). A concern for Côté is the 'nurturance of a mass of consumers who have little concern regarding what the future holds and who are receptive of shifting trends and values' (p.422). A case can be made that the resources needed for identity formation are most endangered in urban-schools (Murty 2012), where there is a paucity of kindness in educational settings (Rowland 2009), and this is explored in Chapter 6. The connection to the school environment is important here because the 'resources of identity dry up when people have no space for self-regeneration and self-development' (Sedmak 2009 p.21). For students therefore, 'life is not then seen as a "site for building", upon which, brick by brick, building comes into being, but as a nomadic, unprotected existence in which the temporarily erected tent must be defended' (p.21-22). As such, this study supports Côté's prescription that young people are supported to become the 'architect of their biography' by developing their identity capital (1996; 2008). The discussion in Chapter 5 can be viewed as an attempt to bring together the capability approach's interest in individual agency and this vision of young people as agents in their own biography and who can accumulate such capital.

### **1.2.3. The look of freedom**

When we think about the freedom people have to make use of resources and opportunities, an important aspect of our analysis involves understanding the environment in which they live. This is to say that whilst we are interested in the potential for agency that individuals have, we are also interested in how this agency is structured by the physical and social conditions surrounding them. The capability that a student has to make use of their education depends, in part, on the kinds of people, places and things they have access to. Students who live in close proximity to a range of businesses offering work experiences, who have teachers who take a moral interest in their development, and who have access to public transport to attend public lectures or university open days, enjoy environmental advantages in which they can make use of particular freedoms that other students might not.

With this in mind, Chapter 6 focuses on the features of the post-16 environment that support capability development. In particular, it argues for the ‘look of freedom’: the perceptible elements of a school environment that encourage the agency of students.<sup>5</sup> These elements include the kinds of conversations that take place, the achievements that are celebrated, and the types of extra-curricular activity that are offered. This argument is supported with an account of the social ecology of post-16 education, where different forms of agency are made possible during the transition into and out of the post-16 setting. A point of view is advanced which holds that young people thrive in environments in which they can enact transformative forms of agency in their school life that correspond to expanded forms of agency in their wider lives. This attempts to move beyond thinking about the life of students in terms of their school experience, and connect it the broader context of their development.

Indeed, this relates to a broader discussion about the relationship between agency and structure in social life. Max Weber famously wrote about the ‘iron cage’ of modern society,<sup>6</sup> where our capacity to actively shape our lives was necessarily constrained by the passive but rational process of bureaucracy and administration. As active, social beings, we are liable to find such administrative processes jarring. The effects of this have been connected with forms of humiliation and indignity that reduce the capability of individuals to live a worthwhile life (Margolit 1998). These forms of humiliation are present in modern day social institutions, such as schools, where ‘bureaucracy gives us a new way of...treating people as numbers or as application forms’ (p.218), which is, in turn, ‘an expression of lack of recognition that injures one’s self-esteem’ (p.219). Indeed, if we take seriously the notion that the post-16 environment suffers from social pathological qualities, it is possible to recognise everyday aspects of school life as systemically injuring the dignity of young people in such a way. This is to say, the ‘holding pen’ relies on the construction of social structures that inhibit the possible agency and freedom of students. Separately, Marilyn Frye wrote of the metaphor of the birdcage, which brings us closer to an understanding of how the everyday processes of school life can reduce a young person’s wellbeing:

Consider a birdcage. If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. (You would) be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere... It is only when you step back... and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere...It is perfectly obvious that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon. (1983 p.4).

#### **1.2.4. An inner-situation**

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<sup>5</sup> The notion of a ‘look of freedom’ is developed in this chapter with reference to Jeremy Waldron’s discussion on the ‘look of hate’ in societies (2010).

<sup>6</sup> A term coined by Talcott Parsons, in his translation of Weber’s work. See: Weber, M. (1958).

A final consideration, when applying the capability approach is to think carefully about how the notion of wellbeing is constructed. A case has been made for the importance of agency and freedom in order to achieve things, and this is constitutive of wellbeing. However, there is a debate within the capability literature about whether wellbeing consists in achieving specific goals. From a methodological point of view, this asks whether there is a need to prescribe a particular list of capabilities as *essential* ingredients for a good life (Claassen 2011). In other words, whether we ought to stipulate the kinds of achievements that individuals ought to value. Martha Nussbaum, for example, has argued that there are particularly human functions that all individuals ought to be able to exercise in order to live a truly human life (2000; 2011). Others, most notably Amartya Sen, have argued that the identification of particular capabilities ought to be left to the individuals about whom we are concerned: it is up to them, through public deliberation, to decide upon what wellbeing ought to consist of (2004; 2009). Both positions have come in for criticism from scholars who believe that the whole notion that specific achievements ought to be pursued by people, however defined, is inherently paternalistic (Claassen 2014).

This study does not neatly correspond to either Nussbaum or Sen's position. It takes an approach that is focused on exploring the inner-situation of individual students. The reason for this is, partially, an outcome of Marilyn Frye's view of the birdcage, above. This view has a methodological implication which is that it asks us to focus on the everyday experiences of the individual person, rather than experiences of everyone in a single context. This is to say, we can learn something about the experience of education from the single narrative of a student that we cannot learn from studying a behaviour policy or curriculum, for instance. Adopting a position like this, in the present study, entails that wellbeing is approached by asking what would make a life go well for this *individual* person. In doing so, it argues that there is a particular 'inner-situation' to post-16 education (Chapter 5) that encounters the school environment (Chapter 6) and negotiates it (Chapter 7). It is this last aspect, negotiating the school environment, where arguments related to wellbeing are made. Specifically, the argument in Chapter 7 is that there are particular forms of negotiation or participation that can make a student's life go well. In this regard, an understanding of wellbeing is reached through deliberation with student participants (as Sen might encourage), which produces a universalisable list of capabilities that are constitutive of wellbeing (as Nussbaum might have it) within the post-16 context.

Focusing on the inner-situation of students from a capability approach has taken this study close to the notion of 'character education', which has become popular in education studies (Wynne 1986; Lickona 1991; Levy 2000), and traceable to the influence of John Dewey (1944). Briefly put, character education holds that (i) there is such a thing as character, and (ii) education can develop specific virtues in student character. Often, (ii) takes a deliberative approach where 'character lessons' or programmes are followed with the aim of teaching good character. Whilst it is outside of the scope of this thesis to consider the value of these programmes, a general point of view is advanced that is not properly compatible with

character education. This view is that we cannot hope to teach ‘virtues’ or ‘character’ in any meaningful sense. In part, Chapter 7 presents a view that resonates with the thought of Christopher Hamilton:

Our inner life is in a state of permanent flux, adjustment, readjustment, enquiry, attraction, repulsion, curiosity, solicitude, defiance, acceptance, and so on to all that we find about us. Most of these are left unaddressed by any talk of character.’ (2001, p.12)

Instead, it develops a position in which *we can* develop the internal capabilities of young people so that they are able to make particular kinds of choices or exhibit particular character traits to make their life go better. This is not the same as arguing that we can teach them character. Rather, the argument is that we can support the development of their inner-situation, but this is a process of internal agency and one which is liable to permanent flux, adjustments, and confusions. Even if we cede that there is some form of ‘internal order’ to student’s inner-situation, this chapter highlights that we must also accommodate the influences of apathy, uncertainty, boredom and other traits that might not ordinarily be considered character-traits, less so virtues, yet are still a force on student agency. What Chapter 7 does offer, therefore, is an analysis of internal capabilities that make-up student participation and are constitutive of wellbeing, and which can be cultivated in a way that prepares young people for life beyond school.

### **1.3. Summary**

This introduction has touched on three main points of consideration. Firstly, it has highlighted that there have been significant changes in life-course trajectories and patterns over the last twenty or so years. The implication here is that preparing young people for life beyond school requires responding to these changes, particularly in the way we think about the purpose and value of their education. Secondly, it has suggested that education policy, particularly at the post-16 phase, has not responded to these changes. There are both practical and ethical concerns about the under-preparedness of post-16 students as they complete their studies. Their time during this phase is governed by a policy environment that marginalises an interest in their human development, focusing instead on their capacity as human capital. Thirdly, this introduction has supported the use of a human development framework, specifically the capability approach, as an alternative way to think about the aims and values of post-16 education. The use of this approach encourages us to take seriously what young people have to value in life beyond school, and to consider the role of freedom and autonomy in the school environment. Moreover, the capability approach directs us to think about how individuals form reasons to value particular ‘beings and doings’, which in turn directs us to thinking about the inner-situation of young people during their education.

#### **1.3.1. Presentation of thesis**

All of these concerns form the basis of discussion in this study, which is organised in the following way. Chapter 2 sets out an account of the historical policy trajectory of post-16 education. Chapter 3 provides an outline of the capability approach and its application to education. Chapter 4 offers a project

methodology and describes the empirical operationalisation of the capability approach in this study. Chapter 5, 6, and 7 each present an analysis of the key findings of the study. Broadly, these correspond to the themes of discussion, above. The interests of this project depart from traditional approaches in either the sociology or the philosophy of education. Instead, something of a combination is presented which reflects the character of the capability approach: responding to the practical need for social analysis, alongside an ethical need for careful reflection and theoretical insight. In this sense, the aim of discussion is to ‘think slowly’ about the everyday experiences of post-16 life and say something both practical and valuable about it. Hopefully, this supports a ‘keen vision and feeling for ordinary life’ that exists on the other side of the painful silence students encounter and avoids what George Elliot might think of as being ‘wadded with stupidity’:

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity. (2008 p182)

## Chapter 2

### **Post-16 Education Policy: Aims and Values**

#### **2.1 Post-16 education as a critical policy environment**

The aims and values of participating in post-16 education in England are unclear. Despite its rapid expansion during the twentieth century, a clear or coherent policy framework for the post-16 setting has never been established and this historical failure has created a present-day dilemma. In the new context of a raised participation age, where young people will remain in education or training until the age of 18, Alison Wolf (2011) is right to suggest: ‘if we believe compulsory education to be in (young people’s) and society’s best interests...we need to be clear about exactly what we are forcing them to stay in education for’ (p.105). Whilst individual schools or colleges might have clear ideas about the aims and values of their own provision, there remains a broader concern about the adequacy of our national policy framework for post-16 education, including its aims and values, which this chapter aims to unpick.

The argument set out here is that post-16 education occupies a critical policy environment, where the aims and values of post-16 education need to be revisited in light of current reforms. In particular, it considers the historical development of the post-16 sector as a particular setting for competing and contradictory policy discourses. On the one hand, there is continuity seen in discourses that have supported the preservation of A-levels and specific sixth-form provision. Within this discourse, traditionalist and culturally conservative attitudes govern ideas about preparing for life beyond school. On the other hand, the emerging context of a human-capital model for policymaking in the UK has governed the rapid expansion and reform of vocational training at the post-16 phase. Here, preparedness is understood in economic terms, where education takes on an instrumental value by developing skills and providing qualifications that will improve individuals’ employability. By focusing on the historic trajectory of policy reform, the chapter illustrates how the cultural and economic forces that have shaped policy have created these divisions within the post-16 phase. Whilst significant debates have emerged over curricula and qualification reform in response to these divisions, these have led to unsuccessful or partial attempts at policy change that have occupied this vital policy space and crowded out a more substantial need to review the role and purpose that post-16 education might have in young people’s lives. The chapter presents a human capability framework as viable alternative to the dominant human-capital model to advance a ‘thicker’ definition of preparedness and it offers a set of research questions to explore the aims and values of post-16 education with this definition in mind.

The chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, (1) it offers an account of ‘policy sociology’ with which to understand post-16 policymaking as an on-going, unstable, socially situated process. This is considered within the broader ideological context of English education policy reform, where economic and political values have shaped post-16 policymaking. The chapter goes on to (2) discuss the historical trajectory of

post-16 education, identifying a failure to reach a policy settlement on the aims and values of the post-16 phase, which has invited deep divisions around the structure and nature of post-16 provision in the current context. Thirdly, (3) this current context is situated within a human-capital policy model, which is critiqued and the human-capability model is advanced as an alternative. The chapter concludes by (4) identifying a set of a set of research questions based on the human capability policy model that can inform the aims and values of post-16 education.

### **2.1.1. A critical policy environment**

A central claim in this study is that post-16 education has now become a critical policy environment. The raft of policy reforms that have been introduced since 2010 (DfES 2008; DfE 2011) have placed both direct and indirect pressures on post-16 providers. Direct pressures have taken the form of new qualifications and accountability measures that have reshaped the practice of post-16 education. Indirect pressures have been created by changes above and below the post-16 setting. The pressures from ‘below’ have arisen through raising the participation age to 18 and reforming GCSE qualifications, which have introduced greater demand and uncertainty, respectively, into the transition from pre-16 to post-16 education. Pressures from ‘above’ have been created by the substantial increase in tuition fees for higher education and expansion of apprenticeship programmes for school-leavers, for example, which have introduced an expectation that post-16 providers will be able to inform and guide young people toward post-18 pathways that will be valued in their life after school. Importantly, these indirect pressures from ‘above and below’ have fundamentally raised the stakes and reshaped the role that post-16 education plays in the life of young people. Despite this, the reforms made to post-16 education that have placed direct pressure on providers do not represent a substantial rethinking to the role that post-16 education might play in the life of a young person. A claim can be made, therefore, that post-16 education occupies a critical policy environment, where the aims and values of such an education remain largely unanswered despite its increasing importance.

### **2.1.2. A sociology of public policy**

This critical policy environment can be understood more clearly by theorising the policymaking process. Policy analysis involves describing and explaining how and why policies emerge, the nature of their implementation, and the degree to which they might be successful (Hill 2005). However, understandings of ‘big-P policy’ that are produced by governments are contested (Evans et.al. 2008). Caroline Hart (2012) notes that the ‘dominant focus on the *generation* and *implementation* of policy has tended to reinforce the ideologically powerful construction of policy as a linear process’ (p.12). This understanding supports a ‘rational policy model’ (Bowe et.al. 1992) whereby policy is produced through a ‘procedurally rational process of centralised decision making’ and ‘follows a sequence of distinct and separate stages’ (Raffe and Spours 2007, p.14). This invites an approach to policy analysis that, as Jenny Ozga argues, understands

policy as the 'closed preserve of the formal government apparatus of policy making' (2000, p.2). Stephen Ball characterises this view of policy as an enlightenment concept: 'it is about progress, it is about moving from the inadequacies of the present to some future state of perfection where everything works well and works as it should' (2013, p.9). In practice, however, policy can often lead to unintended or undesirable outcomes, it can repeat mistakes from the past, and it rarely approaches a future state of perfection.

As a result, Ball (1994) has proposed an alternative and influential sociology of policy analysis that emphasises the historical and contextual aspects of policy enactment. He suggests that policy is not 'taken to be an object, a product or an outcome, but rather a process, something on-going, interactional and unstable' (2013, p.8). This approach to policy analysis considers the situated contexts, professional cultures, and material and external contexts that bring it life (Ball et.al. 2012). This blurs the distinction between policy and practice, where the former cannot be understood without the latter, and means that analysis needs to 'take context seriously' because 'policy creates context, but context also precedes policy' (p.19). A similar attention to policy enactment is supported by Bowe et al (1992), who argue that policy is 'not done and finished at the legislative moment, it evolves in and through the texts that represent it' (p.21). In other words, the development and delivery of policy is never fixed: policy is 'constantly in motion' (Hart 2014, p.12). When thinking about the critical policy environment of post-16 education, therefore, it is 'important not to overestimate the logical rationality of policy' because it is 'often messy, contradictory, confused and unclear.' (Ball 2013, p.9). This is true both for English education reform more generally and for the post-16 context in particular. As Frank Coffield suggested of, what was then, the post-compulsory sector:

Charting the impact of government policy on practice has not been, however, a simple matter of recording linear, evolutionary, coherent or cumulative progress. Rather, the processes of change have been complex, uneven, dynamic, ambiguous, hotly contested and often contradictory. Policies have not only evolved or been radically altered, as Secretaries of State and senior civil servants have come and gone, but some policies were abandoned, while others were from the start internally inconsistent or flatly contradicted existing policies. (2006, p.2-3)

### **2.1.3. Policy reform and policy amnesia in England**

Making sense of post-16 education as a critical policy environment, therefore, requires viewing the policymaking process as an on-going, constant and contested process. As such, it is useful to consider the broader policy forces at work in education policy in England before moving on to consider the specific trajectory of post-16 policy making. Here, the work of Stephen Ball and many others has been shaped by the emergence of a neoliberal policy agenda that has driven reforms over the last 30 or so years (Ball 2016; Barry et al. 1993; Gleeson and Husbands 2001; Grek 2009). The literature exploring the rise of neoliberalism in education is now substantial and 'neoliberalism' has become 'one of those terms which is

so widely and loosely used that it is in danger of becoming a detached signifier' (Ball 2012, p.18). Here, following Ball, neoliberalism is taken to mean:

a complex, often incoherent, unstable and even contradictory set of practices that are organized around a certain imagination of the "market" as a basis for the universalisation of market-based social relations, with the corresponding penetration in almost every single aspect of our lives. (Shamir 2008, p.3).

Bernard Barker identifies the 1988 Education Act as a turning point in implementing this agenda (2008, p.670). Wright comments that Thatcher's government has 'had a lasting legacy...bringing about the commodification of education' (2011, p.4). Moreover, Ball suggests, this agenda has created a discourse based on the hard logic of a performance culture, where 'an organisation will only spend money where measurable returns are likely' (Ball 2003, p.223). The social context for this rise in neoliberal policymaking across the industrialised countries has been well described by Benjamin Levin (1998). He identifies several common themes that informed education policy reform from the 1980s onwards, which include: (i) education reform happening in relation to economic needs; (ii) influential criticism of schools emanating from the corporate world; (iii) an increasing scrutiny of the efficiency of teachers; (iv) increased decentralisation and school-based autonomy combined, paradoxically, with a culture of achieving centrally driven targets; (v) creating performance and accountability measures to make education operate more like a market economy; (vi) the promotion of standardised testing and outcome-focused assessment practices.

The critical point about this neoliberal policy agenda, and its relation to post-16 education, is that it has led to an extraordinary acceleration in policy reform; what Coffield describes as the unprecedented 'depth, breadth, and pace' of change in education (2006, p.6). Keeping in mind the view of policymaking described above, it is unsurprising that the acceleration of reform, or 'policy busyness' (Raffe and Spours 2007), has intensified the messy, contradictory, and confusing nature of post-16 policymaking. This has led various academics to view the destabilising effects of neoliberal reform as inherently self-destructive or pathological: see, for instance, Sahlberg's GERM (Global Education Reform Movement) thesis, (2011) Hamilton's pathology of reform thesis (1997), and Levin's epidemic-of-reform thesis (1998). Each of these theses hold that the efforts of policymakers to transfer the logic of the free market and the values of corporate ethics to the education sector have both failed by their own measures and introduced a self-destructive, pathological policy environment in the attempt. The post-16 phase has not been immune to this and, despite the busyness of reform, a meaningful programme of change has not been undertaken (Lumby and Foskett 2005).

A particular failure in post-16 policymaking has been what Higham and Yeomans call 'policy amnesia' (2007). This describes policymakers' inability to learn from past mistakes caused by 'a short political cycle, dominated by the politics of general elections; by the rapid turnover of ministerial teams, political advisers and civil servants, which prevents the building of policy memory' (Hodgson and Spours 2006, p.684). The following discussion charts the historical development of post-16 education in an attempt to

exercise ‘policy memory’ as a means to explore the messy, contradictory, and confusing policy process surrounding the aims and values of post-16 education, with a particular interest in the limited notions of preparedness that accompany it.

## **2.2. Post-16 Policy Trajectories**

In 1926, the Hadow Report argued that:

The general aim (of education) should therefore be to offer the fullest possible scope to individuality, while keeping steadily in view the claims and needs of the society in which every individual citizen must live. (1926, p.1)

The post-16 phase, however, has never reached a policy settlement over how the needs of the individual and the needs of society ought to be balanced. There are competing and often paradoxical viewpoints on the aims and value of academic and vocational qualifications, which have arisen during particular historical and social contexts. During the post-war years, changing demands in the workplace stemming from wider economic developments led to a greater emphasis on the need to provide adequate training through vocational programmes for 16-19 year olds. Parallel to this, however, there has been a longstanding discourse surrounding the ‘gold-standard’ of A-levels (Baird et al. 2000), qualifications which have been understood to provide the intellectual challenge and specialisation required to prepare young people for higher education and employment. Charting the tension between these rival developments is the focus of this section. It focuses on how the aims and values of post-16 education are produced through historical contestation and political struggle, where the voices of young people are often left unheard and the competing priorities of economic competition and cultural conservation shape rhetoric, entailing that meaningful questions about how to prepare young people for life beyond school remain unanswered.

### **2.2.1. The Crowther Report**

The first substantial review into the challenges of educating 16-19 year olds was the Crowther Report (1959). There are two important strands to the Report that are useful to consider in understanding the current post-16 context and challenges facing the sector. Firstly, it supported raising the leaving age to 16 and called for the expansion of Further Education to enable young people to continue with education until they were 18 (Pound 2003). Secondly, a considerable proportion of the report focuses on the values and virtues of sixth-form education, which was noted as surprising at the time because this served a significant minority of young people (Jarman 1960). The Crowther Report encapsulates two powerful policy forces that have governed post-16 education policy: the notion of A-level qualifications as a ‘gold standard’ and the necessity for alternative provision for young people to continue learning uninterested in or deemed unsuitable for A-level study.

The Report is distinctive for the special interest it places in the development of young people. Ball rightly observes that the Report ‘noted the need for a more educated, adaptable, and skilled workforce, for the provision of which the grammar/secondary modern system was not functionally suited (2013, p.76). However, whilst concerns about the workforce are considered, the governing theme of the Report is that: ‘the proper concern in the school years should be the development of the pupil's brain and character, not of his future earning capacity’ (Crowther 1959, p.263). Moreover, the value of these school years is supported by Crowther’s ‘conviction that, with few exceptions, all the 15 year-old boys and girls...should be receiving full-time education until they are 18’ (p.202). For example, Crowther also called for the introduction of Junior Colleges that could offer an ‘adult atmosphere... but with a much wider range of curriculum and with terms of reference nearer to those of a school (to support) the personal development of the students’ (p.422). In this respect, the Crowther Report does introduce a policy discourse about the aims and values of a post-16 education invested more in youth development and less in economic development.

A more contentious viewpoint presented here regards the virtues of sixth-form education and the ‘deep education’ that A-level study offers (Crowther 1959, p.199). The Report supports the expansion of sixth-form provision and identifies five ‘marks of a sixth-form’ that young people benefit from: (i) preparation for university study; (ii) the specialisation of A-level study creates ‘subject mindedness’ for particular academic disciplines; (iii) it requires a student to devote themselves to their subjects independently; (iv) it allows for an ‘intimate relation between pupil and teacher’ based on intellectual discipleship; and (v) it allows students to develop a sense of social responsibility within the school community (p.222-225). Taken together, these points celebrate a particular view of the aims and values of education, indebted to a ‘liberal humanist’ tradition rather than the realities of ‘post-war optimism and reform’ (Pound 2003, p.8). In particular, the view of ‘subject mindedness’ and ‘intellectual discipleship’ lend themselves to criticism that Crowther’s views display a ‘stunning degree of complacency’ particularly because they are steeped in nostalgic traditionalism and lack empirical basis (Pound 2003, p.7; see also: Pound 1998). Moreover, criticisms about Crowther’s celebration of ‘subject mindedness’ connect to broader concerns about the emphasis on academic specialisation in English education which emerged after the introduction of A-levels in 1951 (Peterson 1960). Despite this, over time the post-16 setting has been positioned as a phase for developing vocational skills and Crowther’s liberal-humanist framework has become unfashionable but not explicitly challenged. A question exists, therefore, about whether post-16 education policymaking would benefit from recovering an interest in the personal development of young people in addition to the development of their earning potential.

### **2.2.2. The rise of the ‘skills agenda’**

Between 1960 and 1990, we can increasingly talk of post-16 education *and* training. Here, the aims and values of the post-16 phase branch into two distinct policy spaces that are sustained by separate policy

rhetorics and shaped by particular cultural and social attitudes. On the one hand, academic education and A-levels ‘still set the standard against which all other achievements post-16 have to be measured’ (Pound 1998, p.179). Here, liberal-humanist notions about the intrinsic value of education can be maintained, especially because A-levels are typically offered by school sixth-forms that aspire to offer rounded educational experiences and provide access to elite universities and careers. On the other hand, vocational training increasingly comes to be seen as a necessity to respond to economic changes and ensure that the many young people who do not continue academic studies are able to contribute to a skilled workforce. Here, the rhetoric around vocational training introduces a more utilitarian notion about the instrumental value of post-16 as a phase that prepares young people for the world of work. Importantly, the development of a divided post-16 phase introduces a paradoxical policy environment: academic education is desirable but not necessary, and vocational training is necessary but not desirable.

The development of academic and vocational pathways at post-16 has created a complex and often incoherent policy space at post-16 that complicates an account of ‘preparedness.’ Vocational qualifications have emerged in response to changing industrial needs and without a clear strategic vision (see, for example: DES 1961). The 1969 Haslegrave Report recommended a systematised vocational pathway as an alternative to academic study in England (DES 1969). This pathway was further refined in 1981, when the Conservative government published a White Paper that set out a vision for all young people under the age of 18 to participate in full time education or planned training (Department for Employment 1981). This policy document ‘provided the basis for the training and youth labour market policies for the 1980s, and they underlie much policy today’ (Deakin 1996, p.191). Importantly, ‘there are keywords in this document that are repeated over and over. One of these is skills’ (Wallace 2013, p.38). Indeed, the ‘skills agenda’ advanced by the Conservative government of the 1980s and 1990s is an important aspect of the neo-liberal policy project and commitment to free-market economics. However, the ‘New Right’ politics of the time was equally committed to a socially conservative policy project, which led Thatcher to declare it was ‘absolutely vital’ that A-levels were not reformed (Pound 1998, p.178).

As a result of this, there has been a consistent concern about ‘parity of esteem’ between the academic and vocational pathways. Where the Higginson Report (1988) recommended reforming A-levels to a 5-subject system to improve the choice and breadth of study, the Dearing Report (1996) recommended a more radical move to a unified framework for the post-16 phase, with a particular focus on developing basic vocational skills. Neither report offered any short-term political advantage and their recommendations were not implemented. However, the New Labour White Paper did propose a reform to A-levels in response to concerns about declining standards (DfEE 1997). They introduced the Curriculum 2000 programme that restructured all A-levels into the AS/A2 structure, emphasising greater choice and breadth and introducing vocational-based A-levels. This was a piecemeal attempt at reform that did not address the fundamental divisions within the post-16 phase and, as a result, the Tomlinson Report (DfES 2004) offered a vision for a 14-19 diploma with an emphasis on employability skills. However, whilst the

2005 White Paper did make provision to introduce the 14-19 diploma, it also made a commitment to retain GCSE and A-levels as cornerstones of the 14-19 phase (DfES 2005). Indeed, this is indicative of the continued paradoxical policy position and what Pound describes as ‘the proven capacity of the A level system to withstand repeated attempts to subsume it under a broader and more balanced curriculum and examinations framework’ (Pound 2003, p.6). As a result, Ball notes:

It is easier to capture the scope of change involved (in education reform during the 1980s and 1990s) by listing those things that remain the same – but A-Level examinations may be the only example. (1994, p.11).

This is significant because, despite recurring moments of consensus outside of government to move away from the A-level model, policymakers have historically reformed ‘around’ A-levels; leaving them intact and deepening divisions between academic and vocational pathways at post-16 at points when removing this division was the policy objective (see, for instance: DfES 2005).

Indeed, the Tomlinson Report’s recommendations can be understood as a logical extension of the post-1997 emphasis on developing 14-19 provision as a particular educational phase based on economic policy objectives (Higham and Yeomans 2010). Whilst different arguments have been advanced for moving to a 14-19 system (Baker 2013), a central plank of support for this model is that learners could be streamed into different pathways according to interests and abilities so that all young people would be better placed to develop low, high or intermediate skills. In this vein, the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) argues that the 14-19 reform programme will be essential to achieve a ‘world class skills base’ (p.16) and that raising participation at post-16 and ensuring adequate stretch and breadth at A-level is a crucial component of this. Importantly, the rhetoric used in the Review is that the UK faces a ‘skills crisis’ as a result of a ‘historic skills deficit’, which, Leitch argues, has been a longstanding concern for the UK as far back as 1776, when Adam Smith wrote in the *Wealth of Nations* that ‘the greater part of what is taught in school...does not seem to be the proper preparation for that of business’ (p.10). The assumption presented here is that the true aim of education is ‘the proper preparation for that of business’ and value it can bring to the national economy. Yet, there is a clear disagreement between Amartya Sen’s reading of Adam Smith, discussed in the Introduction, and Leitch’s reading of Adam Smith, which inspires a performative and managerial approach to student preparedness.

Moreover, the rhetoric delivered in the Leitch Review is problematic on two grounds. Firstly, the Review does not specify or provide examples of the kinds of skills it has in mind. Secondly, the recent Skills Survey from the CBI identify the most important factors that employers look for in young people, and ‘by far the most important factor...is their attitude to work (89%)...aptitude for work (66%)...(which) rank well ahead of formal qualifications (23%)’ (CBI 2016, p.16). This suggests that the expansion of vocational qualifications may not, in themselves, be sufficient to fulfil the skills agenda. Indeed, the CBI suggests that the school system is starting to put more emphasis on personal development, and this trend needs to be taken further and that employers would like to see more emphasis on ‘helping young people develop their self-management and personal behaviour (36%) and giving them more opportunities for work

experience (24%) (p.6). In these respects, even the ‘skills agenda’ might be better served over the long term by considering how education providers might confer a broader range of benefits to young people beyond credentialisation.

### 2.2.3. Current policy reforms: 2010 onwards

The most recent reforms to post-16 education policy have been enacted between 2012 and 2017. The most significant of these reforms is set out in the Education and Skills Act (DfES 2008), which outlines the government’s intention to raise the participation age to 18 by 2015, with attendant duties on young people, parents, employers and local authorities to support this participation. Initially conceived by the Labour government (DfES 2007), the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition committed to continue this fundamental reform to the post-16 sector in the 2011 Education Act (DfE 2011), and the current Conservative government is overseeing the final stages of its implementation with no programme for further reform yet. An analysis of the policy framework that has brought about RPA is presented in the following section, and the discussion below aims to unpack the post-2010 programme of reform.

A key policy document that has shaped the most recent post-16 reforms was Alison Wolf’s review of post-16 vocational training (Wolf 2011). This review’s recommendations, unlike its predecessors, have been fully implemented by policymakers. Whilst the Report focuses on improving the vocational pathway for 16-19 year olds, it is important to recognise that many of its recommendations impact on post-16 providers, including sixth-forms who offer academic programmes, and has thus shaped the context for the current A-level reforms that are described below. The review was published in 2011, and subsequent reforms to post-16 education and training have taken place on a staggered timeline between 2012 and 2017, illustrated in Figure 1 below, representing a rapid phase of policy implementation. During these years, several significant reforms have been introduced alongside the raised participation age. These include the introduction of individualised post-16 study programmes, changes to accountability and funding measures, and ‘reform’ to A-levels in a return to the pre-Curriculum 2000, linear structure.

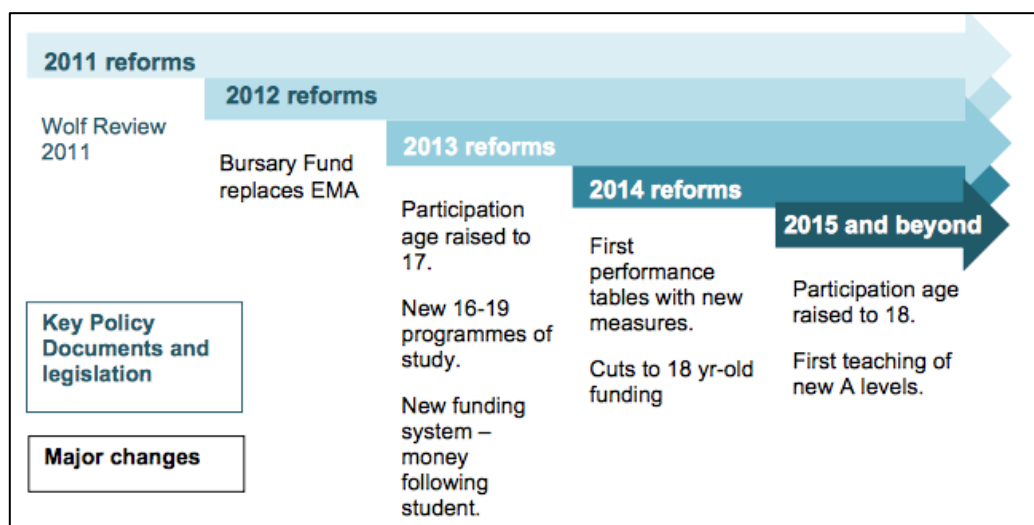


Figure 1: Policy Timeline for 16-19 Education and Training (Lupton et al. 2015, p.19)

A key recommendation from the Wolf Review was that study programmes be introduced 'to offer students breadth and depth, without limiting their options for future study or work' in addition to developing key employability skills and workplace experience (DfE 2014a, p.4). Study programmes are unique to each student and must include 'substantial academic or vocational qualifications; work experience; and continuation of English and maths where they do not hold a GCSE graded A\*-C in that subject' (p.3). This strategy has been incorporated into new accountability measures for post-16 providers, and so forms a formal requirement for the education of all 16-19 year olds for both academic and vocational courses.

The implementation of 16 to 19 study programmes is intended to 'provide a very clear structure to ensure every young person has a challenging individualised learning programme designed to support their development and progression in line with their future career plans' (Ofsted 2014, p.4). Despite this, a recent review by Ofsted (2014) has found 'little evidence of the transformational 'step change' intended with the introduction of the 16 to 19 study programmes' (p.4). They are particularly critical of provision in sixth form schools and academies, writing that the introduction of study programmes:

has led to disappointingly little change to level 3 programmes, particularly in schools and academies...Many of the school and academy leaders interviewed were unaware of the requirements of the study programmes and implications for sixth form provision; implementation in these contexts has been too slow (p.6).

Moreover, regarding the work experience requirement, there remains 'a lack of understanding of the place of such activity, particularly for learners studying for A Levels' (p.10). A related concern here is that 'too much careers guidance at all levels is weak', where many learners in the review were 'unclear about the progression routes available beyond the study programme they were following and too many of them had changed provider, their core aim or both' (p.6). This concern is indicative of a wider, historic, problem encountered across all providers at post-16. Inspection evidence suggests that around one in 10 learners who start a planned two-year level 3 programme at 16 do not progress to the second year, and Ofsted argue that 'this problem needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency' (p.15). As such, there is a significant space between the policy ideal and the practical realities at post-16.

A second important aspect of post-16 policy reform is the change to A-level qualifications. There are three core components to the A-level reform, which involve decoupling AS and A-levels, revising the assessment practices of A-levels, and revising the subject content of A-levels. From 2015, a revised structure and syllabus for all courses will be taught in schools and colleges 'so that they are more rigorous and keep pace with the demands of universities and employers' (DfE 2014d, p.5). The driving force for this reform is to undo the changes that took place under the Curriculum 2000 reforms. The Department for Education argues that 'evidence from higher education shows that new undergraduates lack some of the skills essential for undergraduate learning and that modular A levels have contributed to this' (DfE 2014c, Section 9.3). Thus, a central narrative to these reforms is the opportunity to restore greater levels

of teaching and learning in schools in order to develop the intellectual capabilities of students more effectively. Yet, it is important to recognise that whilst these new syllabi might represent an increased demand for undergraduate level academic skills at post-16, this does not necessarily correspond to an increased supply of these skills from students, particularly where the available resources and pedagogical training to deliver these courses are overlooked.

#### **2.2.4. Summary**

The current reforms outlined above provide the context for the present study. Important questions remain about the aims and values of post-16 education, which remain unclear despite an almost continual effort to review and reform provision. This section has emphasised that a difficulty in this respect, as identified by Crowther in 1959, is that post-16 education serves a diverse body of young people at different stages of personal development, with different degrees of readiness to commit to and complete vocational courses or pursue specialised academic study. The historical concern about low-quality vocational training at post-16 has served to perpetuate a discourse about the need to provide more rigorous, skills-based training. Alongside this, however, A-levels have continued to be recognised as the ‘gold standard’, strengthening the divide between pathways and contributing to an incoherent discourse about the purpose of post-16 education more generally.

The current influence of the Wolf Review on the present reforms signals a strengthening in the vocational discourse around post-16 education and notions of ‘preparedness.’ Even for sixth-forms who only provide A-levels, there is now a legal requirement to offer students meaningful work experience, ensure they are working towards basic numeracy and literacy if they have not achieved this already, and engage in non-qualification activity to develop ‘leadership, team-work or self-management skills’ (DfE 214a, p.9). Further, reforms to ensure A-levels are made more rigorous have been made to satisfy the demands of employers (DfE 2014d, p.5). Paradoxically, these reforms have included removing a subset of vocational A-level courses that were introduced as part of Curriculum 2000, because they lacked sufficient rigour.

The aims and values of post-16 education, despite remaining unclear, have certainly moved in a particular direction. It has become ‘common sense’ that the role of education is to prepare young people for the world of work and train them in skills that employers will require in the future. Universities have played a significant role in ensuring that A-levels remain a highly specialised and, compared to the international context, a distinct model for preparation whose value is increasingly couched in terms of employability and future earnings.

### **2.3. Making Sense of Policy Paradigms**

The previous section has taken an historical view of post-16 policy development within England. It has located competing discourses about its aims and values in relation to the increasing ‘skills based’ agenda and the development of vocational values as ‘common sense.’ The discussion in this section re-

approaches this policy context by situating the English policymaking process within a particular policy model: the human capital model. By doing this, it makes explicit the aims and values that are implicit in post-16 reform and highlights the assumptions they are based on. It critiques this policy model and considers how an alternative model, a human capability model, might be used to reconsider the aims and values of post-16 education.

### **2.3.1. The human capital policy model**

Making sense of reforms outlined above requires thinking about the international policy context in which policy makers are working. In particular, human capital theories have been central to informing European frameworks and these have been widely accepted by policy makers in England over the last 30 years (see: Chiappero-Martinetti and Sabadash 2010).<sup>7</sup> These models are ‘based on the assumption that the inculcation of skill-orientated knowledge generates economic activity’ (Côté 1996, p.424) and developed within the framework of a neoclassic economic understanding (Jensen et al., p.41).

Hayward and Williams (2011) have traced how this human-capital approach to education has matured in England. They argue that, in response to the collapse of the youth market and increasing rates of youth unemployment and crime during the late 1970s and early 1980s, attempts to cope with youth social exclusion ‘focused on apparent deficiencies in skills, attitudes and aspirations that supposedly act as barriers to entry into the labour market’ (p.176). More recent reforms, specifically raising the participation age and the increasing reliance on vocational programmes, can be understood as part of a post-1997 policy focus to establish 14-19 provision as a single educational phase (see: Higham and Yeomans 2010). This is indicative of a wider turn in the development of employability features as one of the core objectives of contemporary social policy directed by human capital models. The 1997 European Employment Strategy (ESS) has played a role in directing the aims in English education, particularly with a view to shaping notions of work-capability and ‘felxicurity’ in young people (see: COM 2007). Gauthier (2005) has termed this post-1997 reform agenda as ‘Asset-based welfare’ (ABW) where ‘the development of human and social capital...is presented as the solution to unemployment and social exclusion’ (Bonvin and Glaster 2010, p.76). Essentially, by adulthood, citizens should be capable of presenting themselves as an *entrepreneur self* (see: Périlleau 2005). Here, it is possible to situate the Leitch Review (2006), which emanated from the Treasury, as a policy document that ‘harnessed the reins of this evolving educational discourse by arguing that Britain’s long-term economic competitiveness depended upon increased investment in a diversified and vocationally relevant curriculum’ (Woodin et al. 2012, p.2).

Critics have argued that this ‘faddish preoccupation’ with vocational diplomas at post-16 is a product of a wider process by which the education system has been subverted by crude notions of human capital theory (Hayward and Williams 2011), with performativity substituting for educational aims and values

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<sup>7</sup> Human Capital Theory was developed by the Chicago School of economics, See: Becker (1962), Mincer (1974) and Schultz (1961).

(Ball 2011). The most recent attempts at pursuing this vocational agenda have been characterised as ironic, where 'at a time when the age of transition to the labour market is getting ever older, young people are being asked by those running the education system to give up the ability to acquire general and critical knowledge at an ever earlier age in order to make pseudo vocational choices' (Hayward and Williams 2011, p.183). Indeed, the unintended consequence of this approach to rolling out low-quality vocational opportunities for the sake of credentialisation is identified by Alison Wolf, who notes:

A spiral of certification may indeed mean that we are all much more qualified in terms of possessing formal certificates, but the UK workforce, in aggregate, already possesses far more qualifications at a given, overall level, than current occupations require (2011, p.35).

Melanie Walker (2010) has highlighted the difficulties with this particularly resistant neo-liberal paradigm in education policy in the UK that underpins the human-capital approach to education. She writes that 'it is ideas from neo-liberalism that have come to determine discourses and practices in education rather than the idea of capability formation and democratic processes' (p.155). Moreover, it is these ideas that 'normalize the domination of economic growth models, comparative national income, and the importance only of learning that can be measured' (p.155). As a result, it can be argued that the neo-liberal policy-shift in education over the last 40 years has significantly shaped our notion of what effective schooling looks like (Ball 2010): strongly favouring instrumental values to education accounted for through performances of student (and staff) achievement. In this vein, Ofsted inspection regimes and PISA surveys are indicative of the highly performative and function-based environment of English education (Ball 2003; Perryman 2006). However, Marion Young (2009) has investigated how performance-based measures that utilise national and international aggregated score comparisons, such as PISA and UNESCO's EPI, neglect differences in cultural values. Robeyns notes that human-capital theory blocks out 'the cultural, social and non-material dimensions of life' and so could not explain the 'behaviour of someone who wants to spend her time studying something without any prospect of economic returns from this education' (2006b, p.72).

In this vein, Walker (2005) has supported the need to 'challenge a narrow income generation approach or, as it might currently be in the United Kingdom, a focus on education and employability as the key, even the only goal, that matters for policy makers' (p.104). The shortcomings of the human-capital model are well-illustrated by Sabine Alkire's investigation of a literacy class set-up in Pakistan for Muslim women (2002). From a human-capital perspective, this project would fail a basic cost-benefit analysis: educating these women would not improve their future earnings because there were too few local employment opportunities for women in general. However, Alkire records the substantial effects this programme had on their literacy, sense of self-worth and wellbeing, and increased self-sufficiency. The outcome of the human capital model is that notions of education are directed towards workfare and 'human development, emancipation and well-being are to a great extent disregarded even if it has to be seen as a

precondition for democracy' (Jensen et.al. 2010, page 51). As a result, it is legitimate to question what might be lost in current frameworks for post-16 education and refocusing on young people as 'human beings not merely (as a) means of production but also the end of the exercise' (Sen 1999, p.296).

### **2.3.2. The human capability policy model**

In recent years, human capability policy models have been proposed as an alternative to the human capital model (Robeyns 2006b). A full discussion of the capability approach, from which these models are based, and its theoretical background are presented in the following chapter. However, at this point it is useful to characterise what this might look like as a policy model in order to identify some of the salient issues that emerge from it and the types of research questions that form the basis of the present study.

Historically, the language of 'capabilities' has been used in policymaking in different ways. For example, in the 1970s the RSA advanced their Education for Capability movement to promote the value of practical skills in education (Royal Society of Arts 1986). However, the capability approach employs the term 'capability' in a specific way and uses 'a language that is not well known among local or national policy makers and other social actors' (Robeyns 2006b, p.70). Within the capability approach, value is placed on freedom or opportunity for people to achieve things that they have reason to value. In other words, as much emphasis is placed on the conditions in which people achieve things as on the achievements themselves. Thus, the approach can 'be used as an alternative evaluative tool for social cost-benefit analysis, or to design and evaluate policies' (Robeyns 2006b, p.70). The claim that a capabilities framework ought to have a role in UK policymaking is not without precedent, and there is some evidence of national policymakers' familiarity with the approach. In 2007, the Cabinet Office's Equalities Report stated:

We need a new definition of equality that will be relevant to our society now and in the future. Traditional approaches – based on equality of outcomes, opportunities, process and respect – have either resulted in a focus on income, or wealth, rather than on all the aspects of life that are important to people in leading a fulfilling life, or have not taken serious consideration of the economic, political, legal, social and physical conditions that constrain people's achievements and opportunities (Cabinet Office 2007, p.5).

This report draws inspiration from the capabilities approach: it derives 10 capabilities from the UN human development framework (Cabinet Office 2007, p.126), that itself is derived from the capability approach literature. In particular, this report produces an analysis of equality gaps across these ten capabilities, which include 'the knowledge understanding and skill to participate in society', 'living standards for independence', 'engaging in productive and valued activities', 'enjoying...social life', and a 'sense of voice and participation in decision making' (p.127-129). However, despite this call for developing a new definition for equality and the indication that a new policy model might be welcome, it

is clear from the discussion in the previous section that the direction of English education policymaking has not abandoned human-capital frameworks.

When considering the aims and values of post-16 education, a human capabilities policy model would consider both the instrumental and non-instrumental dimensions of education (Robeyns 2006b). Firstly, education plays an instrumental, personal economic role: education is valuable insofar as it can be income-generating. As Robeyns suggests: 'the human capital model of education certainly makes an important point, namely that skills and knowledge, acquired through education, are an important part of a person's income-generating abilities (2006b, p.72). Secondly, education plays an instrumental, collective economic role: it is in the interests of policymakers to maximise education levels because this brings economic benefits to the nation as a whole.

Beyond this, however, the capability model recognises that education has intrinsic worth (Dréze and Sen 2002; Unterhalter 2003b). It can have a non-instrumental, personal role insofar as learning and developing one's beliefs is a fundamental dimension to being human. Also, education has a non-instrumental, collective role because it contributes to a society in which individuals are more likely to tolerate different views, engage in democratic processes, and contribute to programmes for social progress. In the capability approach literature, there are many examples of scholars who have used this evaluative framework as an alternative to the human capital model that governs policymaking. Lanzi (2007), for example, views education as having 'instrumental value (wages, test scores, certificates), intrinsic value (achievements in agency, autonomy and well-being) and positional value (established social relations, access to positional goods)' (p.425). Similarly, for Unterhalter (2003b), the capability approach offers the potential to take into account young people's opportunities of gaining an income, establishing and maintaining social relations with adults and peers, and having the ability to exercise freedom of choice regarding future life options. As a result, Harreveld and Singh argue (2008) that this approach provides a different way of analysing educational policy agendas, moving beyond the debate about input and output measures in utilitarian frameworks of welfare economics. Consequently, the capability policy model:

goes beyond the notion of human capital, by acknowledging the instrumental value of education in promoting productivity, economic growth and individual incomes but also the direct relevance that education can have in terms of individual well-being and freedom, as well as for social development' (Chiappero-Martinetti and Sabadash 2014, p.206).

#### **2.4. Conclusion: the policy focus of the present study**

This chapter has sought to set out the challenges facing the post-16 policy landscape. There is confusion about the aims and values of this phase of education, and increasingly economic interests have come to govern policymaking. This has been highlighted as a necessary product of a broader human-capital model

of policymaking that has drawn its own values from a neoliberal policy agenda. Alternative notions about the role and value of education have persisted in the guise of social conservatism, where the model of A-levels and sixth form provision has been maintained. However, more a more substantial re-imagining of the aims and values of post-16 education is possible by drawing on a capability approach framework to policymaking.

#### 2.4.1. What is missing from post-16 education?

The 2009 Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training (Pring et al. 2009) was the largest review of the 14-19 phase of education since the Crowther Report and provides a useful account of what a ‘capability–friendly’ system at post-16 might look like. The Review was not informed by a capability approach but is driven by similarly ethical concerns. Its central focus was: ‘what counts as an educated 19 year old in this day and age?’ In exploring this question, the Review highlights that the ‘impoverished language of “performance management” needs to be challenged’ (p.25). As such, it departs from the human-capital policy model, arguing that:

The aims of education – namely the initiation into a worthwhile form of life which is distinctively human – should embrace a wider set of achievements and understanding of personal and social development than those which are covered in the targets, performance indicators and assessments that dominate policy and practice (p.10).

What is presented here is an interest in how a ‘worthwhile’ and ‘distinctively human’ form of life might be realised through the aims and values of an education system. The Nuffield Review provides an account of what such a life might consist of, identifying six characteristics that, it argues, are central to what we might consider a ‘well educated 19 year old’. Firstly, it supports the need for intellectual development, understood as an ‘initiation into the different forms of knowledge...the acquisition and application of key concepts, principles, and modes of enquiry’ (p.19). Secondly, like the RSA, education should develop practical capability, that is, the ‘capacity to face and to solve practical problems’ (p.20). Thirdly, school life should involve community participation, based on ‘acknowledging common needs, recognising the importance to personal growth of common enlightenment and pursuing common enjoyment...’(p.20). The fourth element of a worthwhile education consists of developing moral seriousness in young people, ‘the capacity to shape one’s life according to what one believes to be right – to take responsibility for the direction of one’s life’ (p.20). For the authors, this necessarily means a concern for ‘big issues’ that affect wider society and demands a combination of moral virtues (concern for others) and intellectual virtues (openness to debate, acceptance of evidence). The fifth aim of education should be to inculcate the pursuit of excellence in young people, teaching them ‘to aim high, to pursue excellence in its different forms’ brought about through experiences that open up ‘possibilities of fulfilment and pleasure previously not dreamed of’ (p.21). And lastly, the Review argues that education should promote self-awareness, in other words: ‘confidence in oneself, though tempered by realistic appraisal, and resilience in the face of failure are part of the educational ideal for all young people irrespective of background or ability’ (p.21).

These six dimensions – intellectual development, practical capability, community participation, moral seriousness, the pursuit of excellence, and self-awareness – give us an insight into what is missing from a human-capital model of education that takes achievement or credentialisation as its *ne plus ultra*. Further, each of these dimensions can be framed as a capability that young people possess and, prima facie, be accepted as constituent of a good life. As such, the aims and values of post-16 education might be recast in these terms: provision ought to aim at developing these capabilities in students and its value rests in the extent to which this is achieved. However, before exploring the capability approach in more detail in the following chapter, two caveats can be made here. Firstly, the six ‘capabilities’ identified by the Nuffield Review are not necessarily a list of capabilities we ought to work with. Indeed, this thesis is partially motivated to consider what an alternative list might look like when utilising a capability approach from the outset. Secondly, this account offers a shallow attempt at unpacking what a capability approach framework requires: as the literature review will explain, further discussion needs to be afforded to the roles of agency, freedom, and achievement as well as an account of ‘conversion factors.’ Despite this, the Nuffield Review provides an excellent reference point for thinking about what might be missing from current post-16 policy.

Moreover, a second concern about ‘what is missing from post-16 education’ relates to institutional practices. Here, the 2011 Emerging Findings report published by the National Youth Agency regarding raising the participation age, is instructive (2011). Four of its nine ‘key findings’ can be understood as issues related to capability development:

- a. Both the positive and negative experiences of schools reported by young people highlighted the importance of teachers being able to communicate well with young people and respond to their individual needs.
- b. Young people want a learning environment that makes it clear that they are valued and respected. Specific elements identified as important included being treated as a young adult, being involved in identifying how they learn best and smaller classes.
- c. The young people identified the need for more appropriate and individual support for young people with additional needs or who had struggled at school, offered in a way which did not stigmatise the young people concerned.
- d. The need for young people to be involved in decisions about education, and for students to have opportunities to provide feedback was stressed.

This report echoes the tragic notion that, as Hayward and Williams suggest, for many students ‘the reason for dropping out was not primarily about the school curriculum, or about a lack of vocational learning opportunities, but an inability to cope with the necessary authority structures that must underpin the structures of schooling’ (Hayward and Williams 2011, p.184). This concern is taken up in Chapter 6. It also illustrates Evans et al.’s notion that ‘individual characteristics clearly play a role in determining a life path, and the notion that individuals are active agents who strive for control’ (2012, p.257), which is

explored in Chapter 7. The report also speaks to Brighthouse's claim that every child in school 'should have a realistic opportunity to become an autonomous person, because autonomy enhances dramatically the ability of individuals to identify and live lives that are worth living' (2000, p.88). And this claim forms the basis of discussion in Chapter 5. In each of these areas, the notion of valuing student freedom and development as an end-in-themselves is absent from policy-discourses.

#### **2.4.2. How might this be delivered?**

Implicit in the discussion throughout this chapter has been an assumption that one model of post-16 education, A-level study delivered in a sixth form, offers advantages over a vocational alternative in a further education college when viewed from a capability perspective. These advantages broadly correlate to the liberal-humanist perspective advanced by Crowther in 1959, and are encompassed within a capability model of policy. Specifically, this provision avoids the way in which much of the skills-driven vocational agenda instrumentalises participation in the post-16 phase. However, two qualifications might be made regarding this assumption. Firstly, this does not hold that vocational courses delivered in colleges cannot support capability development in young people, just that it is less incentivised to do so by the current policy framework. Secondly, it does not follow that the current model of A-level provision is best placed to support capability development in young people. Indeed, Hodgson and Spours (2016) have argued that, compared to other international models, the English system is unique for offering 'a narrow range of specialist subjects, studied over two years to meet the requirements of three-year subject specialist university degrees' (n/p). As such, important questions persist about whether a broader academic curriculum might better serve student capability development. Nevertheless, it is useful to consider how the A-level model sits within the broader provision of sixth forms to understand how a 'capability model' might be delivered at post-16.

From within the sector, the former Chief Executive Officer of the Sixth Form Colleges' Association, David Igoe (2015), has defended the broader curricular offer characteristic of sixth forms during a period of significant funding cuts. In particular, Igoe argues that there are several essential elements of the sixth form curriculum that are best expressed as a commitment to holistic education. These are:

1. An academic study programme (A-levels or International Baccalaureate)
2. Further individualised study with an Extended Project Qualification or Critical Thinking A-level
3. Opportunities for personal growth through participation in sport, drama, music, clubs, societies, and trips and visits
4. Personal tutoring for target setting, progress monitoring, career and UCAS application advice, counselling and personal support as necessary.

Furthermore, in light of the raised participation age and likely need to support an increasing number of lower-prior attaining young people, a fifth element:

5. Individual and small group support to assist with the transition to higher level academic study.

These features of sixth form provision demonstrate an interest to work beyond the requirements of policy and deliver education that explicitly invests in developing the character, beliefs, and interests of young people. Within the Sixth Form Colleges' Association, there have been attempts to formalise this curriculum and offer it as a 'wrap around award' termed the 'Sixth Form Baccalaureate.' Indeed, Igoe (2015) argues that the notion of an SFBacc has been developed in response to a need to endorse the value of the curriculum model and, going forward, could form the basis of an effective quality assurance framework.

Reflecting on this model, and how it departs from the current policy direction, it is useful to return to the Nuffield Review's argument that the language of policy matters (Pring et al. 2009). Within policy documents, there are particular terms employed which shape the possibilities for thinking about the alternative ways of acting. From a capability approach, we might ask: are these learners or young people; are we supporting pathways or life-courses; should we promote retention or engagement; does the purpose of post-16 consist in training or education; should we strive for progress or development; do we value attendance or agency? The argument set out in this chapter is that whilst the current policy framework insists on the former, a good quality post-16 phase ought to endorse the latter.

### **2.4.3. Key questions in this study**

There is scope, therefore, to approach post-16 education from a capability approach perspective. The focus of the present study is to employ such a perspective in order to rethink the aims and values of a post-16 education. In particular, such an approach enables us to explore how such an education might develop the preparedness of young people to live a worthwhile life after school. In doing so, the aim is to go beyond the concerns of the human-capital model, specifically the qualifications young people achieve, and pay attention to the broader ranges of advantages and goods that post-16 education might confer; viewing the post-16 phase as a setting for youth development, engagement, education, and agency. Necessarily, this focuses on the everyday life of post-16 participation and not only the outcomes associated with it. With this in mind, several questions surrounding the capability approach's relationship with education policy arise that shape the focus of this study and are addressed in the following chapter:

1. What does a 'capability approach' study demand: what normative principles are we committed to when using the approach and what evaluative space does it focus on when making judgements about the quality of life and social arrangements in society?
2. How can education be viewed in the capability approach: what is its value and role in securing individual wellbeing and social justice?
3. What does the application of the capability approach look like in practice? This is to say, what kinds of questions might it answer and how can it be operationalized in empirical research?

## Chapter 3

### The Capability Approach

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an outline of the capability approach (CA) to develop the discussion of post-16 education policy in the UK. It does this with the aim of showing how the former might be used to explore social research questions about the latter. This chapter begins with an overview of the CA; specifically, the normative principles that underpin the approach and evaluative space it focuses on in social analysis, both of which are central to this study. The discussion then explores the relationship between the CA and education, arguing for a view of education as ‘autonomy building’ and the post-16 phase as concerned with preparedness. This view is advanced by exploring several supporting notions associated with the CA: fertile functionings, corrosive disadvantages, personal heterogeneity, clustering disadvantages and secure functionings. The chapter considers how these theoretical notions can be applied to empirical investigation. It does this by presenting three common applications found in the literature, which overlap and inform specific concerns found in this study. It concludes by identifying several questions that arise from this discussion and are taken up in the following chapters.

#### 3.2 The Capability Approach

##### 3.2.1 Social justice and equality

This study is based on a concern for social justice in education. Those who are interested in social justice are typically motivated to account for some form of equality in society. And when we talk about social justice we are generally discussing ideas related to fairness, impartiality, or rights, with an interest in how they describe the relationships between people and the things they have or are able to do. What this means is that social justice studies often attempt to sketch out what ‘equality’ might look like in society, and the role of research is twofold in this regard; firstly, it might seek to provide some definition of equality or inequality along with a methodology for identifying or measuring it and, secondly, it might provide some strategies for creating a more equal society, most likely starting with the least well-off. It might be argued that theories of social justice are more usefully applied to developing societies, where there is an urgent need to address basic forms of injustice related to achieving basic quality of life for all. However, increasingly there is an acknowledgement that developed societies face a particular challenge in terms of inequality: the ‘health gap’, ‘education gap’, and ‘wealth gap’, for instance, can each affect the quality of life in disastrous and tragic ways for those at the bottom (Marmot 2015). Indeed, Jerry Cohen highlights the relationship between social justice and equality, observing: ‘I take for granted that there is something which justice requires people to have equal amounts of, not no matter what, but to whatever extent is allowed by values which compete with distributive equality’ (1989, p.906). As such, there is an

important connection between social justice and equality that is relevant to understanding quality of life in all communities, richer or poorer.

This study advances the notion that a particular view of equality connected to post-16 education in England can be understood as ‘preparedness.’ Here, preparedness corresponds to the capability for young people to go on and live a worthwhile life after they complete their post-16 studies. In part, this connects to the capability to realise aspirations related to employment and economic security. But this also connects to other features of human life that make it worth living, such as the capability to create and sustain social relationships, or the capability to invest oneself into the cultural and political life of the community. Preparedness, therefore, takes us beyond a human-capital vision of post-16 education (discussed in Chapter 2) and towards a view that the aims and values of education ought to be grounded in a broader concern for the kinds of lives that young people value. In part, and as this chapter goes on to illustrate, this necessitates taking account of and developing their present capabilities so that they are equipped to live autonomous lives during and as a result of their educational experiences. Moreover, this view involves taking account of the nature of disadvantage in young people’s lives and how this, especially in the context of limited resources, can create conditions of insecurity and risk that limit future life chances beyond school.

### **3.2.2 The theoretical framework**

The CA is a theoretical framework that has been increasingly applied in a number of disciplines to evaluate wellbeing and was conceived by Amartya Sen during the 1980s (Sen 1980; 1985). In the present day, the CA has been recognised as a framework that crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries, offering a view of wellbeing that has been explored both theoretically, in philosophical studies, and practically, through empirical investigations (Robeyns 2006a; Hart et al. 2012). As such, the CA is a framework that has been recognised as bridging a gap between theory and practice in social research, and increasingly adopted across a range of fields, including development, health, disability, gender, and education studies. Common to all of these applications of the framework is the aim to understand what human wellbeing consists in and how public policy might better endorse it.

The beginnings of the approach can be found in Amartya Sen’s 1979 Tanner Lecture (Sen 1980). Here, Sen developed the CA as a framework for economic analysis to assess quality of life based on a philosophy that departed from the mainstream economics of the time. In rejecting these traditional models for understanding social equality, Sen initiated the ‘equality of what?’ debate, which asks what *metric* or *currency* of equality we should operate with in political and economic analysis (Moss 2014). Sen proposed the notion of ‘basic capability equality’ as an alternative to welfarist, resourcist and Rawlsian models of equality (see: Partfit 1984; Rawls 1971; Dworkin 1981; Dworkin 2002). These alternatives put forward competing views of equality, but they all broadly hold that a person’s wellbeing can be judged in

uni-focal terms. This means that equality can be understood via a single comparison of people's subjective wellbeing (the degree to which their preferences are satisfied or they are happy with how things are going), their levels of income and material wealth, or their possession of primary goods, such as rights, liberties and material wealth. The problem with these models, Sen argued, is that they do not properly acknowledge the differences between individuals; both in terms of their capability to convert resources into things that they value, and in terms of their capability to value goods differently. In this lecture, Sen argues that there is an irreducible diversity between people (what they are able to achieve, even with the same resources) and an irreducible plurality of goods (what people want to achieve, even with the same resources). As such, the view of social justice that Sen offers is grounded in an interest in the human potential for agency; the capability for individuals to independently realise their own valued states of 'being and doing' rather than the process of accumulating further commodities or capital. Consequently, in the Tanner Lecture, Sen sets out the basic principle that understanding equality and wellbeing in society depends upon an evaluative framework that captures plurality in terms of what individuals are actually able to achieve, and not assumed to be able to achieve, given (i) the resources they have, (ii) the range of possible outcomes or achievements open to them with those resources, and (iii) the particular outcomes or achievements that they value.

### **3.2.3 Normative principles: freedom and opportunity**

The CA is underpinned by at least two normative principles (Sen 1992; 1999). Firstly, at an individual level, the CA holds that wellbeing consists in an individual's freedom to choose, from various options, the kind of life they want to live. Secondly, at a political level, social justice is achieved when individuals have the opportunity to actually live the life they choose. These two normative principles enable us to evaluate individual wellbeing in terms of freedom (to choose the life one lives) and opportunity (to be able to actually live that life). These principles also give rise to two areas of debate that help grasp some of the complexity of this approach.

Firstly, it might be asked whether there is a particular choice you *ought* to make regarding the life you want to live: are there objectively better lives than others, and if so, can you be mistaken about the kind of life you want to live? This concern arises because personal goods, those things we value for ourselves, are part of our internal psychological infrastructure, which is governed by desire as much as it is reason. For this reason, we are not always the best placed to judge how we are faring in life: more often than not we adapt our expectations, preferences, and desires to suit what is conceivable according to the possibilities open to us. Moreover, a concern for this study is whether young people should be responsible for deciding what their own wellbeing consists in. Secondly, it might be asked at the political level whether we ought to give priority to some opportunities instead of others. For example, is the freedom to choose how you live your life in one domain (for instance, what kind of job you want) more important than the freedom to choose how you live your life in another domain (for instance, where you want to live)? This

concern arises because, in a practical sense, social goods are typically scarce and exhaustible and it is inevitable that a fair society cannot afford complete freedom or opportunity for all citizens. In this respect, we cannot hope for students to achieve all the things that they have reason to value. Even in the most affluent society we must accept that there are inevitable ‘trade-offs’ that disadvantage some groups of people in some ways (a situation exacerbated by inequality in affluent societies) and all people in different ways (because all people cannot be satisfied all the time). For us to promote fairness, therefore, we must make the case that in some contexts some freedoms might sometimes override other freedoms. Whilst these concerns are explored more fully below, it is useful at this point to highlight that the CA is rooted in complex philosophical questions about what ‘the good life’ consists in and the scope for public policy in making it possible.

The complexity of the CA is due, in large part, to the under-specified nature of its framework. Beyond the basic normative principles discussed above and its core concepts, outlined below, the CA does not offer a complete theory of wellbeing or promote a particular methodology for investigating it. In this sense, it is important to emphasise that the CA is simply an *approach*, a way of looking at information about people’s lives with an interest in what is important when evaluating how well-off or badly-off they are. This is to say that the approach is simply a set of philosophical concepts that are designed to make sense of the complexity of human life in a way that makes it possible to research it and say something useful about it in order to improve people’s lives. These concepts, like axioms in geometry, are useful for understanding the world around us but not sufficient to investigate it on their own. The following section unpacks these concepts, before the discussion goes on to explore how they might be applied in practice.

#### **3.2.4 Versions of the approach: Sen and Nussbaum**

It is necessary to distinguish between the work of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum who have developed distinct but overlapping versions of the CA. Amartya Sen’s version of the CA is governed by an interest in economic assessments of quality of life. Researchers that have drawn on his work have therefore typically sought to criticise human-capital models of development and argue for the need to understand quality of life in terms of human capability (see: Comim et al. 2008; Kuklys 2005; Alkire 2002). The clearest example of this, and perhaps the approach’s most notable contribution, has been the introduction of the Human Development Approach and Human Development Index used by the United Nations Human Development Reports Office (UN 2016, v), which Sen played a significant role in framing (though not every aspect of his work on the CA is present here). Sen’s version of the approach is sometimes associated with large-scale quantitative research, which uses the notion of ‘human capability’ as an evaluative space for the comparison of individual wellbeing (Hart 2012, p.65-68). Sen’s work, and the literature that has grown from it, can be characterised as employing technical empirical methodologies, emphasising the measurement of human capability as a means to assess quality of life, and typically

engages in debates on economic policy and aspects of academic fields with a stake in these debates (notably development, health, education, and social policy fields).

In contrast, Martha Nussbaum's version of the CA is governed by an interest in constructing a theory of social justice (2001; 2011). The methodological focus here is technical but typically focused on philosophical argument and analysis, encouraging qualitative accounts of the social world. The literature that has grown from Nussbaum's work has, consequently, emphasised the need to establish a more philosophical understanding of human capability and its relationship to human flourishing with the aim of incorporating it into a liberal political framework (Crocker 2008). These efforts have led to some key differences between Sen and Nussbaum's approach,<sup>8</sup> most clearly seen in Nussbaum advocating the use of a list of Central Capabilities; a specification of universal political entitlements that are fundamental to living a truly human life (2011). Such a list is deliberately absent from Sen's approach because, for Sen, the focus of the approach is to be able to assess capabilities and not define what they should be; arguing that capabilities are relative to specific contexts and their identification should be a deliberative process involving any and all stakeholders in that context (Sen 2009). In contrast, Nussbaum's work is grounded in a version of liberal universalism that holds 'central capabilities' as essential for human dignity. This quite clear division between the approaches illuminates some deeper differences between these thinkers, particularly the conceptual understanding of what constitutes capability and how it is exercised (taken up in Chapter 7, in particular). Thus, Nussbaum's version of the approach, sometimes called the 'Capabilities Approach', departs from Sen's version in some important ways that are addressed below. The main departure is that Nussbaum's work tends toward a normative account of social justice whereas Sen's work focuses on comprehensive criteria for quality of life. As such, it has informed a great deal of academic literature across political studies, policy analysis, and social research that aims to critique or advance social change, especially in areas of gender inequality, education, and development studies.

In this study, much of the theoretical apparatus of Sen's approach is used. In particular, attention is paid to his notion of capabilities consisting of freedom and opportunity to achieve things. In Chapter 5, the analysis focuses on how the post-16 setting is made up of a complex array of freedoms that students must make sense of and take advantage of as part of their development. In Chapter 6, Sen's notion of external conversion factors is used to explore how differences exist between students in what they can actually achieve given the same resources, where attention is paid to sources of variation in family life and social setting, for instance. However, Nussbaum's philosophical concern in ensuring that social arrangements ensure a basic level of human dignity inform much of the evaluation throughout this project. A recurring theme in the analysis is an interest in the ways in which dignity can be manifested, constructed, supported or threatened in the life of a post-16 student. Moreover, in Chapter 7, Nussbaum's notion of internal capabilities is used as a theoretical tool with which to explore the inner lives of students in more detail to

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<sup>8</sup> However, this distinction can be overstated. For example, Sen's later work (2009) has developed a theory of social justice.

unpick the ways in which the complex emotional and psychological dimensions of post-16 life can shape students' educational participation and 'capability for capability development'.

### 3.2.5 Functionings and capabilities

The CA employs a specific set of terms to assess people's lives. The use of language such as 'capability' and 'functioning' is used to describe how people 'actually live their lives' with greater realism than is found in rival approaches. Simply put, 'a functioning is an achievement whereas a capability is the ability to achieve' (1987, p.36).

The term 'functioning' describes the achievements that people value in life; 'the various things a person may value doing or being' (Sen 1999, p.75). This can include basic achievements such as being well fed or literate, and more complex achievements, such as belonging to a community or having self-respect (p.75). As Sen puts it, 'living may be seen as consisting of a set of interrelated 'functionings', consisting of beings and doings,' which 'are *constitutive* of a person's being, and an evaluation of well-being has to take the form of an assessment of these elements' (p.75). In other words, we can partially assess the wellbeing of a person by asking whether or not they have achieved those things they value in life. Sen notes that the concept of functionings has 'distinctly Aristotelian roots', identifying a correspondence between his position that wellbeing can be assessed in terms of human action and Aristotle's view that the good life is 'one of activity or functioning that leads to human flourishing' (2004, p.39 ff.3). As such, both perspectives hold that an 'an impoverished life is one without the freedom to undertake important activities that a person has reason to choose' (Sen 2000, p.4).

In this study, the kinds of functionings we might be interested in are those achievements that students have reason to value. In general, this will relate to the achievement of being prepared for life after school. However, this will be made up of more tangible achievements. Most clearly, this might relate to academic achievements. A student might value achieving high academic grades for a variety of reasons, including gaining a deeper understanding of their subjects, improving their chances of gaining a university place, affirming their self-respect, or increasing their esteem in the community. A student's wellbeing might also be connected to achieving a broader range of functionings in school including realising their social, personal, emotional, political, or religious goals. The life of a student and their participation in the school community makes a great range of functionings possible, and this study takes the view that a student's preparedness can be partially assessed in terms of the kinds of functionings they are able to achieve as part of their school life in addition to those future functionings that their school life makes possible.

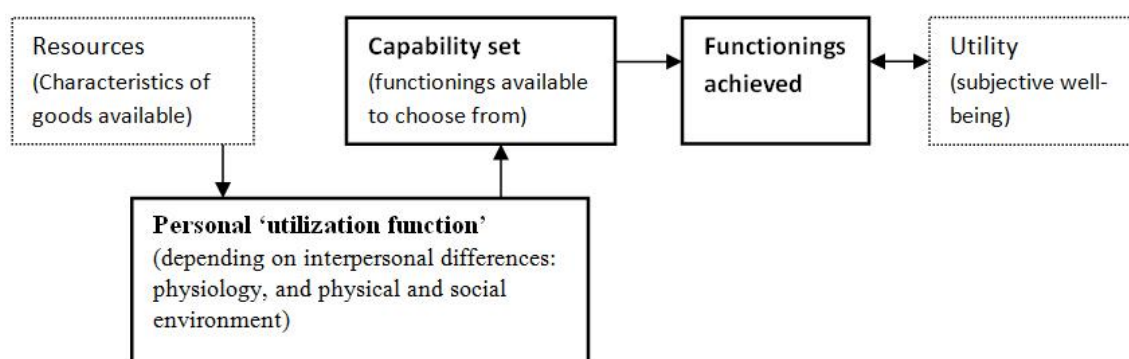
However, functionings only provide part of the picture and the CA is primarily interested in the role that 'capability' plays in an individual's life. The term 'capability' refers to the range of possible functionings available to a person: 'the substantive freedom to achieve various lifestyles' (Sen 1999, p.75). Thus, Sen

uses the term in quite a specific way where a capability is better understood as an opportunity rather than a potential ability. This distinction is important because an opportunity is created through social arrangements whereas a potential ability is primarily focused on the personal power of an individual to achieve what they value. No doubt, the two notions are connected in important ways but they are not interchangeable: I might have the ability to read but live in a society in which I do not have access to books, and therefore I do not have the opportunity, and by extension the capability, to read. Importantly, Martha Nussbaum's work expands the notion of capabilities in a way that places more emphasis on the potential ability of individuals to act in particular ways they value. She does this by identifying a complexity in Sen's definition where capabilities are 'created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social, and economic environment' (2011, p.20). From this, Nussbaum distinguishes between 'internal capabilities', which refer to personal abilities or characteristics, and 'combined capabilities', which refer to the 'substantive freedoms' or real opportunities that individuals have to exercise their internal capabilities. For Nussbaum, then, capabilities are not simply freedoms to choose between a set of options, although this freedom is important: they are 'general powers that can be nurtured, acquired, developed, maintained, exercised, impeded, diminished, lost and (sometimes) restored' (Crocker 1996, p.161). The addition of internal capabilities to our analysis of individual wellbeing is useful and taken up in Chapter 7 where the relationship between students' internal capabilities and functioning is explored.

In this study, the notion of capabilities is particularly useful when we consider a young person's school life as a process of personal development towards preparedness. This is because this process involves the transition from 'potential to actual' (for example from potentially aspiring to go to university to actually aspiring to go to university), and this transition can be viewed both in terms of the latent ability of the student to achieve things they value (internal capability: being aspirational) and in terms of the opportunities that the school creates to transform this ability (combined capability: having an aspiration). In this sense, there is an important Aristotelian metaphysics that frames the idea of capabilities: a thing has a capability where it has the power to move from potential to actual, whereby motion is an intrinsic aspect of a functioning or living life (see: Graisbauer and Sedmak 2014, p.57). The role of education, therefore, is to bring about this motion.

### **3.2.6 The 'capability space' in social analysis**

What then, does the inclusion of capability add to social analysis? It was noted above that the two fundamental normative principles that underpin the CA is an emphasis on individual freedom and opportunity when evaluating social arrangements and wellbeing. Figure 2 (Wells 2017) identifies the core concepts used in traditional approaches to social justice and illustrates the relationship between them, with the inclusion of a 'capability space' to describe the role that capability plays.



**Figure 2:** The core concepts and their relationships in social justice approaches (Wells 2017)

The discussion above highlighted that Sen departs from traditional approaches to social justice in developing the CA. In Figure 2, we can view a range of possible approaches to social justice, broadly based on the egalitarian view that social justice implies ‘equality of something.’ Firstly, we might support the resourcist view that the distribution of resources that individuals have access to (such as material goods or opportunities) are relevant. Alternatively, we might take the utility-based view that the outcomes that individuals achieve are important, either as objective outcomes (material wealth, qualifications, health, and so on) or subjective outcomes (levels of happiness or preference satisfaction). As we have seen, the human-capital model of post-16 policy favours an outcomes-based approach governed by objective factors. For Sen the appropriate space for social analysis is neither that of resources nor that of utilities or outcomes, but in the freedoms and opportunities (capabilities) that individuals have to convert resources into achievements that they value (functionings) (Pogge 2002, p.177). In his own words, Sen argues:

(Resourcism) suffers from fetishist handicap in being concerned with goods, and even though the list of goods (might be) specified in a broad and inclusive way, encompassing rights, liberties, opportunities, income, wealth, and the social basis of self-respect, it still is concerned with good things rather than with what these good things do to human beings. Utility, on the other hand, is concerned with what these things do to human beings, but uses a metric that focuses not on the person’s capabilities but on his mental reaction. There is something still missing in the combined list of primary goods and utilities. (1980, p.218)

Firstly, Sen rejects the idea that social analysis ought to concentrate on objective measures of utility, such as material wealth. For Sen, the accumulation of material wealth is only valuable insofar as it enables us to achieve things that we really value. He suggests:

the usefulness of wealth lies in the things that it allows us to do – the substantive freedoms it helps us to achieve. But this relation is neither exclusive (since there are significant influences on

our lives other than wealth) nor uniform (since the impact of wealth on our lives varies with other influences). (1999, p.14)

Here, we might be reminded of Aristotle's claim that 'wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking' (2004, p.10). Thus, Sen suggests, 'without ignoring economic growth, we must look beyond it' (1999, p.14). Indeed, this view extends to the discussion of the previous chapter and the presentation of human-capital models for education policy. With reference to the CA, it can be argued that concentrating on achievements, such as academic and vocational qualifications, only offers part of the picture. In addition, we ought to consider the processes through which these achievements are realised (for example, the extent to which student agency led to them) in addition to considering other achievements that young people might value through their schooling.

Secondly, Sen rejects the utilitarian view that subjective measures, such as people's preference satisfaction ought to be used as a sole basis for social analysis. A key reason for this, especially when looking at the lives of disadvantaged individuals, is that people are likely to develop adapted preferences (Elster 1983). On this, Sen writes: to 'overlook the intensity of (a person's) disadvantage merely because of their ability to build a little joy in their lives is hardly a good way of achieving an adequate understanding of the demands of social justice' (2009, p.282). Or, as Saito writes, 'since we learn not to desire what we know to be unattainable, one may suffer extreme deprivation without having a strong desire for change' (2003, p.20). Thus, from a capability perspective, it is crucial to consider an individual's capability set: the range of possible choices open to them to live a life they value. In education, this view is particularly resonant because a substantial part of a student's capability set is shaped by their school life and they have little epistemic access to consider alternative forms of provision, curricula, or aspiration (see: Hart 2012). In this regard, an account of 'institutional coercion' is put forward in Chapter 6 that describes the ways in which a school might shape the range of possible aspirations open to a student.

Thirdly, Sen criticises the view that social analysis ought to concentrate solely on the distribution of resources. Against writers such as Rawls, the CA holds that 'individuals differ in their ability to convert resources into functionings, providing an equal command over resources does not always mean giving equal opportunities' (Vaughan 2007, p.112). The differences between individuals and their capabilities reflects both personal heterogeneities and environmental diversities: our physical and mental condition, the physical climate we live in, the norms and values of our societies, and so on, each contribute to what we are able to be and do in our lives (Sen 1999, p.70; Sen 1992, p.27). This point is further expanded upon in the discussion below, section 3.3. In the context of education, a point can be made that increased expenditure does not equate to increased quality of provision. This is because, in order to understand the impact of increases to things like financial support for students, the range of qualifications on offer, or improvement to school facilities, we would still need to consider how students are actually able to use these resources. In the CA, the term 'conversion factor' is used to describe the ways in which individuals rely on different aspects of their environment in order to make use of resources. In education,

conversion factors might include well-trained staff, family expectations, home setting, peer group dynamics, financial dependence, and so on.

To summarise, Sen argues that the best framework for analysing social arrangements lies in evaluating the ‘capability space’ illustrated in Figure 2. This does not entail ignoring the role of resources (inputs) or the value of utility (outputs): they form part of the picture, but their value cannot be properly judged without accounting for people’s capability sets. Our ‘capability set’, as defined above, refers to what we are able to achieve based on the resources we have access to and what can be done with them given our interpersonal differences. From this ‘capability set’, then, we are able to achieve those functionings that we value. Promoting individual capability involves guaranteeing individuals’ ‘freedom of choice’ to actually achieve things they value and ‘real opportunity’ to choose from a valued set of alternatives. Thus, preference satisfaction (utility) plays an important part of the analysis, however it cannot play the only part of the analysis.

### **3.2.7 Freedom and agency in the ‘capability space’**

Central to the CA, therefore, is the view that capturing what individuals are actually able to achieve is central to social analysis. In other words, Sen places particular importance on the role of individual agency. Sen employs the term agent to denote ‘someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives’ (1999, p.19) and he defines agency achievement as ‘the realisation of goals and values (a person) has reasons to pursue’ (1992, p.56). Agency plays a vital role in how Sen frames wellbeing and understands what a good life consists in: an individual acts as an agent when choosing from a range of possible life choices and converting their capabilities into functionings. This focus on agency entails that an important way to conceptualise the relationship between capabilities and functionings is to consider the role of freedom. Sen highlights that it is possible to satisfy a person’s choices without necessarily giving them freedom to choose. For example, a student might not desire to apply to university but withholding this option from them does not respect their capability to make the choice themselves. As such, Sen holds that a capability can only be properly understood in the context of freedom; a person is only capable of doing something when it is possible for them to either do it or not do it.

And yet, both agency and freedom can be understood in different ways. Concerning freedom, Sen argues that there is an important distinction between opportunity-freedom and process-freedom. Opportunity-freedom is ‘concerned with our ability to achieve what we value, no matter what the process is through which that achievement comes about’ (Sen 2009, p.228). Process-freedom, however, is the aspect of freedom that is concerned with our having the freedom to play a role in bringing about what we value. Sen has described this distinction as one between ‘realised agency success’ and ‘instrumental agency success,’ where the latter is important in the sense of freedom being a form of control over how one’s life is lived (1992, p.58). Here, there is a correspondence between process-freedom and agency, where a

person’s capability revolves around their ability to act and bring about change *for themselves* (enjoying the agency freedom to secure agency achievements). Importantly, however, an individual might use their agency to achieve goals that they value which are not directly linked to their own wellbeing. On this, Sen is clear to distinguish between agency-achievement, realising one’s goals, and wellbeing-achievement, realising those goals specific to an individual’s own wellbeing (Sen 2009, p.287). For instance, a student might value taking their younger sister to school and this might be considered an agency achievement, which is not directly relevant to the student’s own wellbeing achievement (particularly if this makes them late to school themselves).

On Sen’s account, therefore, the relationship between capabilities and functions is explained with two important distinctions. Concerning what we can do in life, there is a distinction between freedom and achievement. The former refers to the range of possible things a person might achieve, whereas the latter refers to actually achieving one of those things. Concerning why either of these might be important, there is a distinction between wellbeing and agency. The former refers to the quality of life a person has, whereas the latter refers to the degree of control a person has over their life including achieving goals not directly linked to their own wellbeing. These two sets of distinctions yield four different concepts of advantage or value related to a person, presented in Figure 3: wellbeing freedom, wellbeing achievement, agency freedom, and agency achievement (Sen 2009, p.287; Gaper 2002, p.440).

	Freedom	Achievement
Wellbeing	Wellbeing Freedom	Wellbeing Achievement
Agency	Agency Freedom	Agency Achievement

**Figure 3:** four concepts of individual advantage

Each of these concepts might be taken as the focus of interest when assessing the capability space. In a social analysis of an educational context, these concepts can take on particular meanings. Student wellbeing refers, essentially, to how well a student’s life is going. In part, this will consist of universal features of human life, such as the physical and mental health of the person. However, in the context of post-16 education wellbeing is also likely to include how well a student is prepared for life after school. For example, does the student have a clear pathway, are they likely to meet specified entry requirements, are they making sufficient progress towards completion of their studies (and so on)? Student agency, however, corresponds to the realisation of goals or values that students themselves have reason to value. A student may have reason to value goals that do not conform to their school’s view of what they ought to value (their wellbeing). These ‘agency goals’ might include both well-placed intentions (e.g. to take on part time work to support the family, despite creating time constraints for studying) and less well-placed intentions (e.g. to drop out of school with no future plans). In this respect, a social analysis of post-16 education needs to balance the importance of students having control over their lives (agency freedom), which is explored in Chapter 5, with the need to ensure that young people are supported towards

reaching decisions, goals, and achievements that they will have reason to value later in life (wellbeing achievement), which is explored in Chapter 6 and 7.

### **3.3 The Place of Education in the CA**

Conceptualising education within the capability approach is not straightforward. Madoka Saito notes that there is a ‘potentially strong and mutually enhancing relationship between Sen’s capability approach and education’ (2003, p.7). For some time, it has been noted that the role of education in the CA is under-theorised (Walker 2006, p.163), however this is no longer the case. Increasingly, competing viewpoints have been advanced in the literature that situates education within analysis differently. Initially, Sen and others recognised that ‘being educated’ was one of a small number of ‘basic capabilities’ that made more desirable forms of life possible.<sup>9</sup> However, the aim of this study is to present education as a fertile capability that opens up the possibility of securing various capabilities that, taken together, enable young people to be prepared for life after school.

#### **3.3.1 Education as a capability**

In Sen’s early writing, he used the term ‘basic capability’ to refer to activities or achievements that are fundamental for human life and made possible by access to relevant resources (Sen 1980). This offers us a relatively narrow view of education as a capability, where the ‘capability to be educated’ is realised once a basic level of knowledge is acquired. Functioning as an ‘educated person’ can have both intrinsic and instrumental value. Being educated is intrinsically important for human life, particularly within the CA framework, because the approach views human life as consisting in ‘having reason to value various beings and doings.’ On this account, therefore, affording people the positive (process) freedom to pursue achievements they value depends upon their capacity for critical reflection and self-knowledge; to develop one’s own preferences and ideas about the good life (Pettit 2001; Qizillbash 2016). The role of education, therefore, is to serve as an operating background on which future life choices might be made and which can enrich the quality of life. Indeed, this is a theme that runs through the following chapters.

Furthermore, in considering her own list of basic capabilities, Robeyns includes ‘Education and knowledge: being able to be educated and to use and produce knowledge’ (2003, p.72). An instrumental view on education as a ‘basic capability’ might be developed from this, which holds that achieving an education is good insofar as it enables achievement in other areas of life. For example, Anand and Sen have argued that education is important, in one respect, for increasing a nation’s human capital (Anand and Sen 2000, p.2038). Here, education can be viewed as an achievement or functioning that individuals make use of to enhance their employability and find work that is rewarding for them (see: Jensen et al. 2010). This narrow view of education as a ‘basic capability’ is well-suited to social analysis in contexts

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<sup>9</sup> The term ‘basic capabilities’ is no longer used by Sen, but see early writings (Sen 1980)

where there is unequal participation or completion of education, particularly in developing societies where gender and class can operate as barriers to securing a decent quality of life.

Lorella Terzi (2007) has also argued that the ‘capability to be educated’ should be considered a basic capability. However, Terzi offers a thicker definition of this capability, defining it as ‘real opportunities both for informal learning and for formal schooling’ (p.25). Terzi goes on to argue that this view of education can be considered a basic capability in two ways. Firstly, like the narrow account above, education is fundamental to human life and so forms a relatively small number of centrally important beings and doings (Sen 1992, p.44). As such, lacking the opportunity to be educated ‘would essentially harm or substantially disadvantage the individual’ (Terzi 2007, p.30). Secondly, the capability to be educated plays a ‘substantial role in the expansion of other capabilities as well as future ones’ (p.30). Saito anticipates this discussion, and highlights that ‘under the term “expansion”, we can discuss two aspects of capabilities’ (2003, p.27). Firstly, an education includes the expansion of ability, such as the ability to read, to write, to count, to swim, and so on. Secondly, an education includes the expansion of opportunity, where an individual is capable of considering being and doing things that they were not previously aware of. Saito explains this in the context of students thinking about different career paths, but it might be argued that participating in education creates new opportunities for young people to participate in new forms of life, such as being part of social groups, taking on new hobbies, and so on. As such, there is a correspondence between the capability to be educated and the capability to be autonomous, in terms of the power of education to ‘create a new capability sets for the child’ (Saito 2003, p.27).

If we take Saito’s notion that education is closely connected to the development of autonomy, and consider this alongside Terzi’s position that the ‘capability to be educated’ consists of both formal schooling and informal learning, we have a broader view of what a social analysis in post-16 education might consider. Specifically, we might view the ‘capability for education’ to refer to ‘what young people may have reason to value in education’ (Vandekinderen et.al. 2017, p.4). This takes us beyond thinking about the formal aspects of developing academic knowledge, as a ‘basic capability’, and encourages us to think about the informal processes associated with schooling, as a fundamental but perhaps more ‘complex capability.’ In other words, we might investigate the notions of agency and participation that underpin a student’s experience of schooling to understand how their experience expands their capabilities and assists in the development of autonomy: of discovering what they really want to be and do, and have reason to value, in life after school (Hart et al. 2014).

Taking this broader view of education, as a process of autonomy building, invites a particular application of the CA that goes thinking in terms of ‘basic capabilities’ and towards thinking in terms of ‘complex capabilities.’ This broader view holds that school serves as a crucible for the development of young people, where multiple forms of agency are enacted and consist in the complex interworking of multiple

capabilities and forms of functionings. In this vein, an account of linked capabilities is advanced in Chapter 5 that hopes to explain how the often complex and sometimes contradictory aspects of individual agency in 16-19 year olds might be understood. Ahead of this it is useful to consider how the notions of capabilities and functionings have been developed in a theoretically similar fashion.

### **3.3.2 Education as a fertile functioning**

Wolff and de-Shalit introduce the notion of ‘fertile functionings’ to refer to the way that ‘doing well in one functioning...will lead to improvements in other functionings’ (2007, p.133-134). For example, finding employment will lead to further opportunities for affiliation. The opposite of this is what Wolff and de-Shalit term ‘corrosive disadvantage’, where ‘disadvantage in one functioning leads to disadvantages in others’ (p.133). For example, losing one’s job might reduce opportunities for affiliation. These two notions are useful for thinking about how individual capabilities and functionings are dependent upon each other in complex ways, and which it can be argued ‘enhance the theoretical apparatus of the Capabilities Approach’ (Nussbaum 2011, p.42-43) by taking us closer to what Sen has in mind, writing:

even though it is often convenient to talk about individual capabilities...it is important to bear in mind that the capability approach is ultimately concerned with the ability to achieve *combinations* of valued functionings...we have to see the person’s overall capability in terms of combined achievements that are open to them (Sen 2009, p.233 ff).

Nussbaum has suggested that ‘education plays a fertile role, opening up options of many kinds across the board’ (2011, p.42-44). A good education will create opportunities for employment and economic security, for different forms of affiliation and the use of practical reason. The ways in which education can serve as a fertile functioning by enriching different aspects of life is discussed in Chapter 5, where the discussion explores how the post-16 setting acts as a site for identity development. Here, a case is made for recognising that post-16 education promotes a cluster of capabilities including self-knowledge, social esteem, organisational abilities, aspirations, and the development of moral standpoints.

By contrast, the value of post-16 education can be reduced by the impact of corrosive disadvantages. A disadvantage outside of school life can easily have destabilising or catastrophic effects on educational participation, and this is taken up in Chapter 6. Consider, for example, the potential effects of material deprivation, malnutrition, or lack of parental support, on young people. This is particularly important if we consider what Vandekinderen et al (2017) term the ‘the exclusionary effects’ of the human capital policy model, which are ‘largely based on the image of the ideal student, seen as needing to participate in “appropriate” subjects’ (p.3). These authors argue that the human capital rhetoric ‘easily disregards the fact that some citizens have few available choices and resources’ and serves to ‘reinforce individual notions of self-blame’ because of the rising demands of self-responsibility’ (p.4). Importantly, corrosive disadvantages are dynamic and transgenerational, meaning that they are forms of disadvantage that can

spread throughout an individual's life experience and be affected by parental experiences. For example, Susan Mayer's research (1998) explores the ways in which severe poverty acts as a corrosive disadvantage that 'leads to problems with being educated, maintaining one's health, and finding shelter' (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007, p.134). However, Mayer concludes that the problems caused by economic disadvantage (material poverty) cannot necessarily be cured through economic means (1998). Moreover, her argument supports a wider view that children's school success is more closely associated with levels of parental education than income (Barry 2005; Lareau 2003). This account of corrosive disadvantage positions education as a precarious good: one that is susceptible to corrosive disadvantages but also one that offers the promise of a fertile functioning.

### **3.3.3 Diversity in student lives**

The view that young people's education is vulnerable to corrosive disadvantage highlights the connection between school life and individual circumstances. As such, understanding the relationship between education and the CA requires understanding the sources of variation between young people's lives as an important step in social analysis. As discussed above, the critical point here is that equal resources in education do not equate to equal freedoms and opportunities to achieve. In other words, providing the same resources for all students may not guarantee 'real opportunities' for all students (Sen 1992, p.31).

Indeed, the account of fertile functionings and corrosive disadvantages encourages us to recognise that there will be significant sources of variation between individuals when we attempt to make sense of the culmination of their combined capabilities or functionings. Sen identifies different sources of variation that shape what individuals are able to do with resources they have access to, such as education (Sen 1999, p.70-71):

- i. Personal heterogeneities. People have disparate physical characteristics, and these make their needs diverse. In his writing, Sen is primarily interested in physical characteristics of individuals, however Nussbaum has advanced the view that interpersonal differences exist in terms of internal capabilities: the character traits and attitudes individuals might have (Nussbaum 2011). This discussion is taken up in Chapter 7 where it is argued that a particular demand of a dignified education is aiming to work with, and develop, the psychological and emotional capabilities of young people during the youth development phase. Importantly, this necessitates recognising that preparing young people for life after school will involve preparing them for different challenges to one another.
- ii. Physical environment. Students experience different living conditions and this necessarily impacts on their capability to make use of education. On the one hand, the cramped and uncomfortable living conditions that some young people experience will dictate the quantity and quality of work they are able to do away from school. On the other hand, the physical infrastructure of the school will influence the ways in which students are able to make use of resources. In Chapter 6, the impact of physical spaces is discussed and how this can impact on capability development.

- iii. Social climate. Here, there can be important variance in education related to the nature of community relationships (such as public places in which young people can study) and the opportunities for young people to develop social capital through their schooling. Again, this forms the basis of discussion in Chapter 6, where the importance of work-experiences and positive relationships with teachers acts as an important conversion factor for students.
- iv. Relational perspectives. The capability of students to make use of their education will also be impacted by the different patterns of behaviour, social conventions, and peer-group norms that they encounter throughout their education. Here, educational participation becomes relativistic in the sense that doing well in one particular educational environment will demand a particular mode of being, a way of conforming, that may not be relevant in a different educational environment. Consequently, students will need to respond to the relational perspectives of those around them: for example, in Chapter 5, the capability for self-expression is discussed and its connection to public recognition and self-esteem. For each student, navigating the expectations of those around them is a necessary part to deriving value from their post-16 education.

These sources of variation are discussed in more detail throughout the study. They form a particular part of the analysis in Chapter 6, which focuses on the nature of ‘external conversion factors’, and Chapter 7, which focuses on internal capabilities as a source of variation impacting on student views on wellbeing.

#### **3.3.4 Clustering of disadvantages in education**

By considering how these sources of variation affect what students are able to be and do, it is also possible to think of how sources of disadvantage can cluster (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007, p.120). Clustering disadvantage refers to the ways in which specific forms of disadvantage can be dynamic, which is to say a person can accumulate and reproduce disadvantages over time. An example of this is discussed later on, where a student explains how she is expected to carry out daily chores for her family. This leads to her spending less time on her school work, which in turn means that her relationships with teachers becomes strained and this leads them to call home, and the student’s parents punish her for not doing well in school. It is unlikely, from the outside, for us to notice the pattern of inequality that this young person experiences; it is only by taking her view and listening to her voice that we might gain an insight into the plurality of disadvantage. Significantly, this thickens our account of inequality because it suggests that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds will have fewer opportunities than their more advantaged counterparts, even if they are given more resources (the problems that this student faces will not be resolved by an increase in books or equipment).

Wolf and de-Shalit argue for an approach to public policy that attempts to ‘de-cluster disadvantage’ (2007, p.120). In the example above, we might identify groups of young people who are likely to take on additional responsibilities at home and therefore be disadvantaged in their school life. There might be an underlying cause for why this is the case, for example material deprivation or single parent homes, but

this might not be necessarily relevant. The critical point for ‘de-clustering’ disadvantage, in the first instance, is ensuring that the pattern of clustering is disrupted. The student themselves highlighted this, suggesting that if her teachers were aware of how many chores she completed at home then they might not consider she was lazy. She might be wrong in this respect, but it is clear that post-16 education can be significantly disadvantaged by poor housing, lack of parental support, increased family responsibility, low aspirations, and so on: all of which are disadvantages that typically cluster together. Indeed, this illustrates the Matthew Effect that clustering disadvantages attract: where ‘the rich get richer and the poor get poorer’ (a key finding from Chapter 5). In this instance, the student faces a form of spiralling disadvantage where hardship at home creates hardship at school, which in turn creates hardship at home, and so on. An entry point for de-clustering disadvantage here would be for parents and teachers discuss the issue together, thereby disrupting the pattern created by not talking about the issue at all (which adds to the student’s experience of difficulty).

An important aspect of this account of capability deprivation through clustering disadvantage is that poverty can lead to consequences that are not immediately obvious or connected with material deprivation. For instance, Tania Burchardt argues that there ‘are strong associations between being poor, being out of work, having low educational qualifications and the risk of developing a long-term health problem’ (2003, p.63). Clustering disadvantages can also have a significant impact on the life choices that young people make: returning to Susan Mayer’s research, Wolf and de-Shalit emphasise the point that those living in poverty are typically trapped in a short-termism that makes it less likely to have a sense of future and to plan ahead (2007, p.149). One implication here is the effect that multiple disadvantages can have on young people’s capability to aspire and make reasoned decisions about their future. A broader implication is that clustering disadvantages inhibit the potential for young people to develop or enlarge their capabilities.

This supports the view that the effects of clustering disadvantage are important because capabilities have a counter-factual nature. They include ‘what someone would achieve, or even could have achieved, had different choices been made’ (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007, p.63). Indeed, the difficulty with this is discussed in Chapter 5 where many students expressed a desire to go back and do things differently at the end of the academic year. For these students, there was an overriding sense that they ought to have done better and could have done better if circumstances had changed. However, despite the culmination of their choices resulting in disappointment, these students were unlikely to adjust their aspirations or view of the future. Chapter 7 highlights that many of the young people interviewed retained a fixed but vague notion of what they could do in life after school, despite increasingly struggling at school. Whether or not these students were right in their convictions, Chapter 5 highlights how the Matthew Effect of functioning related to key achievements in youth development, namely identity formation. Here, like Wolf and de-Shalit, the study identifies ‘high performers’ who were increasingly advantaged by their educational experience and ‘low

performers' who faced increasing disadvantage during their post-16 experience (2007, p.82),<sup>10</sup> which in turn impacted on their preparedness for life after school.

### 3.3.5 Capability security in education

There are, however, ways in which student capabilities or functioning might be insecure. Wolf and de-Shalit raise an important point here:

in their zeal to emphasise freedom to achieve functionings, capability theorists have failed to bring out a somewhat different issue of greater importance: the freedom to *sustain* functionings (2007 p.65).

This is to say that, in paying attention to the range of achievements that might be valued by a post-16 student, we must also consider the extent to which these achievements are free from risk. Take the following achievements, for example: high levels of attendance, making academic progress, having good relationships with staff and students, wider participation in clubs and societies, clear and achievable aspirations for the future, and so on. Each of these achievements might need to be negotiated against other achievements that young people might value, such as: taking on part-time employment, supporting their family at home, looking after siblings during holidays, volunteering, dedicating time to university applications, and so on. If we accept that, for many students, achieving all of these functionings will not be possible due to constraints in time, money, family support, and other resources, then it follows that 'trade-offs' will inevitably arise. For those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, this can mean they are 'exposed to risks which they would not have taken had they had the option' (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007 p.66). In this sense, there can be on-going challenges for students to achieve 'capability security' or 'secure functioning' where they cannot manage the competing demands of the school and home lives. Developing young people's capabilities entails making sense of the various risks that can arise when they attempt to move from one form of functioning to another.

Wolf and de-Shalit identify three forms of risk associated with functioning (2007, p.70). Firstly, there might be a risk to a specific functioning: Chapter 6 discusses how many students feel constantly under threat in their post-16 life as a result of an exams-focused and performance driven school environment. Secondly, there can be cross-category risk to functionings, where the risk to one functioning spreads to other functionings: academic progress, high aspirations, supportive peer groups, and so on, can be put at risk by ill-health, a slow transition to post-16, or subject choice (discussed in Chapter 5). Thirdly, students might face inverse cross-category risk, where attempts to improve functioning in one aspect of life might put other functionings at risk. 16-19 year olds face increasing demands, which can include increased school workload, the need for part-time employment, family responsibilities, time spent researching university or careers choices, and so. For those young people from particularly disadvantaged

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<sup>10</sup> Wolf and de-Shalit discuss the general tendency for 'high performers' in regards to functioning, where individuals who enjoy fertile functionings are increasingly advantaged compared to those who do not. They do not specifically relate this account to education.

backgrounds, this contributes to an increasingly risk environment, where time spent on one commitment can reduce functioning in another.

### **3.3.6 Summary**

The discussion above has gone beyond the basic framework of the CA to consider how capabilities and functionings might be both fertile and secure, in particular. In doing so, it has presented a version of the CA that is fundamentally concerned with the control that individuals have over their own lives. Here, the role of post-16 education is not simply to ensure that individuals have the freedom to achieve something, but whether they are able to achieve things in their own way (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007, p.164), and thus be masters of their own lives. This has represented an attempt to provide a sociologically thicker notion of education as an autonomy-building process, rather than simply a 'basic capability' as found in the early literature. Indeed, this effort reflects Robeyn's viewpoint that the CA is well-placed for developing such a nuanced view of education that goes beyond human-capital models, arguing the CA:

looks at what education means for a life that is composed of many different dimensions and sees education as a contribution to the development of the kind of person one will become and the types of things one will be able to do. Clearly, labour market skills do not disappear from the picture, but other skills and experiences also become important, such as the formation of one's character, the cultivation of moral virtues, and an appreciation of culture in all its dimensions (2016, p.399).

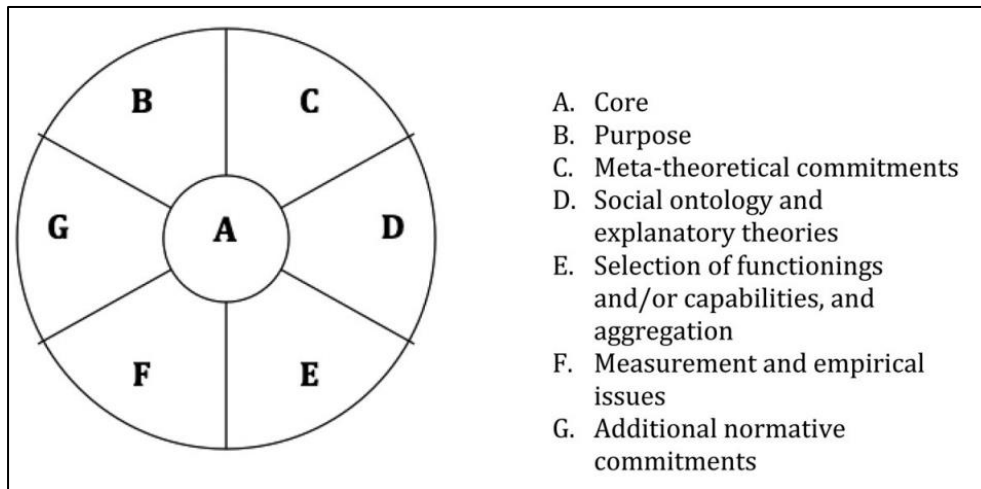
## **3.4 Applications of the approach**

The discussion now turns to consider how the CA approach might operationalise these theoretical concepts in practice. Whilst Martha Nussbaum (2011) has argued that she and Amartya Sen offer two rival traditions in the approach, the CA literature includes a complex family of research ideas and frameworks. Here, the discussion draws on Ingrid Robeyns notion of *capabilitarianism* (2016) to sketch out what is distinctive about CA research, before going on to identify three core empirical concerns the CA might address, each of which are relevant to the present study.

### **3.4.1 Capabilitarianism**

Ingrid Robeyns (2016) use the term '*capabilitarianism*' to refer to the diverse family of research that has grown from the CA based on a single, 'ultimately normative character' (p397). To make sense of this complex literature, Robeyns argues for a '*cartwheel view*' of the capability approach (Figure 4) that can accurately describe the various '*family members*' found in the literature. This view is particularly useful for two reasons. Firstly, it accommodates the range of adaptations of the CA that do not fit neatly into the Sen/Nussbaum traditions, defending against the view that the CA is 'in a state of near anarchy' (Vero

2010, p.224). Secondly, this view provides an essential checklist for researchers to develop their own ‘capabilitarian’ framework, enabling them to work through the complex choices that need to be considered as part of using a CA research framework.



**Figure 4:** Cartwheel view of the capability approach (Robeyns: 2016)

The cartwheel view presents ‘capabilitarianism’ as made up of seven wedges, or modules, that represent different aspects of empirical work that need to be specified. The CA is defined by a commitment to the central module, A, the core of the approach: by and large set out in section 2. Beyond this, researchers need to consider what the purpose of using the approach is (Module B): to address global or local issues, to evaluate a particular policy or social institution, and so on. Module C refers to the meta-theoretical commitments that might arise from this purpose. For instance, if the study purports to construct a theory of justice, a meta-theoretical consideration is whether this theory will be an ideal or non-ideal theory of justice. Next, Module D refers to the kinds of ontological commitments that researchers might make in their analysis. Here, social researcher ought to question what assumptions are being made in relation to the nature of social reality. For example, all CA studies are interested in the role of individual agency, but how this operates in relation to social structures will need to be accounted for. In Module E, researchers will need to consider whether their analysis measures capabilities or functionings, and whether particular capabilities or functionings will be afforded more value in the analysis. Module F refers to the choices that researchers will need to make regarding the measurement of capabilities or functionings. In general, this includes whether a study will use either qualitative or quantitative methods, or both, and what specific methods of analysis might be deployed. The final module, G, addresses any further normative commitments that a capability scholar might make in their account. For example, a researcher might include normative principles stemming from youth development studies that inform the kinds of capabilities or achievements that are of interest. These normative commitments might extend a study beyond the core principles of the capability approach without contradicting them. This cartwheel view of the CA illustrates the various ways in which the approach demands further specification from researchers and it provides a framework for understanding the various philosophical and theoretical points of

departure found in the literature. Recasting the literature as ‘capabilitarian’ is helpful because it stresses the normative principles that capability scholars are all committed to, whilst mapping out the possible pathways open to applications of the CA.

In practice, the CA has been used as an evaluative framework in three distinct but often overlapping ways. Firstly, it has been used to assess and evaluate individual wellbeing. Secondly, the CA has been used to assess the equality of social arrangements. Thirdly the CA has been used to critique, change or develop public policies that aim to toward social justice. These three types of application offer potential avenues for social research to apply the CA, but often these concerns will overlap in practice, as they do with this study. An example of each type of application is offered below to illustrate the potential of the CA in social research

### **3.4.2 Evaluating individual wellbeing with the CA**

Firstly, the work of Otto Hans-Uwe has sought to investigate the ways in which the CA can better inform our understanding of individual wellbeing, with a particular interest in the lives of young people. For example, Hans-Uwe and Ziegler (2010) have argued for a sociologically based, materialist interpretation of the capability approach in conjunction with specifying education as a ‘non-idealist version of Bildung’ (p.232). The materialist aspect of this argument means recognising that material conditions, such as wealth, form objective conditions and preconditions that determine and predetermine the kinds of lives that individuals live. The role of education, therefore, is to enhance ‘agency, voice and recognition’ in young people so as to enable them to negotiate these material conditions and allow them to fully participate in society. Hans-Uwe routinely places the importance of individual development in his account of the CA, arguing elsewhere with Sabine Schäfer:

the individual, on the one hand, is conceptualised in the context of the CA as a person who already has certain characteristics at her disposal, especially a high degree of critical reflection that allows her to develop a life plan, to recognise options for action, and to reconcile one with the other (2016, p.9).

Here, the CA provides a social justice framework that foregrounds the role of agency. In this framework, education can open up possibilities for young people to exercise agency through interacting with others, developing life plans, and learning how to navigate the material aspects of society (such as finding work and managing finances).

This view of education, as a site for agency and participation, is utilised in this study. In particular, Chapter 5 focuses specifically on the forms of agency that post-16 students engage in during their school life. It identifies the role of ‘identity practices’ as central features of student agency that help explain and evaluate individual wellbeing, with a particular emphasis on how student preparedness is composed of these identity practices.

### 3.4.3 Evaluating social arrangements

Secondly, Elaine Unterhalter's work (2003a; 2003b; 2009) has sought to apply the CA in order to assess social arrangements. In particular, it has taken a special interest in applying the capability approach as a means to assess gender inequality in educational contexts. Her work has gone beyond the often-loose association Sen makes between education, schooling and capability development, and sought to unpick the complex settings in which schooling takes place. Unterhalter's work makes that case that assuming educational participation, or schooling, offers a measure for capability development overlooks the particular disadvantages that students might experience through their schooling as a result of social relations. A concern Unterhalter has explored (2003a) relates to the South African national education policy response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in light of the significant rates of sexual violence and gender discrimination in South African schools. The argument she presents is that whilst the CA is useful for framing this issue as a fundamental concern for assessing the value of education and schooling, the approach itself needs refining to better understand the social conditions in which capabilities are formed in schools (2003a). Specifically, Unterhalter argues for complementing the approach with a social theory that can map out the social relations of the various actors in the school setting so as to better conceptualise how attitudes and practices are produced. In this context, she writes:

How are we to understand 'social arrangements' without an adequate social theory? As I outlined above, it might be possible to claim that one was utilizing the capabilities approach and view schooling as a space free of contestation, unmarked by race or gender inequalities, whose outcomes were always an expansion of human capabilities. In this reading, the South African government policy would be an entirely adequate response predicated on aspects of the notion of capabilities. But schools are not outside society. It seems to me, political and social analyses are crucial to make the capability approach 'real' and that the capability approach without an explicit acknowledgement of the salience of social theories of inequality lays itself open to becoming a hollow mantra (2003a, p.18-19).

Unterhalter makes the case that the CA is valuable because it focuses on the everyday concerns of individuals when assessing social relations, however it stops short of supplying a framework for understanding how everyday concerns are shaped by social relations. Indeed, Unterhalter et al.'s (2013) use of feminist theory as a conceptual framework to understand social relations has enabled her to identify the broken link between education distribution and empowerment, where social forces 'press down' on girls and prevent their education from being 'capability enhancing.' Similarly, research by Joan Dejaeghere and Soo Kyuong Lee (2011) recognise the need for a social theory to conceptualise the everyday interactions of individuals before applying a CA to evaluate social relations. They echo Unterhalter's position that:

Drawing on a capabilities approach to examine what matters for equity in education, suggests we need to give more emphasis to what people value in the everyday interactions in schooling, such as the curriculum, teacher relations and processes within education, rather than concentrating

efforts primarily on access to education or the achievement of a certain level of education (2011, p.29).

The view that the CA depends on an analytical framework for conceptualising social relations is taken up in Chapter 6, where a social ecological model of human development is used to analyse how external conversion factors vary between individual students in their everyday lives. In doing so, it draws attention to the interactions that students have with teachers and curricula, as well as a broader range of environmental phenomena.

#### **3.4.4 Critiquing public policy**

The third way in which the CA has been applied in social research is as a framework to critique public policy and recommend programmes for social change. Ingrid Robeyns (2006b), for example, has proposed three policy models for education (discussed in Chapter 2): human capital, human rights, and human capabilities. Melanie Walker (2012) has continued with this policy analysis, drawing on the work of policy sociologists to approach current frameworks with a critical lens (for example, see: Baptiste 2001; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). From this critical position, Walker (2006) recommended a capability-based approach to policy-making as a programme for social change and social justice. For Walker, applying the CA to social justice programmes entails placing human capabilities in the space of evaluation regarding policy and raising research questions such as:

Are capabilities distributed fairly? Do some people get more opportunities to convert their resources into capabilities than others? Which capabilities matter most in developing agency and autonomy for educational opportunities and life choices? (2006, p.164).

For Walker and co-author Peppin Vaughn (2012), public policy can and should play a role in expanding individuals' capabilities. Education policy can play a special role here, the authors argue, because education transmits and shapes young people's values and these values form the basis for agency (i.e. values give reasons for being and doing particular things). In this study, an account of agency is developed in Chapter 5 and 6 that extends from this: arguing that by the post-16 phase, students have reached a point in their development where they can effect change in their environments by contesting and shaping the values in their environment, including in the classroom and wider school community.

Thus, this study argues that the post-16 policy environment does not face the same conundrum that other contexts might according to Vaughn and Walker, who recognise that social and political values from policy are reproduced in student capability development (2012 p.502). It does share the sentiment that incorporating notions of 'capability development' into current policy frameworks is likely to be counterproductive where this falls short of promoting the importance of agency and freedom that the approach is built upon. Furthermore, a case is made in Chapter 7 that this entails promoting a view of education that avoids determining the nature of students' capability sets, and focuses instead on enhancing 'the ability of the individual autonomously to realize, understand, recognize, articulate and act

towards or follow their own formed (through education), informed and reasoned values' (Vaughn and Walker 2012, p.506).

### 3.4.5 Summary and criticism of applications

The discussion above has presented the CA literature as best captured with term 'capabilitarian,' to reflect the diversity of the field. This stresses the way that empirical studies will typically draw on the CA as a partial framework for social analysis, rather than a complete theory or methodology. As such, beyond the basic normative commitments, which were unpacked in the previous section, the literature is characterised by a broad range of approaches, interests, and research questions. This section identified three broad thematic interests within the literature that make up practical applications of the CA: assessing individual wellbeing, social arrangements, and public policy. Typically, however, these thematic interests overlap in empirical studies. Indeed, in the present study each of these themes feature in the analysis and this has been signposted in the discussion above.

Before discussing how the CA is used in this study, however, it is useful to explore several criticisms that applications of the CA have faced. For the purposes of clarity and relevance to the current work the following objections are considered: the CA is underspecified and therefore cannot be operationalised in empirical research; the CA leaves open the possibility of justifying 'reckless agency' when individuals are given freedom to decide the kind of life they value, especially in relation to children or young people; when individuals are not given the freedom to decide the kind of life they value, paternalism arises; and the CA is grounded on an account of individualism that ignores the reality of social structures or power relations.

***The approach cannot be operationalised:*** Firstly, the CA has been criticised as radically under-specified (Gasper 2002; Giri 2000; Alkire 2007; Robeyns 2006). This leaves open a number of 'theoretical lacunae' that are needed to be filled as part of a research design process (Robeyns 2006, p. 353), which have lead critics to claim that the CA is an 'an unworkable idea' (Rawls 1999, p. 13) that cannot be operationalised for empirical studies in a practical way (Roemer 1996). The underspecified nature of the approach has been a central point of discussion in this section, and the kinds of specifications that need to be made in order to make use of the CA have been identified through use of Robeyns' work on capabilitarianism (2016). Following this, a recent publication by Robeyns draws a distinction between the *capability approach* and a *capability theory*; arguing that the term *capability approach* refers to the general, open and underspecified approach, whereas the terms '*capability theory, analysis, account, or application*' refers to the specific use of the CA (2018, p. 29), which is arrived at through the procedure outlined in the cartwheel view of the CA. In this respect, the CA furnishes us with a rich vocabulary for analysing the social world, which has been explored above, but the development of a specific research design depends upon the scope and aims of the project at hand. Consequently, 'there is one capability approach and there are many capability theories and keeping that distinction sharply in mind should clear up many misunderstandings

in the literature' (Robeyns 2018, p.29). This suggests that operationalising the CA is difficult due to the lack of theoretical specification, but this does not prevent it being operationalised altogether. Rather, there is a strong demand placed on the researcher to translate the core notions and interests of the CA into a research design that considers the broad range of questions that Robeyns' cartwheel view of the approach makes clear. In the following chapter, the discussion seeks to specify the CA in relation to the research aim in this study and how it is operationalised.

***Where the approach relies on participants to define capabilities, it is too permissive:*** A second objection to the CA is that, in some forms, the CA's account of the 'good life' and the relevant capabilities for achieving this are defined by whatever individuals have reason to value and therefore lacks a substantive account of how people should live. Sen's work, in particular, defines wellbeing in terms of people having the freedom to achieve things in life that *they have reason to value*. The objection to this asks: what constitutes a sufficient 'reason to value' something and what should we do if people are irrational or reckless in what they choose to value; does this give us capabilities that would, in some sense, reduce wellbeing? For example, it is possible to imagine how a thief, a drug-addict, or sex-worker could each argue that they have reason to value particular 'beings and doings' which we might disapprove of but are nevertheless central to how they live their lives. Indeed, each might be able to provide very clear reasons to value these beings and doings. Here, we might claim that Sen's CA demands that we have an obligation to support these individuals by providing freedoms or opportunities or resources that would enable them to achieve these 'beings and doings' we disapprove of.

In response to this, we might return to some key principles of the CA. Firstly, some capabilities scholars do not use Sen's procedural approach to defining capabilities and prefer to prescribe particular capabilities which everybody ought to value, in virtue of being human. This would offer a substantive, rather than procedural, account of capabilities and this position is adopted by Nussbaum in relation to her Central List of Capabilities (2011); however, this gives rise to separate criticisms which are explored below. With this substantive account of the 'good life', it is therefore possible to avoid lapsing into permissiveness or moral relativity. Secondly, a general point can be made in defence of Sen's approach that freedom to decide what one wants in life (irrespective of what it is used for) is a first order good regarding social justice. The criticism that some people might not utilise this freedom to live a worthwhile life in particular cases does not *necessarily entail* that this freedom is not worthwhile in general. In other words, the CA holds that people ought to have the freedom to choose, but what they actually choose is of second order importance. Here, we might argue that if the thief, the drug-addict and the sex-worker have real opportunities to live differently, then the demands of social justice are satisfied. Thirdly, a stronger defence of individual freedom might be drawn from Sen's criticisms of subjective wellbeing (SWB) and his account of adapted preferences (1994, 2000), which emphasise that having a reason to value a particular functioning depends upon having the actual freedom to choose between various states of being.

In many cases, such as the thief, the drug-addict, or the sex-worker, we might consider whether the kinds of 'beings and doings' that they value are in fact reflections of a disadvantaged condition they are in and that they might choose a different set of 'beings and doings' if they were in a position to consider a greater range of possible life choices. Here, the argument follows, we might need (either as researchers or members of a political community) to delve deeper into the situation that individuals are in and ask whether they might have reason to value alternative choices or lifestyles.

An example of this, relevant to the current study, would be what to make of a young person who reports that they have reason to drop out of school. Moreover, in this example we can imagine a range of plausible reasons why a young person might have to make this choice, for instance in order to take on a full-time job and support her family, or because she changes her mind about what career she would like in the future and her current learning programme is now unsuitable. Here, our initial objector would argue that the CA commits us to endorsing the individual's decision to drop out of school. However, a closer reading of the CA suggests that (i) it is an important part of the process to listen to and involve the views of individual, even where we initially disagree with them, so that possibilities for agency are not withheld, and (ii) we may discover that this individual has more complex 'reasons to value' their decision, and that their decision might be different if a greater range of choices were available. For example, the student might be unaware that they are entitled to financial support whilst studying or that they could transfer to a new learning programme. And if, even after considering a wider range of alternatives, this individual does not change their mind, then the CA is not committed to endorsing this viewpoint in practical terms: we can still hold that this individual's choice is wrong and not give her the opportunity to drop out of school without being having reduced her capability set (either because we consider paternalism justified in light of her age or because education is such a basic capability that her total freedom is significantly enhanced across the life-course by continuing with it). In either case, where substantial disagreements arise concerning how people choose to live, Sen's CA simply proposes that: 'public debate and critical scrutiny are often helpful, (but) it stops well short of proposing one particular process as relevant in all contexts' (Deneulin and Shahani 2009, p. 32). As such, on the level of public decision making or defining institutional values, identifying what people have reason to value does not have to stop (or start) at the individual level, but can be a process involving local and collective 'agency of people acting in those contexts to address these questions themselves and build up and share their repertoire of good practices' (Deneulin and Shahani 2009, p. 32). This is important because it highlights that even when capabilities are defined procedurally, from the ground-up and by individuals, this does not preclude shared-decision making or democratic processes. In this study, the dilemma of a young person who wanted to drop out of school did not arise, however a strong case is made that schools might do more to better understand the reasons young people have for participating in post-16 education in the ways that they do. Here, the argument is that improving the agency and capability development of young people necessitates cultivating the ability to reason practically about what one values being and doing. Moreover, it can be

noted that some young people might have satisfactory reasons for wanting to leave school (if they are offered an apprenticeship, which would open up opportunities that their school-life would not); one of the advantages of the CA is that it leaves open this possibility when evaluating wellbeing.

***Where the approach relies on participants who are children or young people to define capabilities, it is too permissive:*** This objection is an extension of the previous point, but particularly relevant for this study. Here, the general concern about whether individuals can reason effectively about their wellbeing becomes specifically troublesome when the individuals we are concerned about are children or young people (see: Biggeri et al. 2011). Within the literature, attention is often given to whether very young children can define capabilities given their cognitive development, but it is plausible to extend this concern to 16-19 year olds in respect of their psychological or social development. For example, consider the teenager that believes that they have ‘reason to value’ avoiding school work in favour of playing computer-games all day or engaging in anti-social behaviour. Concerns similar to this are found in Chapter 7, where the discussion highlights how young people in this study grappled with boredom, frustration, anxiety and disappointment in their studies and, in response to this, potentially adapted their aspirations and their account of what they had reason to value in ways that might not be consistent with the school’s views (for example, when students report ‘I just want to get out of school’ or ‘I don’t care what grade I get.’). In general terms, this objection holds that children or young people should, specifically, not be responsible for defining what they have reason to value in life because there are not yet fully able to reason about their own wellbeing. The replies considered above are relevant here, but for this study it is possible to press the objection further: surely, there are specific achievements or forms of life that we want to encourage young people to engage in, especially in their post-16 education?

Firstly, we might reply to this objection on theoretical grounds: as above, even if we cede that this teenager’s choice is not the result of a lack of choices or adapted preferences, we can still endorse the CA and reject the individual’s account of what they value. This is to say, it is consistent to object to some ‘reasons to value’ at an individual level because they are demonstrably not in the interest of that individual or the community they belong to, and this case is made stronger when we are assessing the decisions that young people make about their futures. In other words, we might make the case that there is a moral and prudential case for paternalism when dealing with young people; encouraging them to explore alternatives and keep different options open to maximally advantage their future wellbeing. Here, this presupposes that there is a degree of social or institutional recognition of some generally accepted values (accepted either locally and within a particular community or accepted globally and applicable to all humanity). For Sen, deciding these values lays at the heart of a deliberative, participatory democracy (which might, for example, investigate the question: how should we enforce a young person’s right to an education?). In this case, we might withhold the freedom and opportunity for individuals to achieve things that are generally agreed to be against their interest, such as dropping out of school, on the grounds that (i) individuals

form part of a community from which their rights derive (a form of contractarianism), (ii) their decision goes against a generally accepted definition of wellbeing (a form of liberal universalism), or (iii) individuals should not be unnecessarily disadvantaged by choices they made in their youth, at a time when there is not a sufficient possibility to know what they would have reason to value as adults (a form of paternalism). In this sense, this reply would accept that there are some specific achievements or forms of life that are central to the well-being of 16-19 year olds in post-16 education.

Secondly, a practical response to this objection can be found in this study. Here, the research design (discussed in the following chapter) involved interviewing twenty 16-19 year olds in a semi-structured format, typically for over an hour. During these interviews, participants were able to engage in deliberative, rational and reflective discussions about their lives and what they believed they had reason to value. Importantly, the issue of what to make of outlandish or irrational desires did not arise. In part, this reflects the sample of the study; these were twenty academically able, relatively aspirational individuals who were generally quite autonomous, keen to take advice from staff, and had good reason to want to make the most of their studies and time in school. In this sense, it is important not to underestimate the capabilities of young people to reflect on and take seriously their own lives, even when they become disillusioned, especially by the time they enter the post-16 phase. It is worth acknowledging, however, that this study might have had to engage with this objection more fully if it had involved younger students or young people with greater experience of marginalisation in society and less success in school, who would perhaps have good reason to be cynical about the value school, employment, and so on. Despite this, there is an important body of research that applies the CA effectively with vulnerable young people or communities ‘at the margins’, which highlight that school-leavers are often effective in reasoning about their own lives (see: Otto and Ziegler 2010; Chiappero-Martinetti and Sabadash 2014; Schafer and Otto 2016).

***Where the approach relies on researchers to define capabilities, it becomes paternalistic:*** A fourth objection found in the CA literature is the claim that the approach, in some forms, can lead to paternalism (Sudgen 2006; Claassen 2011; Claassen 2014). Whereas the objections above are the result of Sen’s procedural approach to defining capabilities (that is, through the use of individuals reasoning about what they have reason to value), other applications have followed Nussbaum’s substantive proposal that argues that we can prescribe a list of basic capabilities that are necessary to flourish in the main spheres of life (2000a, 2011). The problem with this substantive approach is that we remove an important element of freedom or autonomy from individuals when we prescribe what they should value and what their wellbeing consists of. In the context of this study, the charge of paternalism might apply if we (researchers or school staff) believe that particular achievements are valuable and others not for young people. For example, we might believe that young people *ought* to value academic achievements over personal relationships and weight our analysis or policy prescriptions in favour of capabilities that support

academic achievement. However, whilst this study has supported the view that there are, indeed, some basic capabilities (rather than achievements) that are central to an account of wellbeing in post-16 life, it has sought to avoid this position in two ways.

Firstly, the research methodology employed is largely procedural when defining capabilities; the analysis presented in Chapter 5, for example, sets out a series of linked capabilities that emerge from the students' narratives about the kinds of life they value. In Chapter 6 and 7, however, the discussion moves to more substantive views about what wellbeing might consist in, in order to develop these linked capabilities in the post-16 setting. An important analytical point about this is that a substantive approach is adopted once particular capabilities are defined in Chapter 5; in other words, the overall argument follows the form of 'students have reason to value the capability to achieve X, then it is prudent to develop a corresponding capability Y.' To put this into more practical terms: the study highlights that identity formation is a something post-16 students have reason to value (based on the accounts of students themselves), and it then goes on to specify capabilities that are needed to do well in this respect, such as being self-controlled or having self-purpose. A second, connected, way in which this study has strived to avoid paternalism is by focusing the evaluation of student lives in terms of general capabilities that do not commit individuals to any *particular* action. For example, in Chapter 5 the capability for self-concept is explored as something that each participant has reason to value. The analysis, therefore, presents the ability to develop self-concept as an important feature of post-16 provision for students. Here, the emphasis is on the *freedom* that students have to develop or exercise this capability, not on the *achievement* of it. As such, the account of capabilities presented in this study is not, in any straightforward sense, paternalistic. As Claaseen suggests:

A theory requiring people to laugh is disrespectful of some person's choices not to laugh. A theory requiring people to have the ability to laugh does respect this choice. Only when the capability theory refrains from advocating functionings it avoids paternalist implications (Claaseen 2014, p. 60).

***By focusing on what individuals have reason to value, the approach is too individualist:*** A final objection to the CA is that it is overly individualistic, specifically because it focuses on the experiences and values of individuals at the expense of considering group experiences and values. As such, critics might hold that the CA fails to take account of social structures or categories that are relevant to evaluating social justice, such as race, class, gender, sexuality and so on. In responding to this objection, it is useful to highlight that different forms of individualism exist, and these take on different meanings in different fields, including social theory, psychology, political economy, and philosophy. Indeed, the CA is committed to one form of individualism, namely ethical individualism, and not necessarily others. Ethical individualism is the claim that:

when evaluating different states of social affairs, we are only interested in the (direct and indirect) effects of those states on individuals' (Robeyns 2005, p. 108).

As such, ethical individualism is a component of a CA research methodology: it makes a claim about who should count in our evaluations of social justice or wellbeing. This is to say, when we judge whether a society is fair, or a social policy is effective, we ought to collect data at an individual level rather group-level. One reason for this is that ‘if the smallest fundamental unit of moral concern is any group, such as the family, the social group or the community, then analyses will systematically overlook any existing or potential inequalities *within* these units’ (Deneulin and Shahani, 2009, p. 35). As such, a core principle of the CA is that social analysis should not only seek to uncover inequalities between groups (such as rich or poor, or men and women, or young and old) but also inequalities within those groups. Indeed, for Nussbaum the importance of taking account of individual lives in social analysis and social justice arises naturally from:

the recognition that each person has just one life to live, not more than one. [...] If we combine this observation with the thought...that each person is valuable and worthy of respect as an end, we must conclude that we should look not just to the total or the average, but to the functioning of each and every person (Nussbaum 2000a, p56. Cited in: Robeyns 2018, p. 57).

Therefore, ethical individualism is a position that asserts that general wellbeing or disadvantage must be investigated at an individual level. It does not necessarily entail the following two positions: firstly, that wellbeing ought to be defined by individuals themselves or that, secondly, wellbeing cannot be affected by social structures. To consider the first position, the CA does not share the view that only individual views about right and wrong are counted (as discussed in reply to the second and third objection, above). In this sense, there is a vital distinction and possible confusion, between ethical individualism (which posits that it is good for social analysis to focus on the lives of individuals) and some forms of moral individualism found in political philosophy (which posit that ‘good’ is defined by individuals, in terms of their own interests or values). The CA might define ‘the good life’ according to substantive ideas about flourishing (a naturalistic account of the virtues, for example) and then assess whether each individual within that society or a group is capable of living that life, whereas our initial objector assumes that the CA leaves definitions of the ‘good life’ up to each individual. To consider the second reply, the CA does not assert that individual lives cannot be shaped, improved, or disadvantaged by social structures, whether they be social categories (such as class), social forces (such as power relations), or social goods (such as esteem, friendship, community, and so on). In this respect, Robeyns has outlined how the CA’s ontological position, whilst remaining up to the researcher to clearly define, is at least compatible with thinking about how individuals are situated within their environments:

a commitment to ethical individualism is not incompatible with an ontology that recognizes the connections between people, their social relations, and their social embedment. Similarly, a social policy focusing and targeting certain groups or communities can be perfectly compatible with ethical individualism (Robeyns 2005, p. 108).

It is also important to observe that a significant tranche of studies using the CA argue for the importance of social relations (see Sen’s account of agency wellbeing: 2000) and social goods (inspired by Nussbaum’s

attention to notions such as affiliation and involvement in the community: 2000 and 2011), and there has been a consistent effort to investigate capabilities in relation to race, gender, class, disability and age. Indeed, the discussion above highlighted how Elaine Unterhalter's work (2003a; 2003b; 2009) has sought to explain how girls' capabilities are shaped by the structural power of gender relations, and this is indicative of a broader field within capability analysis that considers gender inequality with use of the CA, whilst being informed by ethical individualism (see, for instance: Nussbaum 2000a; Nussbaum 2000b; Robeyns 2003; Vaughn 2007; Klasen 2007; Abel and Frohlich 2012; Walker 2012; Vaughn and Walker 2012; Vandekinderen et al. 2017). Moreover, the social force of gender inequality is a focus in Sen's earliest writings on the CA, for example he highlights that: 'the systematically inferior position of women inside and outside the household in many societies points to the necessity of treating gender as a force of its own in development analysis' (Sen 1990, p. 3). A broader point can be made here that social structure can have an important role in shaping people's capability sets, what they are able to be and do, and as a result they form an important aspect of capability analysis. Thus, in order to understand what a person is capable of being and doing in their life, it is often the case that we need an insight into how their life is affected by 'caste, class, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, (dis)abilities, and the economic system' in which they live because these 'structural constraints are very likely to have an influence on a person's capability set' (Robeyns 2018, p. 66). The way in which ethical individualism shapes the analytical framework of the current study is discussed in the following chapter.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has offered an overview of the CA and identified how it relates to the present study. It introduced the CA with reference to two normative principles, freedom and opportunity, which we can translate to the post-16 setting when thinking about students' participation. The chapter went on to present the CA's view of equality, unpacking various core concepts including capability, functioning, wellbeing, agency, disadvantage, and so on. This provides us with a conceptually rich theoretical framework to consider the ways in which post-16 students lives are bettered through education and participation. In particular, this discussion has highlighted that 'preparedness' for life after school requires us to think beyond employability and take seriously how the multiple dimensions of student life can be supported through policy and practice. By looking at how the CA might be applied in practice, three areas of focus have been identified. From these, it is possible to think about how a CA to post-16 education might proceed:

- i. To evaluate individual student wellbeing. This would focus on the extent to which young people enjoy freedoms and opportunities to live a worthwhile life. In particular, it would consider how post-16 students are able to convert their educational experience into achievements that they value. In part, this involves thinking about what a 'worthwhile life' might look like for a 16-19 year old in the world today and identifying a particular set of achievements to assess their wellbeing from. Alternatively, this might involve asking young

people to deliberate and create their own list of achievements, and then to consider the extent to which they are free to achieve them.

- ii. To assess social arrangements in post-16. This would focus the analysis on the resources and opportunities that are made available to students through their education and investigating how fairly these are distributed. Here, an account of ‘fairness’ is derived from the CA, where the analysis is interested in the ‘real opportunities’ to convert resources into achievements. This entails thinking about ‘diversity’ (the interpersonal differences between students regarding their abilities to make use of resources) and ‘plurality’ (the interpersonal differences between students regarding what they value). Our account would seek to understand the extent to which the structures of post-16 provision enable capability development for all, regardless of gender, class, ethnicity, and so on.
- iii. To critique public policy. This would focus on the ways in which public policy (set by government) and local policies (set by post-16 providers) encourages practices that support the development of individual capabilities. The point of interest here is on the distribution of resources and opportunities in the post-16 setting and the extent to which young people are able to make use of them. With the normative principles of the CA in mind, the analysis would consider the degrees to which agency and freedom exist in the post-16 setting, particularly the ways in which students are able to exercise autonomy in realising achievements they have reason to value. Moreover, the analysis would seek to uncover the ways in which policy interests or discourses might serve to diminish or obscure the importance of capability development.

As the following chapters will explore, this study is interested in all of these applications. By focusing on the notion of ‘preparedness’, it considers the wellbeing of individual students, how this is supported through schools, and how schools negotiate this in the current policy context. In Chapter 5, special attention is paid to student agency and a series of ‘achievements’ are set out related to identity formation. These achievements act as ‘capability list’ throughout the study, insofar as the discussion considers the different ways in which these achievements can be secured. In Chapter 6, an assessment of social arrangements is carried out by paying special attention to the post-16 environment and the ways in which resources and opportunities are made available to students. Throughout the study, a critical focus remains on the policy context of post-16 education and the way in which this shapes post-16 provision, post-16 practice, and the everyday lives of students.

## Chapter 4: Project Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction

Sharon Gewirtz and Alan Cribb suggest that ‘it is sensible to see sociology as an art as well as or as much as a science’ (2009, p.20). These authors emphasise the perspectival and interpretive nature of social science: the view that making sense of the social world demands acts of imagination and interpretation that cannot take place from a purely objective perspective, a ‘view from nowhere’ (Nagel 1986). This is particularly true of research that draws on a capability approach (CA). Chapter 3 emphasised that the CA is neither a theory nor method for social inquiry. What it offers instead is an evaluative framework consisting of some conceptual tools that help illuminate important aspects of social life. Indeed, the discussion of ‘capabilitarianism’ highlighted that operationalising the CA requires value judgements about how it might be done best within particular contexts.

The aim of this chapter is to provide a rationale for the research methodology used in this study, making clear the ways that the CA has been used in analysis. In doing so, it (1) establishes the focus and rationale for this project, making clear the research aim and questions to be investigated. Then, (2) it presents the methodological framework for the study; setting out the epistemological and ontological positions, defending the use of generic qualitative methods, and identifying congruence between the CA’s ethical individualism (as a methodological principle) and the use of Grounded Theory (as a method to explore it). The chapter goes on to (3) describe the data collection process and ethical considerations of the research, before (4) discussing the data analysis process. In particular, this final section focuses on how a two-stage data analysis design was used to apply the CA to address each research question.

#### 4.1.1 Focus and rationale of the study: the place of preparedness

The study uses the notion of ‘preparedness’ as a lens to explore the post-16 setting. The notion of preparedness refers to the capability that young people have to live a life they have reason to value once they complete their post-16 studies. However, as the discussion progresses, ‘preparedness’ is understood as consisting of a collection of linked-capabilities (Chapter 5) that are specific to the youth development process in the post-16 setting. As such, ‘preparedness’ might be considered a ‘meta-capability’ that operates as a critical notion in this study, challenging assumptions about what the aims and values of post-16 education ought to be and investigating the role that post-16 providers might play in capability development.

Importantly, there are two components to this account of preparedness. Firstly, it offers the idea that post-16 education has an instrumental value insofar as it can support young people to secure goods in the future. For example, a ‘good post-16 education’ ought to enhance employment and higher education

prospects. Secondly, preparedness relates to the idea that post-16 education has an intrinsic value for young people; it can be viewed as an autonomy-building process where students explore what they have reason to value being and doing in life. The account of education as an autonomy building process was highlighted in Chapter 3, and is central to connecting the notion of preparedness with values in education. This focus advances this analysis of post-16 education beyond outcomes (what is achieved at the end of education) to include an interest in processes (what is achieved through and during education).

The CA's interest in agency and participation ('process-freedom') provide a further elaboration of what preparedness involves. Using these concepts, the CA holds that individuals need to be supported in, and are responsible for, bringing about the outcomes that they value. In other words, outcomes are not 'done to' individuals. Consequently, preparedness for life after school can be considered a 'process' that young people engage in through their education as agents. Using the CA in this way enables the study to problematise the idea that education ought to be viewed uncritically as a good (either as a resource or an outcome) for all individuals, as is found in current policy discourses. This is because experiences of education that do not promote agency or participation fall short of preparing young people for life after school.

In this way, the CA is used to 'critique and assess social norms, practices, and discourses' that are associated with human-capital models of policy (Robeyns 2006a). Here, we can take specific aspects of post-16 education such as academic achievement, university applications, work experiences, and so on, and ask whether these ought to be viewed uncritically as a good; whether they actually result in young people being better prepared for life after school. In the current policy model, these are viewed as achievements that enhance employability or future life prospects. Yet, it is plausible that these achievements do not always represent good value for the student. Achievements can take place in the wrong areas (a pathway that is not of interest), for the wrong reasons (the assumption that some careers or qualifications will have greater value), in the wrong ways (by gaming the system). This is to say, we might raise questions about the processes through which these outcomes are achieved and the conditions under which resources are provided. In other words, this study grounds its analysis by asking what individuals are able to do with their education in relation to the kind of life that they have reason to value.

The discussion in previous chapters has illustrated that: (i) youth development is now considered to be a non-linear and diverse process leading to uncertain trajectories (Introduction); (ii) policy reform is committed to an expectation of youth development that supposes linear and uniform outcomes, based on a human-capital model that marginalises these patterns of youth development (Chapter 2); (iii) the CA offers an evaluative framework that centralises the agency and participation of young people, providing an alternative to current policy models that better captures the youth development process and promotes social justice (Chapter 3). Consequently, the rationale of this study is to apply a CA or capability perspective to post-16 education. In particular, this entails investigating whether an interest in the process

of education, understood through agency and participation, can yield a clearer sense of educational value than an interest in the outcomes of education alone. Specifically, educational value is couched in terms of ‘preparedness’: a notion that corresponds the cumulative capabilities of young people to live a life they have reason to value after school.

#### **4.1.2 Research questions:**

This study, therefore, is interested in the notion of ‘preparedness’ as a meta-capability, whereby education serves as a process of capability development or autonomy building. To investigate this, its core aim is to:

- explore which capabilities young people develop through the process of participating in post-16 education, particularly those that play a role in preparing for life after school, and what affects their development.

In doing so, the study aims to identify a range of achievements, or functionings, in the post-16 phase that are associated with preparedness. A secondary aim is to understand the role that resources and opportunities play in supporting these achievements. Here, the analysis focuses on two areas. Firstly, how the school environment offers resources and opportunities to support capability development. Secondly, how differences between individual students affect the ways in which they can convert resources and opportunities to support capability development. With this in mind, the study focuses on three research questions:

- i. Which capabilities are developed in the post-16 setting that prepare students for life after school?
- ii. How do resources and opportunities in post-16 education support the development of these capabilities?
- iii. How can differences between students affect their potential for capability development?

Question 1 focuses on process of capability development in the post-16 setting. Specifically, it aims to identify specific capabilities that are central to an account of ‘preparedness.’ This is achieved in two ways in the data collection. Firstly, by identifying achievements or functionings that students have reason to value, and analysing what the capability to achieve that functioning involves. Secondly, by identifying achievements or functionings that students do not realise but nonetheless value. This reinforces the nature of a capability-set as partially counter-factual, where wellbeing consists of the freedom to choose between various values states of being. In this regard, data collection explores the range of possible achievements open to students in the post-16 setting.

Question 2 focuses on what might be called the ‘institutional infrastructure’ of post-16 education. Such infrastructure refers to resources, both material and non-material, and opportunities for their use that might contribute to capability development. In the capability literature, these are typically understood as ‘conversion factors’ that operate in an individual’s environment that make particular capabilities possible given their access to them and ability to use them. This question addresses how a ‘post-16 environment’ might shape and make possible different forms of life for students, which inevitably shape their

capabilities to be and do things that they value. The aim of this question, therefore, is to consider how the value of post-16 education might be enhanced or diminished by particular conversion factors.

Question 3 considers the ways in which capability development might vary between students. It aims to do this by exploring how personal characteristics might act as ‘internal factors’ that support capability development in post-16 education. Primarily, this entails considering how students might have reason to value developing different capabilities based on personal interests, abilities, and desires. In this regard, capability development is connected to a broader understanding of the student as becoming a young adult, who is likely to value their post-16 education based on a personal view of what intrinsic and instrumental goods it might offer them in a way that is shaped by the on-going, reflective process of youth development.

In addition to these research questions, an auxiliary aim of this project is to provide an account of personhood within the CA framework. Research has noted that Sen’s CA, and to a lesser extent Nussbaum’s CA, fall short of providing an adequate or sociologically specified account of personhood (see: Gasper 2002; Giri 2000). This study’s focus on the development of individual persons, and the close attention it pays to individual agency, presents an opportunity to develop such an account of personhood within a CA framework. In practice, this is achieved by drawing on the perspectives and experiences of a small number of participants in order to account for the way they, as individuals, live their lives. The reason for this was addressed in the Introduction, where it was suggested we might learn more about education, in general, from the perspective of a single student than from considering how all students experience a single phenomenon.

## **4.2 Methodological Approach**

To investigate these questions, this study adopts a methodology that sits within the qualitative tradition. This tradition offers a variety of possible frameworks and techniques for exploring the social world that ‘do not encompass a single universally understood position’ (Caelli et al. 2003, p.8), but are nevertheless held together by a basic allegiance to some foundational philosophic assumptions. The strategy of research here can be described as:

- a qualitative study using a combination of generic qualitative methods, supported by Grounded Theory, and an evaluative framework, developed from the CA, which takes an interpretivistic approach to investigate capability development in the post-16 setting, with a view to understanding the process of student ‘preparedness.’

### **4.2.1 Ontology and epistemology**

Sitting within the qualitative tradition, this study takes on three distinctive features of qualitative research in general (Bryman 2008, p.366). Firstly, it adopts an inductive view of the research process whereby the

collection and analysis of data is used to develop theory. As such, this study works with the particular experiences and attitudes of participants to produce a generalised theoretical account of their experience. Secondly, the epistemological position adopted is broadly interpretivist, which means that understanding the social world is achieved through greater stress on the interpretation of that world by participants themselves (Shaw and Frost 2015). Lastly, the ontological position adopted is broadly constructivist insofar as social properties (such as power, freedom, and so on) are constructed through social interaction rather than products of the 'natural' world (Crotty 1998). In general, qualitative research is characterised by a basic allegiance to these philosophical positions. Differing methodological approaches can be advanced with these positions (Bryman and Burgess 1999), and here a generic methods approach is adopted. In doing so, the study aims to give participants a voice in the research to identify, define and explain their educational experiences.

#### **4.2.2 Generic qualitative methods**

This study adopts a 'generic qualitative method' (Caelli et al. 2003) that seeks 'to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved' without necessarily attempting to develop particular theories or explanatory frameworks' (Merriam 1998 p.11) As such, generic methods are 'not guided by an explicit or established set of philosophic assumptions' (Caelli et al. 2003, p.3-4) and are therefore open to both criticism and praise. On the one hand, Caelli et al (2003) have argued that generic methods are problematic, especially regarding the transparency and robustness of the framework. However, the advantage of this method is that it encourages a 'basic or fundamental qualitative description' of data (Sandelowski 2000, p.335), which provides an 'interpretive description' that offers a 'non-categorical' approach (Throne et al. 1997, p.169). In doing so, it provides an approach to data analysis with which an evaluative framework can be overlaid, such as the CA, without falling into an overly-elaborate or convoluted theoretical framework, what might be called a 'metaphysical swamp' (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007, p.77). This offers the research both theoretical benefits, making the interpretive journey from student experience to capability analysis more direct, and practical benefits, by not overburdening the conclusions with theoretical commitments.

Due to their underspecified nature, generic methods require the same degree of critical reflection and robustness that are found in established qualitative traditions. To achieve this, the discussion follows Caelli et al's (2003) recommendations to specify four parameters of the study to enable the reader to adequately evaluate the research. These parameters involve establishing: the theoretical positioning of the researcher, the congruence between methodology and methods, the strategies to establish rigour, and the analytic lens through which the data are examined.

Theoretical positioning refers to 'the researcher's motives, presuppositions, and personal history that leads him or her toward, and subsequently shapes, a particular inquiry' (Caelli et al. 2003, p.9). It is important to make this 'leading' and 'shaping' explicit (Cheek 1995; Lather 1986; Rudge 1996), and this is relevant to the current study in two respects. Firstly, my experience working as a member of teaching

staff and support staff in a school over 7 years has shaped my understanding of post-16 policies and practices. In a personal sense, this guides an interest in articulating what I have experienced to be the salient features of post-16 life. Secondly, my academic background and training creates a particular 'disciplinary socialisation' (Ray 1999). As a student with a background in philosophy and social ethics in addition to education policy and research, this research is partially driven by an interest in approaching social ethical concerns ahead of sociological investigation. The selection of the CA for this study might well be viewed as a product of this disciplinary socialisation: it focuses the research on questions about social justice, political arrangements, and ethical concern.

The study aims to establish congruence between methodology (the philosophical beliefs or world-views about the social world) and methods (the tools or techniques used to investigate the social world). It does this by unpacking the philosophical basis of the CA, particularly regarding notions of agency and freedom, and incorporating these into an analysis based on Grounded Theory. This is discussed further below, in 2.3 and in section 4. A critical point here is that the naturalism and interactionism of Grounded Theory is philosophically consistent with the ethical individualism of the CA.

The debate about what counts as a rigorous study has evolved in the literature (Denzin and Lincoln 2005), emphasising the nature of credibility, the representation of and legitimacy or privilege given to different researcher and participant perspectives, the positionality or reflexivity of the researcher, and so on (Cheek 1996; Lynch and Wooglar 1990; Purkis 1994; Richardson 1991). Firstly, this study hopes to present credible discussion of the data by presenting its analysis in a transparent fashion that could be repeated with another set of data or by another researcher. Each chapter draws extensively on extended pieces of qualitative data, providing a context-rich and original presentation that avoids over-fragmenting participant voices. Secondly, the study aims to work from a position of reflexivity regarding the interpretation and representation of participant perspectives. A central concern here is whether children or young people are able to reflect on their own capabilities, which has been much discussed in the capability literature (see: Biggeri et al. 2011). For reasons discussed in the following chapters, the study assumes that 16-19 year olds are well equipped to reflect on their own choices and capabilities in relation to their educational participation. A strategy used throughout the data analysis was to return to participants to discuss tentative findings. The aim of this was not governed by a particular theoretical stance that assumed that participants needed to add layers of meaning and reflection on their previous accounts, but rather to discuss with them the kinds of outcomes being discussed from the research process as a whole. At this point of initial analysis, participants were often better able to see how the CA operated in practice and offered reflections on whether the findings were consistent and resonant with their own experiences and suggested aspects of their experience that were not yet captured. For example, when presented with the typology of agency that is discussed in Chapter 5, one participant felt that the framework was accurate but that the relationship between different spheres of agency was more interactional and less linear than I had initially supposed. This encouraged an iterative aspect to the

analysis that enhanced the reflexivity of my own analysis and the legitimacy of the views that it attempts to represent.

Lastly, the analytic lens applied to data analysis refers to the ‘methodologic and interpretive presuppositions that a researcher brings to bear on his or her data’ (Caelli et al. 2003 p.9). Here, the emphasis is on ‘how the researcher engages with his or her data’ (p.9). The concepts of the CA provided the analytic lens, and this is discussed in depth below. In general, the CA concepts meld well with the tradition of naturalism in qualitative research, which aims to provide a rich account of social reality ‘as it really is’ by describing people and interactions in as natural way as possible (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). The study’s use of in-depth and semi-structured interviews aimed to provide participants with both the time to talk in detail and the freedom to direct the interview in ways that they felt relevant. Furthermore, the CA assumes a position of ethical individualism (Robeyns 2005; Deneulin and Shahani 2009; Gore 1997). This means that the CA takes individuals, rather than groups, as the sole units of concern in analysis (Comim et al. 2006; Robeyns 2005, p.107). As an analytic lens, this supported drawing on ‘emotionalism’ in the research, which ‘exhibits a concern with subjectivity and gaining access to inside experience’ and ‘is concerned with the inner reality of humans’ (Bryman 2008, p.367). This is the case because the CA is driven by an interest in what individuals desire or value ‘being and doing’, and this directs the analysis of Chapter 7 in particular. As such, the use of a generic research design enabled the interviews and subsequent analysis to elicit information relevant to a CA evaluation.

#### **4.2.3 Grounded Theory and Ethical Individualism**

Building on the discussion above, it is useful to draw out the relationship between the CA’s ethical individualism (as a methodological or philosophical principle) and the methods to explore it in this study. The importance of ethical individualism, and potential objections arising from it, were discussed in the previous chapter, however it is useful to highlight how this principle is incorporated into the research design. From a methodological point of view, ethical individualism holds that ‘structures and institutions (are) evaluated *in virtue of* the causal importance that they have for individual well-being’ (Robeyns 2005, p.107). In this sense, ethical individualism is compatible with methodological holism, which holds that research can refer to social phenomena as explanatory concepts in its analysis (Inglis 2012). From a philosophical perspective, by placing the individual at the centre of our analysis, we are committed to looking at the world through their individual eyes and assessing their freedom to be and do what they have reason to value. Importantly, this does not commit the study to defining wellbeing in terms of how these individuals describe it (as discussed in section 2.4.5) nor does it commit the study to ontological or methodological forms of individualism: the claims that no social facts exist or that they can be explained only in terms of individuals, respectively (Robeyns 2005, p.107). In other words, looking at the world through a person’s eyes and asking how well their individual life is going does not preclude us from explaining their position in terms of social explanations, such as their experience of gender inequality or

racism. Social goods and structures form part of our analysis because the options a person has depend on their relations to others and the actions of institutions (Dréze and Sen 2002, p.6), and so our analysis draws on social explanations in relation to how they can shape individual agency. This study draws on Grounded Theory to explore these aspects of ethical individualism in order to concentrate on the individual experiences of participants and the meanings they have for participants.

Grounded Theory is used through semi-structured interviews and thematic coding, which emphasise this tradition's origins in pragmatism and interactionism (Corbin and Strauss 1990). The use of Grounded Theory offers the research two in-built principles that support the use of the CA as an analytical lens. Firstly, it allows for the research to conceptualise how young people and their experiences are continually changing in response to evolving conditions and are therefore consistently subject to revision. This is of relevance when considering the agentic focus of the CA. Secondly, Grounded Theory distances itself from both strict determinism and non-determinism: adopting a view that actors are both influenced by their environment and capable of influencing it. As Corbin and Strauss suggest, Grounded Theory:

seeks not only to uncover relevant conditions, but also to determine how the actors respond to changing conditions and to the consequences of their actions. It is the researcher's responsibility to catch this interplay' (Corbin and Strauss 1990, p.5).

This is of relevance when considering the freedom focus of the CA because the capability that an agent has to 'be and do' things that they value is a product of this relationship between the individual and their environment. In this regard, the study claims to offer a strong congruence between its methodology and the methods it uses to explore the research questions.

### **4.3 Data collection**

The discussion has identified the aim of the research, the research questions, and methodological framework for this project. In advancing an empirical research design that could adequately capture capability development in young people, the decision was taken to situate the research in a single site, a sixth-form, and recruit student participants to engage in semi-structured interviews over the course of one academic year. The guiding principle for this was to ensure that data collection was as in-depth as possible to generate data that was highly individualised and contrastive but drawn from a single site.

#### **4.3.1 The research site**

Data collection took place at an inner-city academy school called Fulbright and located in London. This is a large school with over 1,300 students: over 50% speak English as a second language, over 30% are eligible for Free School Meals, and 15% are refugees or asylum seekers. The sixth-form caters for 200 students, where approximately 60% are female. A recent Ofsted report offers the following insight into the post-16 provision here:

Outcomes for sixth form students are good. National published data indicate that students entering the sixth form with slightly below average levels of GCSE attainment are helped to

make good progress, relative to their starting points. A-level standards are at the national average. AS level standards are below national averages. The learning and progress observed by inspectors in lessons was a little more variable in a minority of lessons. Nevertheless, the vast majority of students demonstrated a sense of self-direction and ambition.

The quality of teaching is good. In one media studies lesson, students gave mature and balanced responses on the social network forum in relation to current news and produced imaginative pieces of work. In some lessons, especially history, students benefit from very well-structured teaching and development of higher order thinking skills. However, some students lack the confidence in written skills that would enable a more effective transition from Key Stage 4 and help them be more successful in their AS level examinations.

The leadership and management of the sixth form, in response to this, are prioritising the need for a more appropriate curriculum in line with students' needs and more effective Year 12 induction. Academic guidance is good as students review their personal learning targets and progress with tutors and receive highly valued support and feedback.<sup>11</sup>

This site fits well with the framework of the study: to explore a mainstream post-16 provider that reflects the current policy priorities. The main learning programme offered to students is A-levels, supported with daily tutor time and the opportunities to engage in a range of extra-curricular activities. Moreover, the sixth-form benefits from a well-resourced Raising Aspirations programme that supports students in finding work experiences, university taster courses or residentials, and additional co-curricular opportunities.

An additional benefit of the site is that I have worked there as a member of staff for several years. This facilitated access to the site as a researcher, where I could act as my own gatekeeper. To gain permission for this research from the site, I wrote to the Principal and outlined my research proposal, which was discussed with the school governors before granting consent. At the time of data collection, I had worked at the school for six years. During this time, I worked as a post-16 tutor with responsibility for supporting the academic and pastoral development of students in Year 12 and 13. Additionally, at the time of starting the project I worked a teacher in the social science department, delivering A-levels, for one year. The relevance of this on the theoretical positioning of the project has been discussed above, and the ethical implications of this are discussed below.

#### **4.3.2 Recruitment of participants**

When recruiting participants, it was important to mitigate the influence I had as a member of staff and to ensure that students could volunteer to participate without undue influence. In order to do this, I introduced the project at a sixth-form assembly using a template from my university, a screenshot of my

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<sup>11</sup> Ofsted. (2010). Details withheld for confidentiality.

profile page on the university website (which contains details about the study) and highlighted my university email address, in order to distinguish my interests as a researcher and my role as a member of school staff. The rationale of the assembly was to invite students to complete an expression of interest form that contained basic information about the study, the kinds of questions that students would be asked, and included my university email address. Students were asked to deposit completed forms, with their names on, in a post-box outside the sixth-form office at any time over the next week. The following week, I invited all students who had expressed interest to attend a follow-up meeting where I repeated the introduction to the study, its aims and purpose, gave students a detailed information sheet about the study, and offered students an opportunity to ask questions. At this point, I was careful to highlight to students that their participation was voluntarily, they could withdraw at any point in the study without giving a reason, and that any information they shared would be treated confidentially (subject to the school's child protection policy). Twenty students volunteered to participate in the study and interviews were scheduled with them over the following weeks.

### **4.3.3 The sample of participants**

The study recruited twenty participants. The sample reflected the heterogeneity the student-body at Fulbright, with participants from diverse social, cultural and economic circumstances. Nine students were in Year 13, nine students were in Year 12, and two students were 'retaking' Year 12 after failing to pass their exams at the end of the first year of study. Only one male was recruited because this was the only male volunteer, and this places a constraint on the findings. The study could have reframed its analysis to view capability development from a gendered perspective as a result of the sample characteristics, however this was not pursued. The reason for this is that the application of the CA in this study is highly particularistic, prioritising an analysis of personal experience. This is to say that the study is primarily focused on evaluating student experiences by keeping in mind the concern: *what would make life go well for this individual student?* In doing so, it does not strive to neglect issues of gender but rather accommodate the intersectional differences between participants, considering how their school lives are made up of complex relationships between their age, gender, ethnicity, family histories, personal values, and so on. A useful example, to illustrate such differences, is found in Chapter 6 where students' freedom to attend university outside of London is discussed. Here, the critical issue affecting this freedom was not simply gender (although this is relevant) or family background (although this was also relevant), but these factors in combination with the personal values of the participants. Some female students from religious and conservative family backgrounds did not feel that they had this freedom whilst others did. In part, the aim of the research is to explain these differences and how they are experienced in participants lives. Table 1. highlights key features of the sample, including family participation in higher education (which might influence aspirations) and the aspirations these students had for life after school (university, employment, or unsure). Here, the greatest differences within the sample relate to A-level choices, family background and experience of higher education. A more diverse sample would have included more male participants and a body of participants who wanted to go into employment after school.

Pseudonym	Year Group	A-level study programme	Family background	Family experience of higher education	Aspiration	Number of times interviewed
Ercia	13	Biology, Chemistry and Maths.	Bangladeshi British	Yes	University: Biomedicine	2
Mabel	13	Biology, Sociology, and Psychology.	Black Caribbean British	No	University: Sociology	2
Alia	12 (retaker)	History, Chemistry and Biology	Arab British	Some (extended family)	University: Biomedicine	2
Zara	12	Politics, History and Literature.	Indian British	Yes	University: History	2
Arabella	12	Philosophy. Literature and Theatre Studies.	White and Black African	Some (extended family)	Unsure	2
Ava	13	Literature, Politics and History.	Somali	No	University: Literature	1
Shayma	12	Psychology, Sociology and English Language.	Bengali	Some (extended family)	University: Sociology	2
Bianca	12	History, Politics, and Economics.	Kenyan and British	Yes	Unsure	1
Kim	13	Physics, Maths, and Further Maths.	South Korea	Yes (abroad)	University: Engineering	1
Elijah	13	Physics, Maths, Further Maths and Chemistry.	Black African British	Yes	University: Engineering	1
Selina	12	Philosophy, Literature, Textiles	Moroccan British	No	Unsure	1
Sofia	12	Philosophy, Sociology, Media	Egyptian-British	No	Unsure	1
Trisha	12 (retaker)	Chemistry, Maths, Biology	Kurdish British	Some (extended family)	University: Dentistry	1
Aliyah	13	History, Politics, Literature	Kurdish British	Yes	University: Politics	1
Mia	12	History, Literature, Theatre Studies	Black British	No	University: Politics	1
Emily	12	Politics, Art, History	White British	No	University: Art	1
Olivia	12	History, Philosophy, Literature	White British	Yes	University: Literature	1
Yafit	13	Theatre Studies, Literature, Sociology	Black British	No	University: Sociology	1
Elisha	13	History, Politics, Geography	Black African British	No	University: History	1
Leah	13	History, Psychology, Literature	Lebanese British	No	University: History	1

**Table 1:** participants in study

#### 4.3.4 Interviews

The interviews with students were in-depth and semi-structured. They each lasted approximately one hour and were held on the school site, typically in the post-16 study room or classroom after the normal school day. Data collection was spread across the year and was interrupted half way through to conduct some initial analysis. Towards the end of the year a second round of interviews was held with six students, which allowed me to follow up some initial findings from the research. These six participants were selected because they had taken an interest in the subject of the study and asked if they could continue to contribute to it. A timeline of data collection in 2014/2015 was as follows:

- September: recruitment
- October and November: first round of interviews with 10 students
- December: initial transcription and analysis
- January: first round of interviews with remaining 10 students
- February and March: initial transcription and analysis
- May and June: second round of interviews with 6 students and transcription
- July onwards: final analysis of interviews

The design of the interviews was intended to attract detailed discussions about the students' school lives by talking for long periods of time about their personal experiences and then attempt to connect these to the notion of capability development. As discussed, utilising a generic qualitative method enabled the research design to be developed in a way that foregrounded the CA's philosophical values. With this in mind, these interviews were designed with the following seven conditions in mind:

- i. To discuss students' participation and achievement in terms of specific capabilities (or valued functionings).
- ii. To be able to compare these capabilities in relation to existing capabilities lists, specifically Nussbaum's list, with participants.
- iii. To deliberate over lists and ideas about the CA with participants.
- iv. To be able to understand capabilities in relation to key concepts within the capability literature, notably: process freedom, opportunity, choice, and agency.
- v. To generate context-specific data, which offers rich and full accounts of student lives made up of examples to represent the complex and diverse lives of students, and that could generate 'thick' analyses of student lives in a sensitive manner.
- vi. To be able to draw on my emic position by working 'anthropologically' in terms of seeing and feeling the culture of the setting and produce findings that are consistent with the lived experience of those participants.
- vii. To work with sufficient 'closeness' to the data to generate a theoretical analysis without over-fragmenting it in the process of data analysis.

To do meet these conditions, the interviews were structured in 4 stages where the first 2 stages focused on describing the participant's school life and the second 2 stages aimed to recast these experiences in relation to capabilities:

- i. Introduce Fulbright: the first part of the interview asked students to describe what Fulbright was like and why they had applied to study there. The aim of this was to unpack what students valued about their education, what their aspirations for the future were, and give them an opportunity to characterise their school environment. The responses here were useful reference points to refer to in the second half of the interview.
- ii. School life: the second part of the interview asked students to describe their participation in school. Students were asked to describe what their participation consisted of, what they enjoyed and did not enjoy, what stood out to them as particularly valuable or worthwhile, and how it might be improved.
- iii. The Capability Approach: the third section of the interview reviewed a basic introduction to the CA. Students were given a series of claims central to the CA with an example to illustrate its meaning. For example: 'there is a difference between a man who chooses to fast and a man who starves because he lacks access to food, where we should be more concerned about the latter.' After some time to read this, students were asked what they felt about these claims and what they thought its basic principles were. Students were then given the list of 'central capabilities' from Martha Nussbaum, and asked to highlight whether they thought they were the important and if they would add to or take away anything from the list. The aim of this was to generate some reflection on and understanding of the approach (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007), rather than record students' critical analysis of the approach, before proceeding with stage 4 of the interview.
- iv. Student views on capabilities in post-16 education: the final section of the interview then sought to connect some of key points from part 1 and 2 with the CA. This meant that each interview consisted of a different series of questions based on the student's own school experience. Specifically, students were asked about particular aspects of their post-16 participation in terms of narrative reflection ('in what ways might this have been valuable for you in the future?', 'what was most important about this experience at the time?') and counter-factual questioning ('if you couldn't have done that, what else would you have chosen?', 'what influenced you to make choice?', 'would you do this again if you could go back to the time?'). In light of our previous discussion about the CA, this stage of the interview was sometimes successful in eliciting responses that were couched in 'capability language', such as students' enjoying particular freedoms and opportunities to participate in particular activities or highlighting issues around having freedom of choice.

#### 4.3.5 Further ethical considerations

The research design and data collection process was carried out after gaining approval from my university Ethics Committee. Information sheets and consent forms are included in the appendices of this study, which have been referred to in the discussion above. In addition to this, there are four further ethical considerations to highlight.

Firstly, by acting as my own gatekeeper and drawing on my emic position, it is possible that my pre-existing relationships with staff and students would bias the data collection or analysis. Specifically, there could be a perceived pressure on participants to 'say something good' about the school and resist focusing on negative information. In practice, this was not an issue that emerged in the interviews. Students offered very thoughtful and balanced opinions, and there was no evidence that students felt the need to withhold or modify their opinions. In part, this might be explained by the age of the participants who, between the ages of 16 and 19, were confident to assert their point of view.

Secondly, as a post-16 tutor and teacher, I was careful to limit the ways in which my position of authority might influence the recruitment and participation of students. I have detailed the recruitment process, which enabled students to put themselves forward independently without directly asking individuals for their involvement. In addition to this, an information sheet was created that outlined the aims and methods of the study, what student involvement might consist of, and guidance concerning their right to withdrawal at any stage and how to contact my own supervisors. Before each interview, we read through this information sheet again to ensure that all participants understood the nature of their participation, and participants left with a copy of the information sheet in case they wished to contact project supervisors at a later point. In practice, there was no reason to consider my position as a member of staff as a hindrance or limitation to the project as students were enthusiastic about their involvement and, in general, viewed this as an opportunity to tell me about 'how it really is' in their eyes.

Thirdly, as this research sought to draw out the views of young people about their school lives, it was possible that during interviews participants might be asked about topics that were sensitive to them or that they preferred not to disclose their views about. Again, this was a concern highlighted on the information sheet, and every interview began with reassurances that participants did not have to answer every question. In reality, there was no indication that any students felt uncomfortable or challenged by the interview process. On the contrary, my impression was that students greatly valued being asked about their views and typically gave full, extended responses to each question.

For this reason, my feeling is that my emic position was largely positive for the project. In the first place, it greatly supported data collection in terms of recruiting participants and organising interviews on-site. Moreover, my pre-existing relationships with participants meant that our interviews were typically comfortable and highly conversational: we shared an understanding over many of the topics and events

that were discussed and this gave students an opportunity to focus on how they valued these phenomena, rather than spending time describing them to me.

Finally, it is important to highlight the processes that were set up around data collection and protection. All interviews were recorded on a device that required a passcode and was kept by me throughout the collection phase. During transcription, participant names were anonymised through the use of pseudonyms. Copies of transcriptions were saved to a hard disk that was password protected and kept in one place. Throughout the data collection and analysis phase, participants were given the right to request their data was removed from the study, up until the point when it no longer became feasible to remove their contributions from the analysis (approximately one year after the interviews took place).

#### **4.4 Data analysis**

In this study, initial analysis was conducted through a two-stage process of thematic coding and category sorting, and then a CA evaluation. In this respect, the first stage of analysis draws on practices common to Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss 1990), whilst the second stage sought to contextualise findings within an evaluative capability framework. The first stage of data analysis produced a ‘core-category’ of ‘identity building’, which provided a central phenomenon to understand student agency within a CA. Consequently, the CA evaluative framework was designed with a particular interest in notions of identity and personhood, an area that is recognised as under-researched in the capability literature (Comim and Teschl 2006; Gasper 2002; Giri 2000; Zimmerman 2006).

##### **4.4.1 Rationale for a two-stage process**

The two-stage process to data analysis has been adopted in previous qualitative applications of the CA. A recent survey of methodological approaches to a cross-country study into youth unemployment present this methodology well. In the survey, the authors summarise the research methods applied by researchers across the different participating nations, two of which are:

Germany: The case study collected data through: problem centred interviews with young persons; expert interviews with case managers; and documentary analysis. The analysis was based on the assumptions of Grounded Theory. Sequential analysis (word by word, line by line) and a broader case and field-oriented perspective were used with a ‘coding paradigm’ of conditions, context, strategies (action/interaction) and consequences. The CA was used as a permanent evaluative background although, as Grounded Theory demands, the focus was on to first accurately describe the data as closely as possible to the original phrasing and to develop theory based on the data instead of forcing this into predefined categories. (Hollywood et al. 2012, p.9)

UK: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers (including policy makers for the organisations), project workers and young people in two case study organisations. A ‘thematic

content analysis' approach was taken to analyse the transcripts using an analysis framework loosely based on Grounded Theory approach to uncover core categories in the data. Using these core categories, the capabilities framework, as developed in the common questions, was then applied as a means of further analysing the data to understand how the programmes can be understood from a capabilities perspective. (Hollywood et al. 2012, p.11)

Here, both research designs included a data collection with semi-structured interviews, data analysis was conducted using Grounded Theory, and the CA was then utilised as an evaluative tool to draw conclusions about the data. In both cases, it is important to note that the methods used for data analysis (sequential analysis of transcripts using a coding paradigm, and thematic content analysis) are completed before the CA is used for further analysis.

#### **4.4.2 Stage 1: Grounded Theory**

Once the data were collected and transcribed, the guiding methods for analysis were found in Grounded Theory. Here, the emphasis is on discovering emerging ideas in the data through a process of understanding the raw data, labelling the data with terms or concepts, and then developing categories of concepts. A key principle when working with the data is to focus on repetition, in other words ensuring that concept 'earns its way into the theory by *repeatedly* being present in each interview' (Corbin and Strauss 1990, p.7). Firstly, the interview transcripts were explored through sequential analysis: working through them line-by-line. This involved a process of open coding, whereby each line was assigned one or two codes that captured the meaning of the line. Typically, this involved identifying the key word in the line or, where that might be ambiguous, using a similar word that captured the same meaning. For example, take the response: 'it's definitely more inclusive than my other school. There the teachers were either with you or against you.' Here, the line was assigned the code 'inclusive' and given a second sub-code of 'teachers.' The code of 'inclusive' represented a positive feeling towards the school, particularly it's environment, and the sub-code of 'teachers' enabled me to ascribe a particular reason for this feeling. Each line was often assigned a sub-code, but this was not always required.

Once all transcripts were coded, the analysis then moved onto a process of axial coding. Here, the codes from each interview were compared and contrasted with the aim of developing clear categories in which multiple codes could be assigned. Taking the example above, 'inclusive' was assigned to the category of 'school environment.' Once this was done, it was possible to then add a further level of analysis by including the sub-codes so that each category had dimensions (codes) that contained multiple properties (sub-codes). For example, the category 'school environment' included the dimension 'inclusive', which included the property 'teachers.' The advantage of this was twofold: firstly, it was possible to contrast multiple meanings of 'inclusive' across the data (some students articulated these in terms of friendships or mentors), and secondly it was possible compare categories that contained similar properties (the category 'academic achievement' also contained the property 'teachers'). This process of axial coding was useful because it introduced a hierarchical structure to the data, which allowed for overlapping meanings (where

two categories might share a code) and therefore it maintained much of the complexity of the data whilst providing it with a clear organisation.

The final stage of coding involved a process of selective coding. This is ‘the process by which all categories are unified around a "core" category...(that) represents the central phenomenon of the study’ (Corbin and Strauss 1990, p.14). Explaining this further, Corbin and Strauss suggest that the core category should serve to answer questions such as: ‘what is the main analytic idea presented in the research? If my findings are to be conceptualised in a few sentences what do I say? What does all the action/interaction seem to be about?’ (p.14). The core category that emerged from the data was ‘identity building’, which is to say that the central phenomenon that students articulated their experiences of post-16 education through was that of the process of identity building: developing a sense of who they are and what they value. In other words, the collection of concepts and categories that represent the data could all be housed within this notion of identity building, acting as a crucible that put them in relationship with one another.

#### **4.4.3 Stage 2: the CA as an evaluative framework**

Once the process of coding was complete, it was then possible to return to the data, in an iterative fashion, to apply the CA as an evaluative framework. The aim was to understand the core category, ‘identity building’, from a capability perspective. This entailed exploring the data with a focus on the processes and opportunities that students were involved in and which enabled them to develop their identities in ways that they valued. Conceptually this was a challenging task that demanded desegregating the data, returning to individual cases, and reanalysing it using concepts from the CA, and then conducting a cross-case analysis to see whether generalisations could be made across the data.

Initially, this second stage of analysis was approached in a single phase. Here, it was influenced by Burcardt and Vizard’s recent work, who argue:

we contend that it is possible to ‘operationalize’ the capability approach by tracking three ‘aspects’ of the position of individuals and groups: functionings (i.e. realized states of being and doing, such as health status, or the extent to which a person is living in physical security); treatment (immunity from arbitrary interference, discrimination and other forms of detrimental treatment, such as lack of dignity and respect); and autonomy (empowerment, choice and control in relation to critical decisions that affect a person’s life). (2011, p.92)

Using this, the aim was to track three aspects of each participant in the data. Firstly, by coding for each of their functionings. Here, various states of being and doing were labelled, including academic, social and extra-curricular functionings. Secondly, the treatment of students was coded by labelling examples of interaction between the student and other agents, such as family, friends or staff. Thirdly, autonomy was tracked in the data by finding examples of empowerment or choice in student lives, such as making choices (or discussing possible alternatives) and developing aspirations.

However, whilst returning to individual cases was a useful process to view each participant from a ‘capability perspective’, it was evident that more might be done to contrast and compare student experiences. As such, this subsequent stage of cross-case analysis was carried out in three further phases that correlated to each research question. The strategy for analysis is discussed at the start of each chapter in Chapter 5, Chapter 6, and Chapter 7. A brief overview of these three phases is presented in Table 2.

Chapter	Focus of analysis	CA concepts explored in analysis
4	Student agency	Functionings, achievements, related to identity building.
5	School structure	Conversion factors
6	Student characteristics	Internal capabilities, including beliefs, desires, traits, and values.

**Table 2:** phases of analysis forming the discussion for each chapter

This provided a new lens through which to approach the research questions, each of which are explored in the subsequent chapters:

- i. Which forms of student agency bring about functionings that support identity building in the post-16 setting?
- ii. How do external conversion factors in student lives support capability development for identity building in the post-16 setting?
- iii. How do personal characteristics influence student’s capability for identity building in the post-16 setting?

The findings for each question form the basis of discussion in each of the following chapters.

#### 4.5 Summary

This chapter has set out the research design and methodology for the study. It began by specifying that ‘preparedness’ forms the focus for the study and provided a rationale for this based on the discussion of previous chapters. Preparedness was defined as a meta-capability or an aggregation of capabilities that young people might develop through their post-16 education and which enable them to live a worthwhile life after school. Here, the aims and values of post-16 education are founded on a view of education as a process of capability development or autonomy building.

To investigate this, a core aim was identified: to explore what capabilities young people develop through the process of participating in post-16 education, particularly those that play a role in preparing for life after school. In other words, the study aims to identify a range of achievements, or functionings, in post-16 phase that are associated with preparedness. This also entails an auxiliary interest in how the post-16 setting offers young people the resources and opportunities for capability development and how the characteristics of those young people might affect their use of resources and opportunities (their ‘capability for capability development’).

The study approaches these aims by drawing on qualitative research traditions to support the application of the CA. As such, the study advances with a combination of generic qualitative methods, supported by Grounded Theory, and an evaluative framework, developed from the CA, which takes an interpretivistic approach to investigate capability development in the post-16 setting, with a view to understanding the process of student preparedness. The implication of this is that data has undergone a two-step analysis; firstly, by using Grounded Theory and secondly, by using a CA perspective.

The following chapters discuss the findings from this analysis, and are structured to represent a similar processual approach to data analysis. This is to say that each chapter sets out to (i) present some relevant data to give the reader a 'feel' for the relevant discussions that took place with students, (ii) present an initial analysis based on thematic coding and category sorting, and (iii) present an evaluation of this analysis in terms of the CA. Each chapter focuses on a specific research question, respectively: what capabilities students valued, what the role of external factors are in capability development, and how personal characteristics lead to diverse outcomes in terms of capability development.

## **Chapter 5:**

### **The Role of Agency in Post-16 Life**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores the role of student agency in post-16 education. It considers the relationship between student agency and capability development, specifically concentrating on what forms of agency correspond to capabilities that prepare students for life after school. In doing so, it analyses the important function that identity practices play in students' lives throughout the post-16 phase. With a thematic interest in the 'power for self-definition' found in narratives offered by several students, this chapter explores what might be called the 'inner situation' of these students and how specific identity practices relate to the 'beings and doings' of this inner situation. In doing so, this chapter aims to present identity building practices as a vital but under-theorised aspect of post-16 participation.

Firstly, three student portraits are discussed with special attention given to the agency that underpins identity building, where identity building is framed as a 'social practice'. Secondly, a typology of agency is presented that offers an initial analysis of the identity practices found in these student narratives. Here, identity practices are considered a special functioning that are made up of different spheres of agency that interwork in the service of student identity building. Thirdly, a capability approach (CA) is presented as a framework to argue that identity practices are made up of a set of 'linked capabilities' made up of these spheres of agency. From this, it is argued that educational experiences can offer students distinct freedoms and opportunities to encourage forms of agency that can motivate the 'inner situation' of young people, enabling particular forms functioning that give their post-16 education value. The importance of this, it is argued, is that educational experiences that enable students to form valued identities are not only important to support wellbeing, but also that the strengthening of diverse and well-formed identities in the school setting has broader economic and social value. An auxiliary aim of this chapter is to address a common critique of the CA that suggests that it lacks a coherent account of the 'inner life' of the agent and thus overlooks how they come to value particular choices about what they want to be and do in life.

##### **5.1.1 Views on student identity**

There is a need to better understand how identity formation takes place in post-16 education and to use this understanding to improve educational outcomes for young people. This need stems from particular structural failings and inequalities that characterise the post-16 setting where many young people leave school without a clear idea of what they want to be and do in life, seen in the significant number of NEETs (Yates et al. 2011), an increasing university dropout rate (HESA 2016), and a shrinking youth labour market (Wolf 2011). Research shows issues of post-adolescence govern student identities (Maguire et al. 2001) and there is a reluctance to engage with adulthood (Ball et al. 1999). As it was argued in the Introduction, we might aver that education policy suffers from a particular pathology: overlooking the

reasons why young people might enact their own social exclusion (Archer et al. 2003), struggle to accumulate identity capital (Côté 2002; 2006), and resist commitments associated with emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2007).

A considerable amount of research across various fields has considered the relationship between identity and education. In social studies, social context is generally regarded as essential to understanding education policy and practice (Gewirtz and Cribb 2009). Research typically places emphasis on how student identity impacts on educational success (See: Hird 1998; Gee 2001; Youdell 2003) or teaching and learning capabilities (Sanchez-Casal 2009). Social justice concerns surrounding educational participation have been approached in terms of student social identities such as race, class or gender (Archer 2003; Reay 2001; Renold 2001). In addition to thinking about the relevance of social context on educational participation, research has considered how personal identity is shaped by educational contexts. For example, situated perspectives place importance on understanding the environmental and cultural contexts that shape 'learner identities' (Cobb et al. 1999). Here, learning is a process of participation that takes place in communities of practice (Wenger 1998) and these situated perspectives are closely aligned with psychosocial approaches to youth development, particularly Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development (1973, 2006), which has itself been applied to educational contexts (Hodgson and Spours 2013; Weaver-Hightower 2008; Raffo 2010). The social aspect of student identity development, and specifically the role of the school environment in the 'social ecology' of youth development, is considered in Chapter 6.

Elsewhere, a number of studies have explored how transitions to higher education can be understood within a broader understanding of young people's life courses (Christie et al. 2016; Scanlon et al. 2007; Read et al. 2003; Astin 1993), for instance arguing that educational participation is a driving force for personal identity development (Christie et al. 2008). Like the CA, these studies are distinguished by a focus on ethical individualism, capturing qualitative data about individual choices, emotional lives, and transitions to new learning environments (Christie 2009), and holding these as socially valuable or significant. Psychological approaches to identity development have increasingly influenced education policy and practice in the UK, most notably those promoting grit (Duckworth 2016), growth mind-sets (Dweck 1999; 2006), and character education based on findings from the field of positive psychology (Csikszentmihalyi 2014). These applications have sought to promote 'characteristics' that might be developed in young people, shaping their identities so as to exercise their capabilities and fulfil their potential. The role that a student's innate characteristics or personal traits might have on their educational participation, particularly their ability to convert school experiences into valued 'beings and doings', is considered in Chapter 7.

### **5.1.2 Situating identity development in the CA**

Capability scholars highlight that education policy frameworks neglect student development in important ways (Hart 2012; Biggeri et al. 2012; Walker 2010a; Walker 2010b; Jensen et al. 2010, Chiappero-

Martinetti et al. 2010; Flores Crespo 2007; Saito 2003). Melanie Walker suggests that education is ‘a process of identity formation over the life course – of becoming and being this kind of person, rather than that kind of person’ (2005, p.108). And yet, neoliberal values ‘have come to determine discourses and practices in education rather than the idea of capability formation and democratic processes.’ (Walker 2010b, p.155). The impact of this has been the normalisation of human-capital models that promote a focus on measurable learning outcomes and create highly performative environments (Perryman 2006; Ball 2003). From this policy focus, we lose a vital interest in and understanding of student development that a CA can offer. Amartya Sen highlights that measurable outcomes, such as GDP or employment rates, are of ‘contingent and conditional importance without being the defining characteristics of development’ (Sen 1999, p.285). In this vein, the CA is well positioned to ensure that we are not ‘thrusting smallness on children’ (Sen 2002) by neglecting the process of human development, especially where education can contribute to the formation of ‘capabilities to be and do things that a person has reason to value’ (Sen 1999, p.56).

However, the connection between the CA and identity building needs further exploration. As Denulin et al. (2009), Robyens (2005) and Gore (1997) have highlighted, the CA is partially defined by an interest in ethical individualism. In other words, this perspective recognises that there is a value for social analysis in understanding and appreciating how individuals make choices about the way in which they want to live their lives. Accordingly, social justice requires us to consider how people choose to view themselves and the kinds of ‘beings and doings’ that they value as a result of this identity. And yet, the CA is under-specified and under-theorised in this area, specifically because it fails to provide an adequate conception of personhood or individuality (Gasper 2002; Giri 2000; Zimmerman 2006). As Zimmerman notes, ‘Sen is interested in the person’s capability for taking valuable decisions, but he does not consider the required skills and social supports that are necessary to make such decisions’ (2006, p.474). In this regard, Des Gasper has highlighted that ‘relatively little theory of being, of being human, seems to underlie’ the capability approach (2002, p.435). Similarly, Giri has highlighted that a core difficulty with Sen’s redefinition of human wellbeing is that ‘it lacks a notion of critically reflective, creative, transformative self’ and his account of capability does not discuss the ‘quest for being, becoming, self-development and self-realization on the part of the actors’ (2000, p.1004). In response, a body of capability scholars have aimed to contribute accounts of how identity might be situated in the ‘capability space’ (Kirman et al. 2006, 2004; Livett 2006; Crocker et al. 2010). These contributions demonstrate that such a conceptualisation of identity can be achieved, particularly by developing our understanding of agency.

## **5.2 Findings from the data**

Each of the participants in this study agreed that participation in post-16 education was a phase of significant personal change and growth. Students spoke keenly about post-16 as a setting that demanded them to ‘grow up’, ‘make decisions’, ‘become independent’, and so on. They characterised their entry into

sixth-form as a rich new environment to achieve this and better define their self, their goals, their aspirations, and so on. This is supported by the ethos of post-16 education, which is largely built around the idea of freedom and independence and an expectation that students will embrace this phase as an opportunity to practice a responsible work ethic in order to become independent young adults. In this regard, post-16 life can be characterised as a journey between the start of Year 12 (as schoolchildren) and the end of Year 13 (as young adults).

Describing this journey, participants placed emphasis on the opportunity to choose their courses of study, make use of new study periods, the freedom to come and go from the school site as they wished, being able to wear their 'own' clothes, and form increasingly adult relationships with staff. For these students, the post-16 environment enabled them to exercise their powers of self-definition, supplying them with greater possibilities for reinvention, discovery, and exploration of the self in relation to their education than they had previously enjoyed lower down the school. However, a clear tension emerged where students' valued 'doings and beings' were often couched in broad and underspecified terms of 'go to university,' 'get good grades,' 'get out of school,' and so on. In this respect, many of the young people who contributed to this study struggled with forms of critical self-examination, finding it difficult to define who they were or hoped to become and what they hoped to do in the future.

Many students reported difficulties with making use of their free time to complete homework or participate in co-curricular activities that they thought would be valuable to them. Students reported deferring important life choices and characterised their everyday school life as lacking in purpose, interest or enterprise. And so, in some sense, the forms of freedom available in post-16 life presume that students have the capability to make use of it, but the evidence suggested that this was often not the case. In such a way, the post-16 environment is a complex setting that produces tensions, contradictions, and conflicts both between different agents and within them. With this in mind, it is useful to sketch out three student portraits drawn from this data collection with the aim of communicating the 'lived experience' of post-16 education and its implications for identity development.

### 5.2.1 Student Portraits

**Zara and 'reformed identity':** Zara is high-achieving student who found that the transition to post-16 was fraught with complexity which brought into question the self-control and self-efficacy that she aspired to embrace as a young adult. For instance, she struggled with managing her free time ('I probably spend too much time chilling, but then that's my own choice and my own fault'), adjusting to studying new subjects like Sociology ('the first lesson I felt slightly out of place'), and the workload ('in the first two months of A-levels, I probably did more work than I did in my whole year of GCSE'). The significance of this transition was a basic aspect of Zara's educational experience; the move into post-16 education felt 'rushed...even though it happened over a period of a few months' because 'it was such a drastic change' it was experienced as a 'sudden transition.'

And yet by the time of our interview, four months into her first year, Zara felt that she had successfully made sense of her place in post-16 education. At the core of this success, Zara suggested, was a mantra: “I always say to myself and my mum always says it: education is what you make of it.” Indeed, Zara suggested that once she ‘hit the second or third month (she) was in the whole routine of getting work done’ and had ‘almost become immune’ to increased workload. For her, staying on top of her studies had become ‘really satisfying’ because, she said: ‘if I can't go into a classroom feeling prepared then I know that I'm not going to perform as well...I won't feel confident enough to even raise my hand and answer questions.’ As the demands of the classroom changed Zara recognised that she would also have to change in order to maintain the same sense of self. Importantly, Zara suggested: ‘I'd let myself go through that process again. It was so good, it taught me that even if something doesn't work out the same way you want it too... you may benefit from it.’ Moreover, she learned that; ‘when you want something...you put it upon yourself to try and make any route that you can to get there.’ In this respect, the ‘sudden and drastic’ transition to post-16 was a critical and risky phase for Zara that challenged her sense of self, exposing her to the possibilities of ‘failing.’ However, this was also a phase of tremendous opportunity and freedom to reform her sense of self that ultimately proved formative for both her education and her wider understanding of a life worth living.

**Bella and ‘lapsed identity’:** Bella enrolled into post-16 as one of the highest achieving students in her year group. However, her Year 12 acted as a period of deferred decision making that was bound up with a reluctance to adapt to her new environment, feelings of academic failure and anxiety, and a difficulty with communicating with staff to ask for support. She eventually ‘failed’ that year, and our interviews took place three months into her ‘repeat’ year of Year 12.

Bella described her application to sixth-form as almost incidental (‘I just thought you don't have to wear uniform, free periods...you don't think about the difference in teaching, or the difference from college and sixth-form). Her application was late (‘I didn't even fill in the form’), she preferred not to think about her subject choices (‘I guess I didn't know what I would choose until I got my results’) and despite her academic abilities she chose not to do the summer homework (‘I just thought it was a waste of time’), which meant that she ‘was threatened to be kicked off every single course’ and that: ‘every day after school for an hour they made me sit there and do the work. And they called my parents, and I had to go on report card, which was really embarrassing.’ Bella struggled with the changed academic ethos (‘In Year 11 they never cared if I did the work’) and resented teacher expectations: ‘I didn't feel the jump in content, essays, or anything like that. It was what the teacher's expect from you.’ As the year went by, Bella suggested that she struggled to form a clear vision for her education, suggesting ‘I've never had a clear goal in my head. I've never thought I want to be a doctor, I want to be a lawyer...whatever.’ In addition to this lack of clear self-definition, Bella also avoided talking about her experience of failure: ‘I was so lost so, I think, then I just kind of gave up, it was embarrassing.’ Bella's experience is instructive because it demonstrates that the identity challenges during the transition into post-16 education can serve to destabilise even the most academically able students.

**Aliyah and ‘identity injury’:** During Aliyah’s first year in post-16, she consciously redefined herself and transformed her approach to school life. Early in our interviews, she identified herself as an introverted character as a younger student, who ‘stayed away’ and had an ‘irrational fear’ of participating in school life outside of the classroom. However, when Aliyah transitioned to post-16 education she consciously decided to try new things and explore new opportunities, such as volunteering for a charity programme and organising a school celebration of diversity that made her feel ‘more open to things’ and willing to take risks. As such, the first year in sixth-form proved to be a phase of significant personal growth that opened Aliyah up to opportunities to make use of freedoms within post-16 education to pursue a life she found worth living.

Despite this, however, Aliyah’s second year was put at risk when she took on too many, or perhaps the wrong kinds of, commitments. Specifically, her application to university proved to be an exceptionally trying experience, which resulted in a period of depression, anxiety, and academic disengagement. As a high-achieving student, Aliyah was encouraged by the school to apply to the University of Cambridge. However, the problem, she suggested, was that: ‘I didn’t stop to think “would I actually be happy studying in Cambridge?” ...Everybody was like “that’s a great opportunity”. I felt like I didn’t have the chance to say, “you know what, I actually wouldn’t be happy.”’ She shared the story of another student who had refused to attend his interview at Cambridge, against the schools advice, saying; ‘He was so right to do that. But just for himself...I think he was more secure in knowing what he wanted and just in general knowing himself.’ Aliyah reported that the pressures and workload of her university application meant that she fell behind with her classwork and felt increasingly out-of-place in the classroom. She felt that her academic ability had been ‘lost’ and she felt ‘a big part of that was the Cambridge application...I would sit in class and think “oh God, I have no idea what’s going on.”’ Aliyah’s narrative reveals the tension that exists between the school’s aspirations for its students and the injury this can cause to students’ sense of self when they do not share the same aspirations. This is to say, the tacit tension between the school’s view of what young people should have reason to value and what young people may actually have reason to value.

### **5.2.2 Remarks on student portraits**

These portraits offer an insight into the ways in which students value post-16 in wholly different ways, for different reasons, and with different results. They help unpick the complexities of school life and the ways in which policy sometimes fails to recognise that ‘success’ of ‘value’ in education is not defined by educational achievement alone. With this in mind, a line of interpretation I want to explore can be roughly sketched as follows. The post-16 setting is an environment characterised by freedom and independence, which provides students with an opportunity to explore new powers of agency within the school environment. This agency is ordered by students’ self-concept and a clear and coherent self-concept enables students to exercise their agency to realise states of ‘being and doing’ that they have reason to value. In other words, it enables students to realise agency-achievements and well-being

achievements. However, for many of the students in this study, the lack of a clear self-concept limited their agency in the post-16 setting. As such, a students' self-concept assists with making sense of the freedoms and 'forms of life' (Foucault 1988) of a post-16 student so that they can fully realise their potential in this setting. Consequently, the development of a clear and coherent self-concept that is closely aligned with everyday practices of post-16 life might be considered a capability whose achievement acts as a fertile functioning that makes possible more complex capabilities and which contribute to identity formation.

### **5.3 Initial Analysis**

The portraits above bring attention to the post-16 setting as a space for tremendous diversity and individuality as result of the freedom for agency and opportunity it offers for identity development. Each participant in this study presents an account of their identity development as personal, diverse, and rich as these, resulting in lively 'real-world' research that this study must hope to 'say something sensible about' (Robson 2002, p.4. Quoted in Wright 2012, p.411).

To achieve this, a theoretical perspective was achieved via a three-step analysis. Firstly, interview data were transcribed from the cohort of participants and analysed using thematic coding. During the coding process the theme of 'self-concept' or 'self-definition' emerged where students connected their educational experience to their 'inner situation', specifically their values, aspirations, and intellection of self. These sections of text were then re-coded and a cluster of sub-themes were identified that made up these student introspections, such as 'purpose' (where students spoke about aspirations that developed out of this sense of self), 'respect' (when students felt their identity had public or social value to those around them), and 'control' (where students asserted some responsibility or independence for how they spent their time) and so on. Secondly, with these set of concepts in mind I relooked at the student narratives again and 'immersed myself within the life stories, seeking a holistic overview' (Wright 2012, p.410) to avoid 'over-fragmenting' the data. This helped organise and position the emergent themes in relation to one another, which in turn helped better understand the function of each one and how they might interwork, leading to the discovery of some sense of process that undergirded these students' agency.

#### **5.3.1 Identity Practices**

The first stage of analysis revealed that students' lived experience of post-16 education involved a condition of 'interiority.' Students spoke about everyday practices such as sitting in class, completing homework, speaking with teachers, applying for university, and so on, always with relevance to how it might shape who they were and what they were capable of. This is to say that 'identity work' (Brown 2015; Sveningsson et al. 2003) was a consistent theme which students invested into their everyday life at school. Such identity work might consist of students 'rising to the challenge' and determining what they

are capable of in the classroom, or it might consist of something close to ‘identity play’ (Brown 2012) where they experimented with identity capital (Côté 2002; 2006) making new friendships, participating in new activities, and generally exploring their possibilities of their power for self-definition. In this respect, the condition of interiority refers to the development of students’ inner-situation through identity work and suggests that forms of student agency can be framed as ‘identity practices.’ This is not to say that students are solely concentrated on the process of identity formation during their education, but rather that many aspects of their agency can be viewed through the lens of identity formation.

The term ‘identity practice’ is used here in a quite specific way and intended to convey a particular meaning drawn from Alasdair MacIntyre’s work (1985). MacIntyre defines a practice as ‘any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised’ (p.187). He illustrates this with an example of a child learning to play chess, which serves as a useful analogy for a student participating in school life. When the child learns to play chess, she may be disinterested and only motivated by being rewarded with sweets. On this account, the child may be happy to cheat and work around the rules of the game so as to win more sweets. Eventually, however, the child may come to appreciate the skills and qualities that come from being a good chess player. The sweets and, in fact, winning, become an ‘external good’ in relation to the ‘internal good’ of being a good chess player. Cheating in order to win becomes a form of losing. In a similar fashion, we might see student participation in post-16 education as a practice: discussing and sharing ideas in the classroom, working to meet academic targets, organising one’s free time, speaking in assembly, sharing resources in study rooms, are all examples of a ‘coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity.’ And, as we have seen, these practices can be viewed as opportunities for identity formation. Certainly, there are students who participate insofar as they can achieve external goods such as qualifications, status, a career, and so on. But students might also perceive that their participation possesses ‘internal goods’ such as developing greater autonomy, self-purpose, a sense of belonging within the school community, cultivating a sense of moral value, and so on.<sup>12</sup> These internal goods are internal to the practice of participating in education because they cannot be achieved by missing classes, plagiarising homework, arguing with teachers, and so on. An important point here is that students’ process-freedom and agency achievements are central planks of identity formation in the post-16 setting.

### **5.3.2 Typology of spheres of agency.**

With this notion of identity practices in mind, the analysis sought to unpick the different aspects of student agency that made up identity practices. It was never simply the case that students were ‘doing

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<sup>12</sup> A further distinction that MacIntyre (1985) draws between external and internal goods concerns what may be achieved for the wider community. External goods, like money and possessions, operate under conditions of scarcity, so that when we achieve them it means that others must lose out. Internal goods, however, involve learning to value those goods that are internal to the practice, and as such are inexhaustible and achieving them produces a good for the whole community. A further line of argument here is that identity formation is an internal and inexhaustible good that benefits the community.

identity work', but rather there were more subtle or nuanced forms of identity work taking place. For instance, by participating in a discussion in the classroom a student might be constructing their identity, but also expressing that identity, which in turn enabled them to view their initial construction in new light based on the recognition it received by others. In other words, student identity formation is a process that is driven by a complex interworking of cognitive and motivational processes (Castano 2008), in a way that resonates with studies carried out by socio-cognitive theorists, most notably Bandura (1997). As such, a further stage of analysis identified five 'spheres of agency' that interwork as cognitive and motivational processes that describe identity practices in the post-16 setting. These are not intended to offer an exhaustive or cardinal model for student agency but rather an illustrative and explanatory model.

The five spheres of agency are presented as a typology (Table 3). Each sphere of agency relates to a particular mode of achievement or functioning related to identity formation. The relationship between these spheres is intended to be processual, where the functioning of the most basic sphere (self-concept) influences the functioning of the next sphere, and so on. In this sense, there is a hierarchical nature to this typology. However, as will become clearer during the discussion, the relationship between these spheres is also interactional. This means that each sphere of agency could effect and influence other spheres (a moment of self-control might unexpectedly lead to one reviewing their self-concept, for instance). Moreover, it is not argued that students strived to 'accomplish' identity formation in any sense; by definition these spheres represented an on-going and developmental process. In this respect, identity formation is an iterative process that is made up of consistent and creative attempts to redefine one's self, and put that self-definition into practice through acts of expression, control, and so on. The critical point for discussion is that the richer one's self-concept, the greater the capacity to articulate that and make it explicit through these 'higher level' practices.

#### **5.3.2.1 Self-concept**

Across the study, students' discussion of their own sense of 'who' they are was central to interpreting how and why they committed to all other forms of agency. Moreover, when exploring student narratives, it became clear that a 'successful' self-concept was one that was clear and coherent. This is to say that a 'clear' self-concept was one that had well-defined boundaries, specific values, and particular aspirations. A 'coherent' self-concept was one that could be habituated within the school environment without tensions or contradictions, for instance sharing similar values and aspirations to those promoted by the school. This sphere of agency supports the work of identity theorists such as Erik Erikson, who argued that the central challenge of adolescence is successfully managing 'identity crisis' (1968, 1988; see also Marcia, 1980). For adolescents, he suggests, this entails forming one's identity by taking what you know about the world and what you know about yourself and deciding how to 'make all this work' together, where hopefully 'through this process of self-reflection and self-definition, adolescents arrive at an integrated, coherent sense of their identity as something that persists over time' (Buckingham 2008, p.2).

#### **5.3.2.2 Self-expression**

Secondly, the analysis revealed that students' capacity for self-expression was shaped by the clarity and coherence of their self-concept. Self-expression was defined as any form of dialogue students had with members of the school community that enabled them to articulate their self-concept, and so this sphere of agency consisted in students' affirming their belief in who they perceived themselves to be. These affirmations, when stemming from a positive self-concept, articulated students' sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem; how they viewed their own capabilities. Importantly, there was a strong relationship between self-expression and feeling 'recognised' by the community. William James, when writing on self-esteem, suggested that 'our self-feeling in this world depends entirely on what we back ourselves to be and do' (1981, p.310). This form of agency or public 'backing of ourselves' can be understood as what enables members of community to achieve self-esteem and self-respect, which are vital ingredients for a sense of dignity (Margolit 1998). In other words, there is a fundamental importance behind acts of agency that support self-expression because these supply individuals with 'dignified identities' that are recognised and valued by the community. For many students, the difficulty in defining their self-concept and vagueness of how they saw themselves inevitably inhibited their ability to express their sense of self, and by extension their self-esteem and dignity. These students were often those who's self-concept was unclear because they did not know who or what they hoped to become, or incoherent because it jarred with the values and expectations of the school. Thus, acts of self-expression resulting in recognition were vital for students to feel a sense of belonging, value and purpose in the school and it opened new possibilities for agency and participation in their educational life.

#### **5.3.2.3 Self-control**

The third sphere of agency concerned the capacity for students to exercise self-control. This can be broadly defined as acts where students could 'enact' their self-concept by 'doing' what they valued or aspired towards, bearing in mind that 'individual selfhood is a social phenomenon, but the social world is constituted through the actions of individuals' (Buckingham 2008, p.6). Implicit, here, is the suggestion that many students expressed that they valued some end, such as achieving high grades, but struggled to apply themselves to achieving this end. Thus, self-control speaks to a form of commitment or responsibility to the realise one's self-concept, dedicating oneself independently to realising goals and aspirations that one has set out to achieve through self-expression. For Zara, achieving self-control was a turning point in the way she viewed her transition to post-16, where 'managing' her time and 'staying on top' of her studies was achieved by applying her powers of agency and freedom to pursue goals and aspirations that are central to her self-concept. By contrast, a number of students that held high aspirations for their future suggested that they could not use their time purposefully, preferring to 'chill', 'relax', 'hang out' in the study room and so on. For these students, it was often the case that we could trace the source of their lack of control to their lack of self-concept.

#### **5.3.2.4 Self-purpose**

The fourth sphere of agency is defined as 'self-purpose.' Building on the preceding capacities for agency, self-purpose refers to acts where students could view their life as having a function, characterised by long-

term objectives and reasons for doing things they value. If we consider self-control as the capacity to regulate and restrain agency, self-purpose is the capacity to commit that agency to some desired direction or *telos* that enables one to view their life as worth living over the long-term.

For instance, Zara highlighted that she: ‘got to a stage where I actually liked to study one of the specific subjects, I was thinking even though if I’m not successful, I’ll be happy to do it. Because I chose what I wanted to do.’ For her, the capacity to act with a sense of purpose meant that her education was clearly connected to a broader understanding of what her life ought to consist in, and the direction in which she was taking her life. A key point for these students is that their sense of purpose is firmly rooted in their own sense of intrinsic value connected to their acts of self-control, rather than forms of extrinsic motivation, such as financial gain or reputation. This is illustrative of what both Giddens (1994) and Csikszentmihalyi (1993; 1997; 2014) have called an ‘autotelic personality.’ Giddens characterises the autotelic self as one with an ‘inner confidence which comes from self-respect’ (1994, p.192).

#### **5.3.2.5 View of the good**

The final sphere of agency relates to the act of viewing forms of educational participation as opportunities to practice the ‘good life.’ The post-16 setting has been described as a context that offers freedom on the one hand and challenging expectations on the other. For many students, the lived experience of this is sometimes contradictory and challenging and freedoms can be viewed as offering occasions to postpone commitments and a reprieve from responsibilities. Yet, for those students who feel a sense of purpose and agency this context is an environment rich with resources with which to pursue a life they have reason to value. This is necessarily a more abstract level of functioning but corresponds to quite concrete behaviors and attitudes in students, where they are open to taking on new commitments, responsibilities and exploring the potential of opportunities.

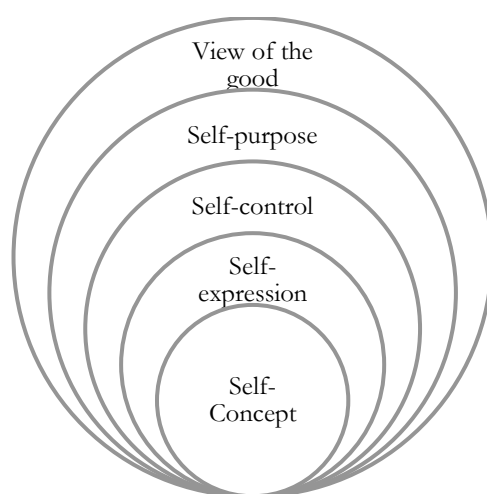
This form of agency is identifiable in at least two respects. Firstly, several students presented a perspective on their studies that viewed education as inherently valuable rather than as a system of credentialisation. This contrasted with a significant number of students who only viewed their education in instrumental terms. Secondly this form of agency was seen in attitudes to the educational context that were proactive, participatory, and exploratory. For example, Mabel embraced extra-curricular activities, taking on multiple commitments that she viewed as valuable despite their non-curricular nature. When discussing this, she reported: ‘they were always things that I wanted to do. I didn’t do them for any ulterior motive. Even when I was growing butterflies with Newton, I was like yeah sure, why not, it seems like the right thing to do.’ Here, Mabel saw tremendous value in living her life in interesting and open ways that connected to a rich self-concept that connected to range of ‘beings and doings’ she felt reason to value.

Sphere of agency	Definition	Examples from student data
Self-concept (or self-definition)	The act of critical self-examination, arriving at a clear, coherent, idea of one's self, values and aspirations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'I've become less narrow minded. And I've begun to accept more of stuff that I don't understand.' (Arabella)</li> <li>• 'Sociology has taken over my life! Because I think about everything from a Sociological perspective now' (Mabel)</li> <li>• 'At the moment I am striving for paediatrics. I think working with little kids is what I do best.' (Erica)</li> <li>• 'So for example, my headscarf – I put it on because I want to.' (Elisha)</li> </ul>
Self-expression (or self-recognition)	The act of dialogue with those in the community, communicating one's self-concept, including one's values and aspirations, and having that self-concept recognised by others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'We would discuss political ideas a lot. And we – politically, we are all very different, but we manage.' (Mabel)</li> <li>• 'But just trying out being open, being open to new things, I was just talking to these strangers about work and stuff.' (Aliyah)</li> <li>• 'And I think the thing is, a lot of my teachers also say like, I always have fun.' (Zara)</li> </ul>
Self-control (and/or self-efficacy)	The act of 'working on' one's self-concept by 'doing' what one values and aspires to be, individually, freely and independently. Taking on commitments and responsibilities to 'become' what one values.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Because I'm in sixth form it has been more of a case of I need to be independent and find my own ways to relax.' (Elijah)</li> <li>• 'Recently, I've just got on with work and I've found it really fulfilling. I used to think of it as a chore, but I've just managed to make it more enjoyable.' (Arabella)</li> <li>• 'If you've got like a free period...you just sit and chill in the atrium...And sometimes, I've done that - I'm not going to lie - but, there's sometimes when I have actually gone in there and I realise that I can't be chilling.' (Zara)</li> </ul>
Self-purpose	The act of viewing one's life as having a function, with a sense of long-term objectives and reasons for doing things one values, making them realistic and achievable, and valuing one's actions in relation to these aspirations. Seeing one's life as worth living.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'You showing yourself that you can do that. And it's something that you probably never thought you could do. And it just shows that all the work that you've been putting in has paid off. (Arabella)</li> <li>• I think the purpose of my life, so far, would just be absorbing the knowledge around me, becoming or having a better understanding of life, politics, and stuff like that. (Mabel)</li> <li>• 'I have always had this dream of maybe going outside London' (Erica)</li> <li>• 'I got to a stage where I actually liked to study one of the specific subjects, I was thinking even though if I'm not successful, I'll be happy to do it. Because I chose what I wanted to do.' (Sarah)</li> <li>• 'So if I get a Chemical Engineering degree, I would like to go to Shell and work there for a few years because I quite liked the atmosphere there, the work atmosphere there is quite nice. There's no hierarchical system' (Elijah)</li> </ul>
View of the 'good'	The act of valuing opportunities, and freedoms as central to your purpose in life, including sharing in a social or civic view of what is good or to be valued according to reason. Viewing one's life, on the whole, as a positive social force.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Even if it doesn't really help me...I'm willing to work towards it...I can try and work towards those qualifications...I don't mind doing that, and I think that's best.' (Zara)</li> <li>• 'When I see different clubs going on I was like yeah, we should definitely do that... And they were always things that I wanted to do. I didn't do them for any ulterior motive. Even when I was growing butterflies with Newton, I was like yeah sure, why not, it seems like the right thing to do.' (Mabel)</li> <li>• 'It's important to me because it gives you that personality where, knowing more is good – so sometimes knowing about something that's not academic will benefit you better.' (Erica)</li> </ul>

**Table 3:** typology of spheres of agency for identity formation

### 5.3.3 Remarks on identity practices

Identity building, on this view, consists in a pattern of ‘beings and doings’ that begins with one’s self-concept and develops through increasing stages of commitment to this concept; progressing, enhancing, and developing one’s identity through acts of self-expression, -control, and –purpose, culminating in a broader conception of goodness or value (see Figure 5). As stated, this view is complementary of work by socio-cognitive theorists such as Bandura (1997), who have argued that capabilities for self-regulation and self-development are dependent upon aspects of self-efficacy or belief in one’s self-concept, for instance. Moreover, this typology suggests that positive identity formation leads to a view of the good life that is connected to wider social values and ethical commitments, which is a view also held in Bandura’s recent work on moral engagement and civic virtue (2015).



**Figure 5:** process model of identity building, depicting five spheres of agency where identity is diffused from its base (self-concept) through five stages of articulation that are capable of interworking and shaping one another.

However, this typology threatens to oversimplify the complex and sometimes contradictory process involved when students embarked on a ‘project of self’ (Giddens 1991). Students consistently reviewed their self-concept over time, experimenting with different forms of self-expression and self-control, and feeling different degrees of self-purpose at different moments and in different contexts. Over time, students’ goals, aspirations and values developed and shifted in response to experiences they had of ‘being’ agents and ‘doing’ agency. For instance, Elisha began her studies with the view of pursuing a career in finance, but as she increasingly took on opportunities related to this she realised that this self-image did not ‘sit well’ with her, and so she moved away from this and towards an interest in History. In fact, this iterative pattern of identity formation was common; most students moved ahead with one set of aspirations and aspects of their identity but at some point retreated from or reconsidered these in favour of a different set of aspirations, goals, and occasionally values. In this respect, a useful understanding of the functioning of the typology presented above might consist in something more nuanced.

#### 5.3.3.1 Agency as Identity Work or Play

This nuanced picture can be found, I believe, in the metaphors of ‘identity work’ that have been of significant use in ‘the analysis of identities construction in and around organisations’ (Brown 2015, p.20-21). This concept is closely associated with the work of Erving Goffman (1963; 1990), and helps us consider how identity formation, when cast as a form of agency, is well-understood as a form of performance related to how people aspire to present themselves in the present and in their imagined future. Recall Zara, who said: ‘if I can't go into a classroom feeling prepared then I know that I'm not going to perform as well.’ Here, her agency within school is underpinned by a kind of performance associated with that part of her identity related to the classroom but connected to wider forms of agency such as home-work, organisation, preparation, and so on. The notion of ‘identity work’ has been defined by Snow and Anderson as ‘the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept’ (1987, p.1348). In this respect, the various activities associated with self-expression, -control and -purpose can be understood as efforts to ‘create, present and sustain personal identities’ in ways that support self-concept. More recently, Sveningsson and Alvesson have developed this metaphor to suggest that ‘identity work refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness’ (2003, p.1165). This emphasis on ‘repairing’ or ‘revising’ brings us closer to the more nuanced picture of identity formation that can be developed with the typology above.

Moreover, the nuance of this picture can be further enhanced by accepting that the activities of ‘identity work’ are interwoven in the everyday life of being a student. In this regard, student agency, which is particular to the youth development phase, is also captured by Pratt’s (2012) notion ‘identity play’ that highlights ‘the impermanence of... a process that is more about on-going and momentary accomplishment — more akin to a performance than something built, (that)...can be fun and spontaneous’ (p.29). This draws our attention closer to the uncertainty and risk that surrounds the ‘beings and doings’ that young people are especially engaged in. As discussed above, many of these students enrolled into sixth-form or made choices about what to study without a clear picture of what to expect, or engaged in their studies in a spontaneous, moment-by-moment, attitude. In this regard, Bianca’s responses are illustrative of many students:

Interviewer: Did you think much about what you want to study?

Bianca: In Year 12, no. But now I think I do. I thought I just, sort of, picked 3 subjects that I sort of liked.

And

Interviewer: Did you feel prepared for the exams?

Bianca: I think everybody kind of underestimated the responsibility. Everyone is like ‘yeah, do it later’, and then...I think everybody just took a GCSE approach towards A-levels, and then when it came to the exams it was just kind of like ‘oh crap’

Bianca's insights are useful to draw out the patterns of 'identity play' that take place in the post-16 setting. Her emphasis on 'just, sort of' picking subjects and an 'oh crap' response to the exams speak to the instinctive and unplanned lived-experiences inherent in the life of a student for many participants. These forms of agency characterise the post-16 setting as including both the deliberative endeavour of identity-work and the improvised, explorative, adventurous, and uncertain attempts at 'identity play', both of which sit within a broader construct of identity practices. With this in mind, it is possible to sketch identity formation as consisting in forms of agency that not only build-up a coherent sense of self-concept over time but also as a process that weathers risk, experiences of failure and vulnerability, and develops in light of on-going challenges, changing aspirations, and revised conceptions of the self.

## **5.4 Applying a Capability Approach: the 'capability for identity formation'**

### **5.4.1 A case for capability development**

The discussion above supports a tremendous body of research that advances the position that youth development is no longer a linear, simple and fixed process, but rather consists of transitions into adulthood that are multi-dimensional, complex and emergent processes (see: Furlong et al. 2011; Coté et al. 2008; Wyn et al. 2012; Arnett 2007; Hodgson et al. 2013; Zarrett et al. 2006; Wyn et al. 2002). Importantly, this challenges traditional assumptions about the ways in which students engage in their education. This traditional view might preserve a narrow understanding of student agency, where a student's initial choice about where or what they study provides a basic foundation upon which they build towards future choices about university or employment. Here, student agency would follow a linear, structured process where the opportunities and resources made available to students during their education conform to an undifferentiated, one-size-fits-all provision. Yet, this discussion has shown that even for high-achieving and academically able students, who stand the most to gain from this traditional view, there are inherent risks in the transition to post-16 education and a significant inequality of outcomes for students whose sense of self can be constrained, threatened, and reduced by the challenge of coming to terms with what they really want to be and do. As such, the capability that students have for identity building is a core dimension of their wellbeing and their preparedness for life after school.

### **5.4.2 Linked capabilities**

The discussion in the previous section has shown how identity building consists of a process of interworking aspects of agency. Specifically, it offers us a conceptual background with which to overlay a capability perspective. To accommodate the dynamics of the typology above within a CA framework, it is useful to draw on two notions from the capability literature that help us think about how capabilities might be 'linked'. The first is drawn from Hazel Wright's notion of a 'capability chain' (Wright 2012). For Wright, the CA enabled her to consider the ways in which an individual acts across their life-course as built upon the functioning of prior capabilities which generate new capabilities, where the imagery of a

chain ‘conveys the notion of connectedness and flexibility’ (Wright 2012, p.417). Here, Wright provides a useful metaphor for what might also be considered ‘fertile capabilities’ (Nussabum 2011) or ‘fertile functionings’ (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007). A second, associated, notion is taken from a child rights framework supporting ‘evolving capacities’ (The United Nations 1989, Article Five. See also: Landsdown 2005), which was introduced in the capability literature by Ballet et al (2011) and developed further in research (Biggeri et al. 2012; Liebel 2014). Biggeri et al. describe the ‘dynamic core’ of evolving capabilities as ‘expressed by the feedback loops that re-shape the potential capability set of the child and enhance or reduce agency’ (2012 p.378). This moves us towards a view that a young person’s functioning in one context opens up a range of possible functionings in new contexts; for instance, developing the functioning of ‘confident expression’ in the classroom is valued as a functioning in itself, but can also be valued in terms of the ‘evolved capacity’ it represents for ‘confident expression’ in the public sphere outside the classroom. In doing so, the notion of ‘evolved capacities’ encourages us to look for forms of agency that nourish wider capabilities. In this regard, both the notions of ‘capability chains’ and ‘evolved capacities’ serve to bring together the notions of agency, opportunity and capability in a framework that supports a theory of ‘linked capabilities for identity formation’ in the post-16 setting.

#### **5.4.2.1 The capability for self-concept**

Accordingly, the first capability we might consider in this ‘linked-set’ of capabilities concerns the development of self-concept. In the analysis, students who presented a clear and coherent self-concept were greatly advantaged both in terms of deriving greater instrumental value from their educational participation (gaining credentials and so on) and in terms of experiencing a greater sense of wellbeing within their education. Thus, the ‘capability for self-concept’ and its effective functioning as ‘clear and coherent’ can be conceptualised.

As shown across youth development literature (Zarrett et al. 2006; Wyn et al. 2003; Côté 1996; Dweck 1999), the capability for self-concept is part of the typical psychological capabilities that young people possess. More specifically, when defined as the possibility for students to critically examine their self and reason about their values, goals and aspirations, it is clear that students entering post-16 education are particularly well-placed to reason about these things. Yet, the degree to which students engaged in this process and exercised their potential to develop their self-concept was variable. A particular challenge surrounded the capability for students to develop a ‘coherent’ self-concept that could connect their experience in post-16 education with a broader view of their lives, and so their reasons for being in school or pursuing particular courses of study were not fully examined or explained in relation to the rest of their lives.

This concern speaks to what Martha Nussbaum (1997) has highlighted as the ‘central task of education’ for the Stoics, which is ‘to confront the passivity of the pupil, challenging the mind to take charge of its own thought’ (p.28). This is because;

All too often, people’s choices and statements are not their own. Words come out of their mouths, and actions are performed by their bodies, but what those and actions express may be the voice of tradition or convention, the voice of the parent, of friends, of fashion. This is because these people have never stopped to ask themselves what they really stand for, what they are willing to defend as themselves and their own.’ (Nussbaum 1997, p.28-29).

In this regard, the capability for self-concept is closely connected to, and dependent upon, a capability for critical self-examination, which is explored in Chapter 7.

Where students articulated clear and coherent self-concepts during our interviews, it was clear that this was a functioning that was supported by specific resources and opportunities, notably drawing on ‘trusted experts.’ Those students who had discussed their choices with a ‘trusted expert’ before moving into post-16 were generally able to define themselves in highly individualistic terms that framed their participation in post-16 as part of a critical decision-making process about what they wanted to achieve. These experts might be teachers with whom the students had developed strong relationships, members of the post-16 team who conducted pre-enrolment interviews, or even friends and family who had knowledge of the post-16 setting. In each case, the opportunity to perform some identity work in this context was critical to assist with shaping the student’s self-concept and the discovery of connections between their choices and their life-long plans. We might think of these discussions with trusted experts as moments in which students’ situational awareness was raised, specifically their awareness of their inner situation. Indeed, research has adapted Van Gennep’s work (1960) on ‘rites of passage’ to explore educational transitions (Astin 1993; Tinto 1998) which has some practical relevance here, suggesting that student persistence in their studies is closely associated with students feeling personally connected to their educational setting. In other words, we might argue that students’ broader participation in their education is shaped by the personal connection they feel with their studies, which we can think of as the ‘coherence’ of their self-concept (the extent to which their ‘student self’ corresponds with their ‘personal self’). In this respect, the CA gives us a valuable perspective because it ‘offers a frame for analysing the options for action that persons recognise for formation of what they themselves perceive as a “good life”’ (Schäferm et al. 2014, p.8).

#### **5.4.2.2 The capability for self-expression**

The second ‘linked capability’ we might consider is the capability for self-expression. As a functioning, this was described as an aspect of agency where students engaged in dialogue with members of the school community, communicating their self-concept and therefore expressing their inner-situation, particularly their values, goals, and aspirations. In this respect, it is a ‘linked capability’ connected to the capability for

self-concept, where the quality of functioning in the former corresponds to the potential for functioning in the latter. Moreover, the capability for self-expression constitutes an important aspect of wellbeing related to the formation of recognition of, and self-respect in, the individual student.

The connection between the capability for self-expression and recognition can be found in the capability literature. The work of Paul Ricoeur (1966, 2005, 2006), for instance, has provided a conceptual framework for research (Janic 2014; Honerød Hoveid and Hoveid 2009) that has connected the notion of 'expression' to the capable human being. Indeed, Ricoeur's understanding of the *'l'homme capable'* is explored from the point of view that capable agents possess the self-recognition that they have this power to act. What this means is that capability, broadly construed, depends upon modes of expression such as "I can" statements: "I can speak", "I can act", "I can tell", and finally "I can be responsible" (Janic 2014, p.21). Each of these modes of expression serve to express some kind of agency, representing the capability of the agent to articulate their sense of self (their 'I') with the self-recognition that makes agency truly autonomous and identity-forming.

From an empirical perspective, Honerød Hoveid and Hoveid (2009) have identified how these 4 modes of expression can be observed in educational contexts. For instance: 'to speak' depends upon a student being singled out from the student body, given an opportunity for voice, and not left unidentified; 'to act' depends on students being able to take on roles that enable them to place staff and students as 'others'; and 'to tell' depends upon students exercising a narrative identity, where their narration places their life as participating in interpersonal relationships. For the authors, these vocal, active and narrative capabilities of expression service a further capability: 'to be responsible'. Here, self-expression functions most effectively where individuals are capable of recognising 'responsibility' for what they 'speak', 'tell', or 'narrate'; not only do they express views, but they are capable of understanding these views as stemming from their own values.

This resonates well with the discussion above, where students celebrated freedoms and opportunities to perform these acts of self-expression. For example, a significant process of development for Zara during her transition into post-16 connected learning to articulate her own values and aspirations rather than those shared peer-norms that were no longer relevant to her. This meant vocalising the fact that she valued support and guidance from her peers, which in turn enabled her 'to act' in specific ways, expressing her 'self' through acts such as personalising her approach to her studies. Thirdly, this empowered Zara 'to tell' insofar as she could express how her narrative identity, her life story as a student in post-16, was in a process of transition that connected to the interpersonal relations she maintained and her wider participation in post-16. And lastly, Zara's effective functioning here meant that she presented a 'capability for imputation' (Janic. 2014); in other words she could express her responsibility for her own actions and culpability for praise or blame as a result of the preceding forms of expression. She felt

known by teachers and respected by her peers for pursuing her own educational project within the school that fitted with her individual self-concept (on the concept of educational respect, see: Stonjanov 2010).

#### **5.4.2.3 Capability for self-control**

So far, discussion has considered the ways in which students may have a capability to develop a clear and coherent self-concept and a complementary capability to communicate that self-concept through forms of agency. Yet, being able to view your self in some way and express this view is one thing, actually committing to that view through self-directed action is a different thing. As such a third, distinct but linked, capability is the capability for self-control.

The capability for self-control corresponds to the freedom and opportunity that students have to exercise autonomy in the post-16 setting. We have noted that the post-16 setting is characterised by high degrees of freedom for students to make choices about how they spend their time and approach their studies. Yet, most commonly, students suggested they weren't wholeheartedly focused on their studies was because they found it, on the whole, either too boring or too stressful. For Sofia, for instance, there was a sense that she struggled to form a self-concept that cohered with her participation in post-16 ('I do it because I'm supposed to. It's easier') and a difficulty with expressing a sense of value in her education ('I don't think there's anything in particular I know a lot about'). It is worth commenting that almost all students agreed that they felt like this at some point, with many suggesting that this was a general attitude they agreed with, and a few suggesting that their boredom or stress was intense enough to reduce their general wellbeing. Sofia's cynicism and detachment from her studies also seemed to underlie the ways in which she avoided, resisted, and resented questions about what she would or could do in the future; 'I hate that question', 'I just don't know', 'I'm hoping it just happens.' Importantly, Sofia was an academically able and otherwise quite successful student, and so there is an abiding sense that she could still 'make it through' post-16.

In contexts such as Sofia's, it is useful to frame the boredom and stress students feel about their studies in terms of a lack of potential agency for self-control. This absence of agency was uncovered in greater detail in Sofia's interview after the exam period. Specifically, Sofia spoke about her desire to be academically successful on one hand and her lack of discipline to bring this about; 'ideally, I'd be like, really working towards exams, so I can do well. But yeah, I don't know. I'm just not really like that.' The way in which I understand Sofia's attitude is as one that stops short of recognising that working towards her exams is within her potential, and her resignation that she's 'not really like that' conceals a lack of possible agency on her part. Indeed, this distinguishes her from a student like Zara, who employed practical methods to revive her academic fortunes whereas Sofia felt unable to do this, suggesting; 'when it comes to thinking about exams, instead of stressing over it, I kind of just ignore it.' The adapted preference to ignore or neglect commitments that are valued is in some sense pathological, especially for young people in the

throes of development, insofar as this suggests that these students are capable of frustrating their own success. Indeed, this adapted preference introduces a particular tension into the ‘inner situation’ where you value a specific ‘being or doing’ but lack the inner-resources to bring it about.

At the heart of this concern is perhaps a reading of students’ inner situation as lacking in what Clemens Sedmak (2016a) has termed ‘self-accusation.’ Sedmak defines this as a ‘non-comparing and non-competitive attitude’ that ‘seeks the truth about one’s moral situation’, which is necessary for ‘preparing real change within one’s own realm of agency’ (p.3). This is taken up further and framed as an internal capability in Chapter 7, but is useful for thinking about how many students who struggle to make sense of the contradiction between what they want and what they do are perhaps neglecting to seek the truth about their situation. This is to say that these students have a view of themselves, which they communicate and express to others, but are unable to put into practical action. For many students, like Sofia, rather than admit to this incapacity they hold on to the idea that the external resources which they have to enact their self-concept (such as academic study) are too boring or stressful to make use of. A pertinent concern, that many experienced practitioners will be familiar with, is that these self-erected barriers to learning are all-too-often strategies to avoid possible failure. In this sense, these students’ identities are governed by ‘comparing’ and ‘competitive’ attitudes that preclude them from taking risks by exploring potential forms of agency in order to achieve what they hold valuable.

Research that has argued for ‘autonomy supporting’ policies in schools (Stefanou et al. 2004) provide a useful framework for thinking about developing students’ capability for self-control. Pintrich (2000), for example, has found that ‘strong classroom contexts...can influence individuals to activate different goals than the ones they would normally or chronically access’ (p.102). In this vein, we might consider how the school as a whole, not only the classroom, can offer an autonomy supporting environment that can define appropriate behaviours and motivate particular goals for students that would enable them to exercise their capability for self-control more effectively. Research by Reeve et al. (1999) has presented related findings that autonomy supporting teachers generally act in particular ways: listening to students, giving students freedom adapt materials and resources, asking about student wants, and responding to student-generated questions. Similarly, Assor et al (2002) have found that autonomy-supporting teachers typically foster relevance by articulating educational activity in terms of student goals, giving students freedom to express dissatisfaction, and providing students with opportunities to choose activities that are consistent with their own interests. These avenues of discussion are explored further in the following chapter, where attention is given to how the school environment might shape or socially situate possible forms of student agency.

#### **5.4.2.4 The capability for self-purpose**

This capability relates to being an agent motivated by self-purpose, which is shaped and driven by the development of self-concept, self-expression, and self-control. As such, the capability of self-purpose is characterised as that sphere of agency where students might view their life across a long-term trajectory, beyond the daily churn of school life and see their actions as having a function in relation to that trajectory. When imbued with self-purpose, the everyday agency of students takes on a particular focus with the project of identity building and the formation of a life plan.

Importantly, there is reason to foster students' conceptions of self-purpose as a function of their agency. The findings from this study suggest that many students are able to discuss a sense of purpose in their education but this was often limited to prosaic, generalised goals such as 'go to university', 'become' a doctor', 'be happy' and so on. What was often missing from these responses was a sense of inquiry and self-interest that would assist these students with making valued life choices. The effect of this was that these students could only view their life in the present and short-term future because the possibilities for long-term options were hindered. Where opportunities were withheld from students to embark in this kind of enquiry, we might frame this as a form of capability deprivation. For instance, Aliyah's narrative offered us an example of a student who was encouraged to pursue goals that were quite alien to her, which ultimately led her to question her own sense of self-value. Consequently, there was a lack of real opportunity for Aliyah to discover her own sense of purpose which ultimately precluded her from making choices about her life she could value. This makes clear for us the argument that the freedom for identity practice is central to the positive identity development of young people and the exercise of capabilities for various spheres of agency associated with this development, most notably autonomy and self-examination.

In thinking about how we might develop the capability for self-purpose in young people, it is useful to consider the ways in which young people form and maintain their aspirations for the future. Caroline Hart's work (2012) has outlined and analysed the ways in which 16-19 year olds might form aspirations in educational contexts. She characterises student aspiration as a 'dynamic and multi-dimensional' concept, where her study found that students 'described hundreds of different aspirations' (p.81) that connected not only to educational or career aspirations, but also to environmental, religious, community, social status, and identity goals. In this respect, Hart highlights that student aspirations are complex; they can be contradictory and changeable and student agency plays a crucial role in the formation of personal aspirations. Promoting this agency demand two connected concerns; firstly students ought to be given the freedom to change their minds and allow their aspirations to 'flux' naturally, and secondly schools ought to respect the ways in which they might impose aspirations on students that limit their agency and wellbeing. In either case, foreclosing the possibility of freedom of choice when students consider their futures acts as a form of institutional coercion. Specifically, the first concern suggests that the unidirectional educational models are likely to hinder identity development for some students, especially

where they are ‘signed up’ for courses to pursue a single trajectory such as higher education. The second concern relates to the findings of this study as several students, such as Aliyah, felt that the school imposed a particular view about what their trajectory ought to be. The difficulty with this is not purely theoretical; students were able to express in practical terms how they felt this removed autonomy, in the form of self-governing authority and decision making about their futures.

#### **5.4.2.5 The capability to form a view of the good**

The linked-capabilities presented so far can be viewed as relating to students view of their inner situation, a view that is necessarily internal and focused on making sense and developing the ‘internal good’ of self-development. Their self-concept can be worked on, built up, explored and so on, but it remains an internal project. Moreover, students can exercise various forms of expression and control to manage, maintain, and enhance their self. And ultimately, as highlighted above, this might give students a stronger, more informed sense of what will come of their self in the future, what their place in the world is, what they ought to do, and so on. The emphasis on all of this is that in exercising these linked capabilities, young people are concentrated on excavating and developing their inner situation in the post-16 setting.

The findings of this project suggest that students who journey along this process not only transform who they are but also how they view the environment around them. Those who did not realise these linked-capabilities effectively, tended to have a fixed view of the school context and viewed it as an ‘external good’, useful for instrumental purposes. Conversely, those who exercised these capabilities well typically had an open, flexible view of the school context and world around them that was characterised by an interest in opportunities around them, experimenting with new commitments and responsibilities, and seeking new ways to engage with and participate in the school community. In this respect, the final stage of this linked-capabilities model saw some students move from developing their ‘inner situation’ to exploring and ultimately shaping their ‘outer’ environment and community, which might be termed a ‘view of the good’.

An important feature of this linked-capability model worth revisiting is that it conceptualises functioning as a dynamic process rather than a *formally* hierarchical process. Whilst the capability for self-concept sits at the centre of this process and the linked-capabilities emanate from it, they continue to interact and reciprocate with one another. For instance, for some students moments of self-control were habit-forming and made possible new opportunities of self-expression; where Zara started to spend her free-time in the study room focused on her studies, she found new opportunities for self-expression and recognition (her self-controlled work ethic gave her new experiences to express). As highlighted above, this means that these capabilities interwork and can serve to strengthen or weaken each other.

A further point to this, however, is that it was observed that there was a strong clustering effect in identity forming practices. It was observed that there were ‘high performers’ and ‘low performers’ in relation to identity development, with a great many evenly distributed around a mean. The high performers were those, like Zara, who were by no means ‘high performers’ in an academic sense, but those that had undergone tremendous transition and development during the post-16 phase. The effective functioning of these linked-capabilities was indicative of the wide range opportunities they had made use of, the commitments they had made during their education, the responsibilities that they had taken on, and so on. In the course of exercising these positive forms of agency, these students had also enjoyed the concomitant elements of wellbeing attached to these capabilities, such as self-examination, self-respect, autonomy, and so on.

What stood out in my discussions with these students was that they viewed their life not only as invested with purpose, but they also had high levels of trust and interest in the school environment in which they had developed. In contrast, some students might be characterised as ‘low performers’ who had yet to really define themselves and their place in school, and who reported much higher levels of cynicism and distrust around their educational participation. Specifically, these ‘high-performers’ reported high levels of; trust in their relationships with staff, interest in the beings and doings of others, participation in school activities, knowledge about how they studied best and where, understanding of what their targets were for development and how to reach them, and so on. A line of argument followed here is that the capability for identity formation is a fertile capability, and these ‘high performing’ students engaged in ‘deep identity practices’ and, in doing so, their agency brought about a cluster of internal goods related to preparedness.

#### **5.4.3 Deep identity practices and preparedness**

Within the post-16 setting, these ‘high performers’ functioned with a sense of ‘geborgenheit’ – an almost untranslatable German concept related to wellbeing that suggests ‘a sense of being nested within a sheltering space to which one can open up’ (Hutta 2009, p.256). For the students that might be considered ‘high-performing’, in view of identity practices, it was clear that they possessed such a sense of belonging that can only be cultivated through undergoing a transformative, developmental process within a context and space to which they now felt attached, ‘at home’ and capable of opening up; a process in which they could have reason to value particular beings and doings that would continue into life after school.

This notion of geborgenheit is useful for highlighting the moral and social value of promoting student identity development in post-16. This value, I aver, consists in encouraging students to engage in what Sedmak (2013) has called the ‘deep practice’ of living with dignity, which is a useful notion for thickening our concept of achieving a ‘view of the good.’ Here, the depth of a practice (in the sense used by MacIntyre, above) will challenge its coherence, intensify its complexity, make it more difficult to have it as

a socially established activity, and the goods it produces may change for individuals (Sedmak 2013). In this light, a deep practice is one that takes place under two conditions (Sedmak 2013; Coyle 2010); it is practiced under adverse conditions and, as a result, it demands wholeheartedness. We have seen throughout this discussion that many students operate within post-16 education under adverse conditions. Students struggle to make sense of the new opportunities and responsibilities of post-16 study, they experience incoherence about what they want to be and what they want to do, and many find the expectations surrounding their decision-making and participation to be too high. And we have also seen that real success in post-16 study depends upon students reaching a sense of wholeheartedness in their school life, where they are able to invest their full efforts and abilities into their education by taking on responsibilities and commitments for their identity development. As such, this provides two conditions under which a deep practice of identity formation takes place.

#### **5.4.3.1 Resilience**

Firstly, when approaching the capability for identity formation from a deep practice perspective, it is vital to consider how students may cope under adverse conditions. Those coping mechanisms that enabled students to continue to develop and flourish can also be understood as strategies of resilience. Resilience can be imagined as ‘the immune system of the soul’ that ‘fosters personal growth’ (Sedmak 2009, p.25). Sedmak (2009) identifies three features resilience that connect well with the psychology of ‘high performers’ and can be readily promoted in the post-16. Firstly, resilience is strengthened through a social dimension, that is, the ‘support of a network, a community, through fostering common interests and social competence’ (p.25). Secondly, Sedmak suggests that ‘resilience is strengthened by mechanisms of (self) control: it is strengthened by a sense of discipline, by control, and self-control’ (p.26). And thirdly, Sedmak writes that ‘those who perceive themselves in terms of growth and development are better equipped for resilience.’ And so, we have three features of resilience to support students’ cope under the adverse conditions of post-16 education: being a part of a community, developing self-control, and having a sense of direction. These can be viewed in terms of the capability for self-expression or recognition, self-control, and self-purpose, respectively. Where these begin to function effectively, we have model for effective resilience and coping strategies in post-16.

#### **5.4.3.2 Wholeheartedness**

Secondly, when approaching the capability for identity formation from a deep practice perspective, it is vital to consider how students might attend to their education wholeheartedly. The condition for wholeheartedness stems, in part, from the condition of adversity. When we live in conditions of adversity, appropriating the skills necessary to cope and flourish demand that we invest our actions with greater intention to bring about the result we hope for. There are perhaps two ways of thinking about wholeheartedness; one of integrity and one of intention.

Firstly, the philosopher Bernard Williams (1981) has argued that once we have a clear concept of who we are, particular 'identity-conferring' commitments arise that we ought to respect. Failing to respect these creates an incoherence in our identity, what we 'are' is not in tune with what we 'do', and so injures our integrity or wholeness. Identity-conferring commitments inform the kinds of doings our life ought to consist in based on the identity we value. Where students held to a self-concept characterised by academic progress and interest, it followed for them that they ought to spend their free-time dedicated to their studies. For Williams, these commitments form the condition of our existence, 'in the sense that unless I am propelled forward by the conatus of desire, project and interest, it is unclear why I should go on at all' (Williams 1981 p.12). Fulfilling these commitments enables the individual to see their practices as invested with a particular trueness; indeed, a common scenario for students involved making detailed revision plans with the intention of preparing for assessments, but never following through with this commitment and consequently feeling a sense of self-deception or self-disintegration. Thus, the capability for identity formation requires individuals to pursue valued beings and doings, not because they bring about external goods (such as respect from peers or teachers, or for the promise of financial reward), but because doing so brings about the 'internal good' of personal integrity.

Secondly, we might think of wholeheartedness in terms of intention. On this view, Harry Frankfurt (1988) has written on the inner-divisions and incoherence that can make up a person and their desires to act in particular ways: all of us have experienced the difficulty of choosing between two incommensurable goods. For instance, we might want to spend time with friends and to spend time studying. When we choose one over the other, the problem is not one of volition (that we gave in to temptation, or did something undesirable), or not that we feel a particular enthusiasm to 'wholeheartedly' do one thing over the other, as it might be with Williams' notion of integrity. For Frankfurt, wholeheartedness is rather the process of making up one's mind in light of these inner-divisions. Of coming down to a decision after deliberation, and making clear one's intentions. On this, Frankfurt writes:

In making up his mind a person establishes preferences concerning the resolution of conflicts among his desires or beliefs. Someone who makes a decision thereby performs an action, but the performance is not of a simple act that merely implements a first-order desire. It essentially involves reflexivity, including desires and volitions of a higher order. Thus, creatures who are incapable of this volitional reflexivity necessarily lack the capacity to make up their minds. They may desire and think and act, but they cannot decide. (1988, p.44)

In this respect, Frankfurt argues for the irreducible conflict in the inner-situation of individuals and fleshes out what a higher-order capability might look like for an agent, such as a student, when forming a clear view of oneself and one's values. This higher-order capability would be a form of critical self-examination that necessarily has an awareness of this inner conflict so that individuals can recognise why building their life project necessitates self-negotiation. In this respect, identity practices and development

are, at their most effective, processes of integration that depend on the form of wholeheartedness that Frankfurt advances.

## 5.5 Conclusion

The central aims of this chapter were to examine (i) how student agency contributes to identity building, (ii) what resources and opportunities post-16 agency requires, and (iii) how identity building might contribute to students' preparedness for life after school. By taking student agency as a focus, the discussion has looked at how identity practices reveal something about the capabilities of students to critically explore what they have reason to value in terms of what they want to be and do. These 'identity-capabilities' have been analysed as a series of linked-capabilities that interwork in increasingly auspicious ways. Indeed, an auxiliary aim of this paper has been to illustrate how a capability approach can operate with a 'thicker' conception of agency related to personal development.

The outcome of this was to investigate the ways in which students explore multiple aspects of their identity simultaneously, often contesting expectations and responsibilities, and retreating from or resisting previous choices, in favour of experimenting with new-found freedoms to make iterative decisions – at one moment committing to one form of life and later giving up on that to consider a new form of life. These identity iterations, perhaps seen as failures according to a traditional linear model, can be understood as valuable expressions of capability and functioning, of a 'life being lived' in diverse and unique ways; a process that can only be housed in a capability-friendly institution that avoids the performative and depersonalising features which are incentivised by current policy models. Importantly, the differing capabilities of the student body to thrive under these conditions raises interesting questions that are open for further research, specifically considering the inequality of outcomes for students in an entirely non-academic sense: high-achieving students can leave school with little idea about what they value, and low achieving students can leave school with a strong sense of direction and purpose.

In the Introduction, it was stated that this study is occupied with the question: 'what would make this individual student's life go well?' In response to this, this chapter has offered an original contribution by introducing the notion of 'deep practices' of agency. This has extended the analysis beyond the familiar notions of student agency found in socio-cognitive studies, such as self-concept or self-control, and focused on how these different aspects of agency might interwork holistically in a student's life in a productive way. This is to say, the discussion has gone beyond current frameworks that focus on a single aspect of student life (such as self-concept) and demonstrated that, at an individual level, student lives consist of multiple forms of agency that yield a greater understanding of student wellbeing when framed together. These 'deep practices' are not idealisations of what student agency might consist of, rather, they help us to understand how a significant minority of students derive greater value from participating in

post-16 education that is particular to their individual lives. This form of participation in post-16 education invites a sense of belonging and dignity in student lives, serving to support students to develop a coherent self-concept and a clear view of their imagined future, whilst furnishing them with the autonomy to bring it about freely.

The following chapters consider two practical implications of this. Firstly, Chapter 6 investigates how the school environment might cultivate these deep practices. It does this by exploring how the school, as a social institution, offers external conversion factors that enable students to transform resources into achievements that they value. Building on the present chapter, this discussion considers how new forms of agency are made possible in the post-16 environment that utilise resources that are specific to this setting. Secondly, Chapter 7 investigates how students' internal capabilities might be directed towards deep practices of student agency. This involves considering how student character, broadly understood, might be developed in ways that promote wellbeing in life during school and life beyond school.

## Chapter 6: The Role of the Social Ecology

### 6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter took one aspect of the CA's theoretical framework, agency, and explored it in relation to the post-16 setting. It argued that student agency consisted of a series of identity practices and framed these as linked capabilities for identity formation. This produced an account of student preparedness based on the view that young people develop capabilities through their agency in the school environment. Specifically, the development of self-concept proved to be a fertile functioning during the post-16 phase, making possible a range of related functionings connected to identity formation. However, this highlighted evidence of a Mathew effect in terms of capability development, where some enjoyed a profitable process of identity-capital accumulation whereas others did not, resulting in a tendency for 'high performers' and 'low performers' regarding capability development. As such, more attention might be given to the ways that the post-16 setting can structure agency, providing conditions that shape capability development and agency achievement through the school environment. Specifically, this would pursue a line of thought related to Flores-Crespo's observation that 'education needs friendly conditions in order to expand human capabilities, and public policies can work substantially in creating such conditions' (2007, p.60). Following this, the discussion now turns to consider the nature of agency freedom in the post-16 setting, the influence of structure on agency achievement, and the kinds of policies that can create friendly conditions for capability development.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the 'external conversion factors' that support student agency and enhance autonomy in the post-16 setting. Taking the linked-capabilities observed in Chapter 5, the discussion explores which external conversion factors might influence and explain the different patterns of student agency in relation to identity formation. Furthermore, it considers the environmental conditions that shape educational processes and student participation, and the influence these have on making available conversion factors for capability development. The specific aims of this chapter are to examine:

- i. what examples of external conversion factors exist in the post-16 environment?
- ii. what conditions affect the use of these external conversion factors?
- iii. what might a 'capability friendly' school environment look like?

To address these aims, this chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, it outlines and explains Sen's account of external conversion factors, with reference to the agency/structure debate. The discussion argues for blending the CA with an account of 'bounded agency', following in the pragmatist tradition, in order to maintain the integrity of Sen's view of agency freedom. Secondly, the chapter presents three examples from the data to illustrate how the school environment is made up of infrastructure that acts as conversion factors. Here, a fourfold classification of conversion factors in the post-16 environment is

discussed. Thirdly, an argument is made for understanding a capability friendly post-16 environment as one that has ‘the look of freedom’, where students are able to participate in the processes of school life and develop the capabilities for identity formation. To advance this account, a social ecology model is adopted as a theoretical framework to incorporate the interactional and dynamic life of the school environment, including the conversion factors it offers students.

### **6.1.1 Conversion factors as structural forces**

In Chapter 3, an account of the CA was set out that briefly described the role of conversion factors. To summarise, an individual’s capability depends upon a range of factors, which have been classified in the literature as personal characteristics, social factors, and environmental factors (Robeyns 2005; Sen 1999). For example, if I own a bicycle (my resource) and I want to ride it to the shops (my desired outcome), achieving this will depend upon my capability to do so (the freedom I have to ride the bicycle). Importantly, my capability does not simply refer to my ability to ride the bicycle but also to the range of factors outside of my control that I depend upon to actually ride it. I need to be in good enough health to ride the bicycle (a personal conversion factor), live in an area in which traffic laws permit me to cycle and cultural norms allow me to cycle free of stigma (social conversion factors), and have the availability of roads to ride on and suitable weather to ride outdoors (environmental conversion factors). In thinking about social justice, either owning the bicycle or arriving at the shops are not sufficient considerations: I can own a bicycle without being able to ride it, and I can go shopping without having access to a bicycle. In this respect, assessing a person’s capabilities to be and do things they value depends on understanding the wider context that this person is acting in. Sen uses capability ‘not to refer exclusively to a person’s abilities or other internal power, but to refer to an opportunity made feasible, and constrained by’ such factors (Crocker and Robeyns 2010, p.68). Thus, we might view capability in terms of ‘potential agency’, where possibilities are created or constrained by factors beyond the control of an agent (an account of capability as ‘internal power’ is, however, advanced in the following chapter). In this vein, it is possible to view the post-16 setting as made up of particular structural factors that make possible specific forms of agency for students. Identifying these factors and exploring how they affect student agency is the focus of this discussion.

### **6.1.2 Structure and agency in the CA**

Capability approaches to education have increasingly sought to conceptualise how agency and participation might be understood within the school setting. The centrality of agency to Sen’s perspective has already been highlighted, where Sen emphasises the importance of self-determination (Sen 1985; 1992; 1999; 2009), and the capacity for an individual to exercise their own free-will (1999). Here, Sen distinguishes between agency-freedom (freedom to act as an independent agent) and agency-achievement (where an individual achieves what they value). Yet, Biggeri highlights that ‘the relationship between the

role of education and agency is complex' (2014, p.50). In part, this complexity derives from the various structural elements that characterise the school setting.

As a result, recent contributions in the capability literature have sought to complement the CA with accounts of structural influence that shape agency. Specifically, several scholars have looked to Bourdieu in order to provide an account of 'the capability for agency' that is supported by Bourdieusian theory, notably drawing on notions of capital, habitus, and field (Schuller et al. 2004; Abel and Frohlic 2012; Hart 2012; Gokpinar and Reiss 2016). For Hart, Bourdieu's 'sociological concepts' are the ideal partner to the 'ethical principles' of the CA because they provide 'organising principles by offering tools for in-depth analysis and understanding of the social context in which education takes place' (2012, p.62). Abel and Frohlic draw on the CA because they find Bourdieu's account of habitus limited in accounting for agency (2012). Gokpinar and Reiss's work (2012), like Hart's, attempts to sketch out how 'forms of capital' (Bourdieuian) might be positioned as 'commodities' (Sen-ian) in social analysis, where the quality of an individual's environment is one in which these commodities can be converted into capabilities. The advantage of this application is that it provides the CA with an account of structure, which is underdeveloped in Sen and Nussbaum's work. Yet, a difficulty we might raise with Bourdieu's theory is that it has sometimes been viewed as overly deterministic, favouring the influence of social structure over the possibility of agency in individual's lives (Tooley and Darby 1998). Whilst Hart highlights that Bourdieu 'suggested that individuals could escape their disadvantaging habitus by seeing chances and taking them' (2012, p.51), we might view the spirit of the CA as one in which individuals do not 'see chances' but rather 'have capabilities' to improve their lives. This is to say, individual freedom and agency are inherent components of the CA's account of the self (Sen 1999), which are not easily accommodated in Bourdieusian thinking.

### **6.1.3 Situated and bounded agency**

It is possible to advance an alternative understanding of external conversion factors as a form of structure that only partially constrain agency. Within the CA literature, Bénédicte Zimmerman (2006) has adopted a pragmatist viewpoint that enhances the role of agency found in Sen's work. She argues that whilst Sen is right to emphasise the role of conversion factors, particularly in respect of the specificity of individual action and achievement, empirical designs do not go far enough to incorporate this (p.474). Zimmerman avers that a framework of positional agency can be found in Sen's work, where the environment is:

seen as a context shaping a plurality of personal positions on the scale of macro or micro variables such as geographical area, political systems, social groups, gender and so forth. These positions are mainly fixed; they can barely be shifted; they are determined by external conditions and constrain individual ends from the outside (2006, p.475).

The critical point here, for Zimmerman, is that in many CA studies features of the social world are 'fixed positions' that are not capable of change or interaction. Departing from this, Zimmerman favours an

account of situated (rather than positional) agency where, in keeping with the pragmatist tradition, the environment may change in the course of individual action. Situated agency holds that an individual interacts with their environment and the other agents within it, creating and modifying conditions for future action. Adopting a view of situated agency in this study has two important implications. Firstly, one is empirically committed to investigating the environment as changeable, capable of ‘reciprocal constitution and transformation’ through the agency of individuals (Zimmerman 2006, p.475). This offers a ‘situated and dynamic’ understanding of the individual, which better conceptualises how capabilities might be used to advance one’s position in the world, for instance in ways that overcome preconceptions about race, class or gender. Secondly, this encourages the analysis to take account of the power relations that shape environmental conditions, specifically those between agents, when assessing the range of possible outcomes of agency. In other words, this entails considering how the range of possibilities open to participants, such as university choice or subject choice or how many hours they could spend on academic study, were partially defined by their relationships with those around them (for example, parental expectations, cultural attitudes, or advice given by teachers). In this respect, ‘taking interactions into account would allow one to complete – at an empirical level – the shift from generic individuals to singular persons claimed by Sen at a theoretical level’ (p.475). This is to say that rather than considering each participant as a generic individual subject to generic or fixed social forces, situated agency is a notion that emphasises how participants can be understood as particular persons; people who are able to be and do particular things based, in part, on their specific relationships with others and their social position in respect of these relationships. The advantage of this perspective is that it enables the CA to draw attention to the ways in which individual agency cannot be understood purely through individual explanations, but rather requires social explanations, such as attitudes to race, gender or class that can be continuously contested or negotiated. The analysis below attempts this by developing a social ecology model of the post-16 environment, where individualised action and power relations are shaped by, but also shape, environmental and social conditions.

The influence of the pragmatist tradition is also found in youth studies, where situated agency has been used to develop an account of ‘bounded agency’ (Evans 2002; 2007; Hamilton and Adamson 2013; Rubenson and Desjardins 2009). Developed by Karen Evans (2002), this is an empirically grounded concept stemming from studies in youth transitions, which views:

the actors as having a past and imagined future possibilities, which guide and shape actions in the present, together with subjective perceptions of the structures they have to negotiate the social landscapes that affect how they act. Bounded agency is socially situated agency, influenced but not determined by environments and emphasizing internalized frames of reference as well as external actions. By examining bounded agency, the focus moves from structured individualization onto individuals as actors, without losing the perspective of structuration (2007, p.92-93).

Here, Evans draws on the framework of situated agency, favoured by Zimmerman in the CA literature, but goes further to make explicit the process of structuration that ‘bounds’ agency to particular possibilities. The analysis below also attempts to incorporate these ideas by considering how students develop ‘internalized frames of reference’ through their educational environments, which shape their participation but can also be modified and challenged. For example, there are important ways in which notions of gender shaped possibilities for some participants (such as where they could go to university), cultural attitudes shaped possibilities for other participants (such as what subjects they could study) or the ways in which wider political and economic values shaped possibilities for some participants (such as the types of career paths that they felt were focused on). These are examples of the ways in which social phenomena (gender notions, cultural attitudes, political values) served to structure or bound the agency of individual students and define particular possibilities for their life-course.

‘Bounded agency’ and similar notions have served as valuable bridging concepts in a literature that has explored complex divisions (Woodan 2009) between those ‘psychological’ accounts promoting agency and internal processes (Arnett 2006; 2007) and those studies that tend towards a sociological perspective and the role of external factors (Bynner 2005; Coté and Bynner 2008; Wyn and Dwyer 1999). With the concept of bounded agency we retain a strong sense of agency partnered with an interest, common to the CA, of how society serves to make available ‘conversion factors’; that is, aspects of an environment that support ‘agency freedom’. Thus, this chapter goes on to explore how post-16 students interact with their environment; identifying the tacit structuralism that underlies their everyday experiences and the potential they have to negotiate and influence this, with reference to the ‘conversion factors’ that exist within the school environment and makes possible particular forms of ‘agency freedom’ for students to pursue the life they value.

#### **6.1.4 Implications for data analysis**

Using a pragmatist framework of ‘bounded agency’ entailed coding and organising interview data to (i) identify types of social and environmental factors, and then (ii) analyse how individuals interacted through these factors to effect capability development. To support this coding process and identify relevant conversion factors, a conceptual understanding of institutions was drawn from Katie Warfield et al (2007). These authors distinguish between tangible and intangible infrastructure, where the latter operates as ‘soft infrastructure that facilitates the functioning and management of tangible infrastructure’ (p.2). We can view the physical, tangible infrastructure of the school as consisting of the building, individual rooms, computers, teaching equipment, and so on. The intangible infrastructure, which facilitates the functioning of these things, therefore includes the more imperceptible elements of the school such as behaviour management systems, expectations around routines and responses to the school bell, the respect of authority structures and conformity to school systems, and so on. Without these elements, the classrooms would cease to function as specific learning environments, people’s roles within the school would become

fuzzy or forgotten, and so on. The inclusion of intangible infrastructure is an important aspect of working within the framework of 'bounded agency'. This is because these imperceptible elements provide 'internalized frames of reference' for students and staff and provide the physical environment with social structuration.

In this regard, it is the intangible aspects of infrastructure that lends the tangible aspects their identity: without the former, the school building can easily serve as a conference facility or assume any number of alternative identities.<sup>13</sup> At the end of the school day or week, there is a perceptual dissolution in the infrastructure of the school, its capabilities and its identity, as the staff and students steadily depart. Indeed, in a similar vein, intangible infrastructure has been defined as 'the set of factors that develop human capability and permit the easy and efficient growth of business activity' (Credit Suisse 2008); a definition that focuses on the important role that intangibles can have in relation to human capabilities, where we might easily substitute business activity for an interest in student education and wellbeing. The importance of accounting for intangible infrastructure stems from the interest that 'bounded agency' has in understanding how agency is shaped by 'internalised frames of reference'.

## 6.2 Findings on external conversion factors

With the notion of institutional infrastructure in mind, it is useful to look back at the interviews with students to consider what aspects of the physical and social context of the post-16 setting made it possible for them to develop capabilities related to identity formation. This means not simply looking at what resources they were given, such as knowledge, teachers, assessments and so on, but paying attention to the conditions in which they could make use of these resources. Before presenting the detail of this analysis, three examples from the data are discussed, which illustrate the ways in which external conversion factors could be identified in the coding process.

### 6.2.1 Three examples from the data

The first example is taken from an interview with Mabel towards the end of her final year in post-16. She suggested that something she valued about her post-16 education was that it had given 'interaction skills' that increased her confidence about living a worthwhile life after school.

**Interviewer:** When did you develop these social interaction skills?

Mabel: I was an external student, and I came, and I didn't know the teachers, didn't know the teaching styles. And you kind of *adapt* to the teachers, the teaching style, their moods, and things like that. And the way you *interact* with people – I've made really good friends here. And that

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<sup>13</sup> Indeed, outside the school day the building where this study is situated is managed by a lettings company. As such, the school functions as a church, a car-boot sale site, a netball club, a gym, and so on. In this way, the school 'loses' its intangible infrastructure once the students and staff leave for the day or week. On deeper reading of this connection, see: Sedmak, C. (2013a).

surprised me because I'm not necessarily the most outgoing person and I'm super awkward. So that was a good experience.

**Interviewer:** Is there anything else that you think has given you more confidence for your life after school?

Mabel: Yeah, I think that I'm really passionate. Especially in Sociology when you have a teacher like Ms Stevenson, she can go on forever about something, and you kind of want to have her brain. Because she just has all that knowledge, and she is so passionate about it. When someone is passionate about something, you're passionate about something as well. You know they love it and they are not just teaching it for the sake of it

Mabel's discussion illuminates the kinds of conversion factors we might begin to recognise in the post-16 setting. Specifically, where she uses notions like 'adapt' or 'interact', Mabel is capturing the dynamic, lived experience of the post-16 setting. She highlights the way in which she adapted to 'teachers', 'teaching styles', 'teacher moods' in order to participate successfully in post-16, and then she highlights that this participation was further supported by 'a teacher like Ms Stevenson' who inspired passion for academic study. She highlights the importance of interaction, both in forming friendships and for developing passion for her studies. In this respect, there are identifiable elements of the post-16 setting that enabled Mabel to exercise her capabilities: her classroom, her teachers, her friends, and so on, were factors within her school environment that helped her to realise particular possibilities, to fulfil particular potentialities, and to live a specific form of life (that she frames as 'a good experience').

A second example we can take is from Trisha. Here, we spent a portion of the interview exploring how she had decided what she might do after repeating Year 12:

**Interviewer:** Does homework help prepare you for the future?

Trisha: Homework, not so much for university. Unless its project wise, like make a PowerPoint or something like that. But when the homework is like tick boxes then not so much.

**Interviewer:** Explain that- what kind of homework is that?

Trisha: You know when they just give you like...In (one subject) they give us true or false statements. And you kind of have to work out which one is true, which one is false. It's the same this year and last year. I just don't feel like homework was fully set and stuff.

**Interviewer:** What about the stuff your learning: is it going to be relevant in the future?

Trisha: I've been to medical talks and sciencey talks and stuff. And they say that what you learn in A2 and partially AS, it does come up. It will help you a lot.

**Interviewer:** So that is useful for you. What else has helped you think about the future much beyond A-level?

Trisha: Like, I got told from my Stats teacher, Mr Pixar, we have – because there's only me, Esteban, Faduma and Kyle in the class...we have our own little banter going on with us and Sir. But he was like, 'why don't you do maths at uni?' And I was kind of thinking about it and he was

like, 'oh yeah, you learn all this stuff' and he was throwing in these things, and I was like 'I don't know, what you can do afterwards, what can you do with a Maths degree'... but that helped...

**Interviewer:** So why did you apply to study Biomedicine rather than Maths?

Trisha: I do volunteering. At Kings Hospital, yeah. And I work on the ward, with the A&E patients. I started in May last year and do weekends.

**Interviewer:** Is that quite involved work?

Trisha: The ward, yeah. It was like – I talk to patients, I was with doctors and nurses. Mostly it was talking to patients. I had some admin work.

**Interviewer:** Does that prepare you for life after school?

Trisha: Obviously, it gives me an insight into it. So there's obviously, I did it because I want to be in somewhere where I was like, oh is this what I'll really want.

This exchange with Trisha is fairly rich with information that supports thinking in terms of external conversion factors. The achievement or functioning that we have in mind is 'self-purpose', the capability to aim your life towards something in the future, and the kinds of resources that Trisha highlights include homework, subject knowledge, teachers, and work experience. Again, however, this exchange captures the dynamic aspect of the post-16 setting where the value of these resources is determined in part by social or environmental factors. Trisha highlights that some forms of homework, subjects, teachers, classrooms, and work experiences can be more useful than others. For instance, the homework ought to be 'fully set', attending talks made her see that her A-level's will 'help a lot', having a small class size meant that she was given personal advice from her Maths teacher, and volunteering in a hospital helped her see it's what she'll 'really want' in life after school. In this respect, we can identify that the *type* of homework, the *attitude* of teachers, the *nature* of the classroom, the *kinds* of the work experience, and so on, are all important dimensions in converting capabilities into a valued functioning.

A final example is taken from Shayma, who reflected on the complex interplay of environmental factors between her school life and home life, which shaped possibilities about what she could be and do on the future.

**Interviewer:** Do you think you will be staying in London for university?

Shayma: See. My mum, I don't know, she's a bit indecisive. One minute she's saying 'yes', one minute she's saying 'no.' And the rest of my family, they have a say in it.

**Interviewer:** Are they saying you should go?

Shayma: No! They want me to stay here. And I'm telling them, 'it's not going to affect you in any way.' This is what they say, 'you're a Muslim girl; you're not going.' They say that because they just expect girls in our family, you know, to get married off or go to university but stay at home.

**Interviewer:** That's what they've said to you?

Shayma: Yeah. They try to say that to me, and I was like, ‘no, no, no.’ Because I was like, ‘I’m British, I was born here, I know everything, I’m not going to let that affect me.’ It’s not even about religion, it’s about their tradition, you know. It’s the culture rather than it being, you know, ‘I’m a Muslim girl.’ It’s because they think you go to university and all this stuff happens. And I’m like, ‘I know myself, I know how I’m going to be.’

**Interviewer:** So you think...

Shayma: My mum’s coming around to the idea. It’s more like the rest of the family that have an influence on her. So she wouldn’t mind me going – I think it’s more like her brothers and sisters. Even my grandmother was like, ‘you can go.’ And I’m like, that’s it, I don’t need anyone’s permission, I’ve got her blessing. I just think she’s scared of what everyone else is going to say, rather than me...

From this exchange, it is possible to view how the complex pattern of family relations configure to shape values and possible aspirations for Shyma. Her capability for identity formation is contested, so that whilst she feels confident about what she wants (‘I know myself’), her capability to realise this is challenged and confronted in her family environment. Shayma went on to describe the ways in which different family members had communicated different expectations about whether she should apply to a university outside of London, which was often influenced by whether they had been to university themselves. Yet, the close family culture that surrounded Shayma meant that she needed to respect and listen to each of these opinions before she was comfortable properly formulating her plans about her future.

### **6.2.2 Discussion of findings**

These examples provide an insight into the richness of the data when looking at how students were positioned in relation to resources and opportunities in the post-16 environment. Tangible aspects of infrastructure could be identified as concrete objects in the school environment, such as places or people. In contrast, intangible aspects of the school’s infrastructure consisted of interactional or situated elements of the school environment, such as processes or events. This distinction, between tangible and intangible external conversion factors, encouraged the analysis to frame the post-16 environment as socially situated and interactional, understanding the students as agents that are capable of influencing or being influenced by these factors, in accordance with ‘bounded agency.’ The discussion below offers outlines each of the factors identified (Table 4) and their influence on students. The following section then attempts to analyse the complex and often messy relationship between various factors and individual students, accounting for how they might, when taken together, shape student capability development as part of a structuring social ecology.

	Places	People	Processes	Events
Examples from the data	Classroom	Teachers	Academic assessment	Raising Aspirations & work experiences
	Post-16 Study Room	Family	School routine	Volunteering
	Shared spaces	Friends	Social Networks	Clubs and Societies
	Local spaces	Peers (student)	Professional networks	Tutor time

**Table 4:** Examples of external conversion factors found in the data

### 6.2.2.1 Places as conversion factors for self-concept

The first aspect of the post-16 environment which provided conversion factors for student's capability development are 'places', which includes classrooms, the study room, shared spaces, and local spaces. These acted as conversion factors because they provided a physical and tangible context for the use of resources and opportunities. Research has explored the various ways in which the classroom environment affects student development, considering the influence of: teacher characteristics (Wayner and Youngs 2003); teacher communication styles (Brekelmans et.al. 1993); learning strategies (Greene et.al. 2004); cultural sensitivity (Fisher and Waldrip 1997); and a range of collective attributes such as task orientation, shared control, teacher support, personal relevance and involvement (Dorman 2001). In this study, participants like Erica and Aliyah characterised the classroom as a micro-environment in which likeminded people are afforded the opportunity to debate and discuss a shared interest:

the best thing about lessons is...you are put into classes with people who want to do the subject.  
(Erica)

I enjoy just sitting in class and...it was not the work thing...but the discussions...in everyday life you don't really sit down with a group of people and discuss topic things.(Aliyah)

Despite this, many participants highlighted that external pressures related to assessment and performance could diminished the value of the classroom for them. Zara highlighted the change in classroom environment from the start of the year, when English students would 'sit around and all read the play together and act it out and that was so much fun', to later in the year when 'the whole exam thing' came to characterise the *kind* of classroom she was in and the 'only sense of satisfaction you can say is "I've got that A or I've got that B."'

Secondly, participants emphasised the importance of the post-16 study room in their daily lives. This room was typically described in terms of a tension between students who wanted to use the room for academic study and students who wanted to use the room for socialising with friends. Whilst this was a physically small place, equivalent to a typical classroom, many participants underlined the importance it had as a space to share experiences and feelings. For students such as Mabel, this was a place to process failure, discuss anxieties, and share experiences away from the observations of staff, reporting: 'sometimes

I'll actually scream in the study room and it's just so normalised and it's easy to be around people who understand what you're feeling, I guess.'

A third category of physical place is the public areas of the school, including the restaurant, atrium, classrooms after the school day, and assembly hall. Indeed, research has recognised that attachments to objects and places in the wider school setting can be central to the emotional life of students (David and Weinstein 1987), and aspects such as freedom of movement within school spaces are connected to academic achievement and wellbeing (Tanner 2000). This was evidenced by a repeated sentiment from students that they valued being trusted to work independently and occupy areas of the school without supervision. For Aliyah, this meant that her experience of post-16 was underpinned by autonomy and responsibility, where 'you ask a teacher can we open a classroom, or in the restaurant you would organise your little revision sessions.' For Arabella, the status of being a post-16 student enabled an element of 'play' in physical spaces that forged social bonds and provided memorable moments in her education. She described using the assembly hall for a post-16 film night, and commented that:

it's the fact you can watch that with people you wouldn't expect to watch that with. You're sitting in a space where normally you have to sit there in silence for half an hour listening to someone talk about things you're not really that interested in. When you get to sit wherever you want, and eat popcorn...it's the simplest of things. (Arabella)

A fourth and final category of physical space is the local surroundings of the school, particularly the supermarket, the public green, and the library. There is growing interest in the ways in which the locality of school can determine important features of student experience and participation, especially the ways in which they can shape opportunities for life after school (Hodgson and Spours 2013), and give a richer understanding of student agency than is privileged by policy narratives that work without such context (Raffo et al. 2015). Indeed, these places shaped the possibility for student agency enabling students to leave the school site to buy food and snacks and offering the freedom to move outside the school building and its expectations so that they could be 'themselves' again. For some students, such as Arabella, this provided a psychological and emotional function when she was stressed because she could 'walk around the block and down to the river.' She did this when she suffered 'really bad anxiety and stress' so that she could 'kind of isolate' herself from the school environment

Table 5. offers an overview of how these places can be analysed as conversion factors for student functioning. Considering how these places could act as positive conversion factors, enabling young people to use resources and opportunities to achieve things they valued, three themes emerged. Firstly, students highlighted the importance of collaborative environments, which actively invited their agency, such as being able to contribute to ideas or debates in the classroom. Secondly, students valued inclusive environments in which their personal values were accepted, for instance in the study room. Lastly, students derived greater value from these places when they supported a wider relevance of their lives,

such as connecting the classroom content to wider social issues or having the freedom to move in and out of the building.

<b>PLACES</b>	<b>Positive conversion factor</b>	<b>Limited conversion factor</b>	<b>Initial Analysis</b>	<b>Overall analysis</b>
<b>Classroom</b>	Classrooms enable students to access academic support and shape broader views.	Classrooms that became assessment focused restricted students' sense of wellbeing.	Classrooms could act as collaborative or competitive environments.	Physical spaces acted as positive external conversion factors when they acted as sites for self-building and identity practices under 3 conditions: collaboration between agents, inclusiveness of personal values, and relevance to wider life.
<b>Post-16 Study Room</b>	A place for students to share views, and/or pursue work that is valuable to them.	A place in which social tensions and prejudice can arise.	The study room would be seen as inclusive or exclusive social space.	
<b>Public school spaces</b>	Public school places could be utilised by students to practice autonomy and responsibility or by the school to forge strong community ties.	Public school places were less important for students who felt they had sufficient social commitments outside of school.	The wider school areas could be invested with autonomy, if it was viewed as relevant because it connected with a student's sense of purpose.	
<b>Local spaces</b>	Local spaces provided opportunities to purchase goods through choice, and moments of reprieve to get away from the school building.	Little direct evidence of the local area inhibiting student capability.	The local area served to give students opportunities to make their daily life relevant by purchasing things they valued in a way that was closely integrated with the school day.	

**Table 5:** analysis of places as a conversion factors

### 6.2.2.2 People as conversion factors for self-expression

A second category of factors that influenced students' exercise of capabilities in the post-16 setting was the role of persons. The kinds of persons with which students formed relationships with served to enhance or, sometimes, deprive students of the opportunity to be and do things that they valued. Firstly, a factor that influenced student capability was teacher-relationships. A body of research recognises the influence that teachers, as agents, can have on the agency of students, notably their social and cognitive development (Davis 2003), approaches to academic achievement (Klem and Connell 2004), continued participation in school (Davis and Dupper 2004), and their practice of respect and maintenance of dignity (Goodman 2009). Here, many students reported valuing the more informal, responsible relationships they could form with staff as they were viewed as more mature young people than they had been previously. Mabel commented on the value of this, explaining that: 'teachers particularly see more in you than you do yourself... I don't understand how they have more faith in me than I have in myself. They really believe in me.' However, a counterpoint was provided by Sofia who felt that one of her teachers

was unable to develop the more informal, responsible relationship with the class: ‘she’s a really nice person, but I just feel like she just doesn’t know how to connect with us.’

A second influence was that of family, which proved to affect many students’ educational participation. Indeed, research has highlighted the influence of family on student agency in relation to academic achievement (Israel et al. 2001), risky behaviours (Kohl et al. 2000), school attendance (Epstein and Sheldon 2002), academic independence (Orrego and Rodriguez 2001), and the formation of life plans (Deutsch 2004). In this study, family was often experienced as a strong influence for students from minority ethnic backgrounds. There were several examples of families introducing cultural and gendered traditions during the post-16 phase, such as the example from Shayma, discussed in the previous section. However, family dynamics and interpersonal relations are complex things and the way in which this phenomenon played out was particular to individual students.

The third influence referred to friendships in the post-16 setting. Again, research has shown the peer relationships with schools are significant factors in determining student agency, particularly in regards to the development of motivation (Ryan 2001), academic persistence and retention (Astin 1997), self-confidence (Chen and Furnham 2002), the use of friendships as academic resources (Crosnoe and Cavanagh 2003), affiliation with the school environment (Hamm and Faircloth 2005), and academic outcomes (Vaquera and Kao 2008). In this study, the dynamic here is quite similar to the one explored above concerning families: students often felt divided between the expectations of their friends and the things that they felt they had reason to value individually. For example, the study room was an often-cited space where students felt compelled to socialise and relax with friends yet they would also be aware that they needed to study and realise their own educational aspirations. Some participants reported that they felt their friends didn’t entirely understand their values or goals.

The dynamic between different forms of student relationships acting as conversion factors to realise capabilities is presented in Table 6. What emerges from a comparison between these different relationships is that where a relationship acted as a ‘positive external conversion factor’, this had taken place where students’ ‘inner situation’ (what is going on ‘inside’) was known to the other person. Specifically, if we think of this inner-situation as housing students’ self-concept, then we can argue that students need to have their values, goals, and aspirations recognised in their relationships with others. Where teachers, family, or friends neglected to consider the self-concept of a student, this served to diminish their capability to act in ways that they found valuable. As a result, a conclusion can be drawn that the effective conversion of capabilities depends, in part, on the development of relationships that are built on an informed understanding of the students’ inner situation based on opportunities for shared self-expression.

PERSONS	Positive conversion	No conversion	Analysis	Overall
Teachers	Teachers hold students to account to achieve what they are capable of.	Teachers fail to develop interpersonal relationships, leave students feeling unknown.	Teachers need to recognise the inner situation of students: their self-concept (goals, aspirations, values).	<p>Persons act as positive external conversion factors where they offer opportunities ‘expression’ of the self-concept.</p> <p>A recognition of the ‘inner-situation’ through developing interpersonal relationships, an informed understanding of students’ self-concept, and greater opportunities for sharing self-expressions.</p>
Family	Families that had shared experiences of education could assist with decision making, or supported students make independent decisions.	Families that imposed expectations or beliefs about what student ought to do, especially when lacking knowledge/experience of post-16 life and new pathways.	Need for more informed school and home settings about individual students’ self-concept (goals, aspirations, and values) to reduce tension between sites.	
Friends	Friendships served to support and reinforce self-concept, provide opportunities for self-expression.	Little understanding between friends of educational aspirations, goals and values, led to destabilising routines and missed opportunities.	Greater opportunities for friends to share and express self-concept to each other to promote greater mutual understanding.	

**Table 6:** Analysis of persons as conversion factors

### 6.2.2.3 Processes as conversion factors for self-control

A third category of external conversion factors that emerged from student interviews could be broadly termed as ‘processes’, most notably among them; academic assessments, school routines, and social networks. Each of these furnished students with the possibility to convert specific goods or resources (academic knowledge, organisation methods, personal characteristics, etc) into outcomes that were worthwhile to them. In this respect, ‘processes’ represent a body of intangible aspects of the everyday school experience that enabled students to exercise their capabilities for better or worse.

Firstly, the process of academic assessment underpinned students’ educational experience to a significant degree. Much educational research has centralised the importance of assessment practices on the development of self-motivation and self-efficacy (Zimmerman et.al. 1992), self-regulated learning (Zimmerman 2002), and wider academic emotions (taken up in Chapter 7) such as hopelessness, pride, anxiety, shame, boredom, and so on (Pekrun et al. 2002). Typically, the ebb and flow of students’ attitudes throughout the school year centred on the various assessment points. Many students ascribed significance to these assessment points in terms of their power to influence agency. Erica, described them as moments in which the sixth form ‘formally have a look...and they decide whether you should continue with the course or not.’ There was a general sense that assessments were punitive instruments: ‘when teacher’s say to you you’re not doing enough... it kind of hurts because I know I do put the work in’ (Erica). Similarly, Arabella commented: ‘you get told that “this is wrong, that’s wrong” ... And it’s like, what about the stuff that I have actually done.’ However, other students described this process as an opportunity to demonstrate agency. Shayma, for instance, reflected that ‘Ms Taylor predicted me the

lowest in the class....and I was like “I want to prove you wrong.” Here, assessments enabled Shayma to work towards her goals in a self-disciplined, autonomous way. In this respect, assessment points could serve a vital purpose for students by fostering feelings of self-efficacy and self-control by providing them with a framework to convert their capabilities into concrete achievements connected to the primary purpose of their schooling

A second conversion factor that echoed this dynamic was reported by students in relation to the everyday school routine. Research in this area has highlighted the potential conflicts between school schedules and adolescent sleep patterns (Wolfson and Carskadon 2003), the use of spare time to develop resilience (Gilligan 2000), and the wider social and personal factors that determine participation at post-16 (Foskett et al. 2008; Archer and Yamashita 2010; Ball et al. 2000). At Fulbright, students are provided with daily structure in the form of at least one double lesson, a daily tutor group, and weekly homework tasks. This means that students need to organise their daily routines in respect of these commitments. For many students, this presents a challenge. Bianca, for example, reported that ‘school always gets in the way’ of other activities that she felt important to her wellbeing, particularly living a healthy lifestyle. More generally, Bianca found the workload of A-level studies a burden that she approached in haphazard fashion: ‘there’d be bad essay, bad essay, and then good essay because I’d be feeling bad about my results...I get a bit panicked.’ What Bianca, and many other students, seemed to be struggling with was finding the opportunity to use the work they were set as opportunities to organise their daily lives into a structured, purposeful routine. Conversely, some students found that a daily structure was important to them. Arabella, for instance, realised that she missed the routines of the school day after competing her exams, commenting: ‘I struggle without it sometimes. I wake up at 2pm and it’s like I should have been up way earlier...Having some form of set guidelines that you have to follow is very important.’ In this respect, the structure and expectations of post-16 study has the potential to provide greater freedom for self-control and achievement than what a life without constraint might do for these students.

A final process relates to the role that student networks play in converting resources and opportunities. Networks refer to groups of students who regularly connected with one another, providing an opportunity to engage in a process of ‘sense making’ and ‘belonging’ to a school community. In this sense, they can be viewed as micro-communities within the school where membership entails broadly shared values, characteristics, attitudes to learning, aspirations and so on. In a sense, they operated similarly to ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger 1998). These networks share a ‘domain’ which distinguishes them from others (A-level study), engage in regular activities (studying together, socialising, sharing experiences), and share a practice or repertoire of resources (sharing experiences, methods for studying, ideas about life after school). Mabel highlighted how her student network improved her social environment so that she had the confidence to fully participate in education. Importantly, we can distinguish between the friendships that Mabel enjoyed and discussed under ‘relationships’, and the social

network that she belonged to. The distinction rests on the idea that a student network makes possible particular processes associated with interpersonal group relationships:

The school has the ability to kind of push you towards certain directions. But as a group, when we talk about things, people always know what they want...you often find a person making their own decisions about what they want to do, and find that you don't even need to help them very much to get to that decision. (Mabel)

Here, we see that Mabel saw her social network as a vital aspect of her participation which enabled her to be resilient against school expectations, enabling her and her friends to maintain their own sense of control over their futures.

PROCESSES	Positive conversion	No conversion	Analysis	Overall Analysis
Academic assessment	Depended on students viewing assessments as opportunities to work hard for and formalise achievement. Would convert academic self-concept, self-efficacy, self-purpose.	For students who 'fail' – this is often used to 'kick off' courses rather than foster resilience or capability to fail. Could create anxiety, depression, and feelings of alienation.	Greater resilience and belonging nurtured in students and capability to fail built into system (rather than terminate participation).	Significant issues related to emotional wellbeing reported in the difficulty with using 'processes' like assessment and routine as positive conversion factors. For a significant minority, these created instability, and unpredictability, in their daily lives, which had a negative effect on student capabilities.  The positive conversion of capabilities depended upon:  Students having a clear self-control by developing mechanisms for coping with failure, and encourage self-organisation, fostered through constructive social networks.
School routine	Depends on students viewing the routines and structure as an opportunity to invest their lives with purpose to work towards specific achievements.	For students who felt that the school routine was an obstacle, the workload and commitments served to create anxiety and instability through disorganisation.	Successful conversion resulted in on students' making use of resources for self-control. The quantity of the work load made this difficult for many students.	
Student Networks	Depended upon students developing close-knit, supportive group of peers to enable individuals to critically reflect on their own sense of purpose and values.	No evidence that large social networks had a negative impact as a conversion factor. However, very few students proved able to form these forms of social networks.	Successful conversion depended on having like-minded students with a shared sense of responsibility and opportunities for sharing experiences.	

**Table 7:** Analysis of processes as conversion factors

The way in 'processes' in the post-16 setting might represent external conversion factors in students' educational environments is summarised in Table 7. In general, the analysis reveals the inherent tension that arises from processes in the post-16 environment, where students needed the inner resources to cope with expectations, govern self-management, and cope with failure in order to make use of processes as positive conversion factors. A particular concern relates to the 'emotional' dimension of these school processes, where students reported anger and anxiety about the pressures they felt in their everyday

school lives. This concern was reduced for students who had access to student networks in which they could explore their self-concept, or for students who felt a sense of self-control in preparing for assessments.

#### **6.2.2.4 Events as conversion factors for self-purpose**

The final category of external conversion factors that influenced the exercise of capabilities in the post-16 setting was ‘events’. Specifically, this referred to ‘raising aspiration’ events and work experience, time spent volunteering, and participating in non-curricular activities such as tutor time or clubs and societies. As such, these events introduced conversion factors that related closely to students’ sense of self-purpose.

The first and most notable category of event that acts as a conversion factor for individual students is the ‘raising aspirations’ programme. This programme is curated by a member of staff and consists of supporting students to apply for various university outreach projects, organising career talks and events in school, and assisting students with finding work experience placements at the end of Year 12. For Arabella, work experience enabled her to look at her education in a new light. After spending time at an events company, she reported:

work experience has had such a big impact on me and I didn’t realise it would. I have just become more aware of the fact that actually everyone is putting in their part and...it can’t just be you on your own fighting against the team because that doesn’t work.

A similar transformation took place with Bianca, who attended a placement programme with a global bank, where she was mentored by the Head of Communications. Bianca’s mentor was a successful female, and Bianca described her in the following way:

she was enthusiastic. Her job appealed to me, because she travels a little bit, and it’s also, she has a lot to do. So, I thought it would be interesting. And also, she didn’t do too well at uni. And she still had a good job. So, I was like, I want to learn about her experience. And she worked in the Netherlands for a few years, and I want to do that. I want to work in another country for a bit.

Taken together we can see how the life journey of her mentor was something that Bianca could use to review her own life and goals, helping to see her life own across the long term and form aspirations that she could value and that would otherwise not have existed. Yet, there a body of students who felt that they were not catered for because they did not identify with career paths promoted by the programme. Selina suggested, ‘no one really asks me, what do you want to do?’ She described how she was interested in looking at alternative pathways from university, and during a specific ‘futures week’ she was encouraged to come in because there would be a range of options for students to learn about. However, during the week Selina suggested that the only non-university options represented were related to engineering, commenting ‘just because I don’t want to go into academic stuff, it doesn’t mean I want to go into construction.’

A second category of event that shaped student's educational experience was volunteering. Research has highlighted various issues related to the integrity of volunteering, debating whether it is motivated by 'CV enhancing' (Handy et al. 2010) or a more complex and changing form of identity-work (Holdsworth 2010), as well as debating whether the benefits of volunteering tend to be 'assumed' rather than proven (Holdsworth and Quinn 2010), and whether it provides a useful source of labour for local organisations (Mooney and Heald 2001). In this vein, there is considerable debate around the 'integrity' of volunteering as a practice to 'do good' that raises questions about 'who' is it good for and how much good it achieves. For Aliya, her involvement with an organisation that supports students to work in groups to set up a social enterprise was an empowering experience. Initially, she had signed up for this because it was about 'just being more open to trying new things', but this led to becoming an ambassador for the programme after completing it and attending dinners with corporate partners. Ultimately, this experience had transformed the way that Aliyah viewed herself: it broke down social and gender barriers that she felt would affect her life after school and gave her the confidence to think about how she might transition into a corporate career. However, again Selina provided a counterpoint for this. She had volunteered to support the school play by making costumes, because, like Aliyah, she thought 'let me just do it.' But, Selina became frustrated: 'it's like, they put too much responsibility on me. They were shouting at me going, "the costumes aren't done." From Selina's point of view, she was 'just helping out' but 'they were trying to teach me a life lesson.' As a result, this experience illustrated the ways in which often these kinds of experiences cannot be engineered or foisted on students. Rather, there is a vital dimension that they need to feel invested and able to maintain their autonomy throughout the volunteering process.

The third category of event identified in the data is non-curricular activities, such as tutor time and clubs. There is a wide body of evidence that connects extra- and non-curricular activity to increased student motivation (Holloway 2002), academic outcomes and prosocial behaviour (Zaff et al. 2003), school connection and sense of belonging (Brown and Evans 2002), and improved transition prospects including access to better occupational status (Tchibofo 2007). Like volunteering, this presented a real challenge for several students who felt tutor time as a 'waste of time', 'meaningless', 'boring', and so on. However, in contrast to this some students reported that their non-curricula involvement was deeply formative. Mabel, for instance, engaged in clubs and societies to a remarkable extent, listing her involvement in: poetry, creative writing, running, butterfly keeping, and debating clubs, as well as participating in various charity schemes and an excursion to Ethiopia. For her, involvement in these clubs and activities was about making use of the freedoms and opportunities around her to do things she valued: 'they were always things that I wanted to do. I didn't do them for any ulterior motive.' Not only did participating in these clubs create an environment in which Mabel felt free and able to express herself and pursue her own view of the good life, but they also provided her with spaces in which to make sense of her academic experiences. Specifically, she highlighted a moment where, after a mock exam, she visited her butterfly growing club: 'I knew I failed when I did it. And I went to all of the caterpillars and I was just like 'ergh.'

It was definitely calming. It was an environment that I needed.’ This enlivens us to the notion that non-curricular participation, whilst not a core aspect of provision or policy, can act as a vital factor for student wellbeing achievement.

Table 8 reflects on the ways in which these events have acted as external conversion factors for students and highlights three considerations. Firstly, events in the post-16 environment could be ‘transformative’ insofar as they provided motivation for students to pursue specific pathways. Secondly, these events acted as conversion factors where students were able to find them relevant, cohering with their own values and aspirations. And thirdly, these events were reported as valuable conversion factors where they were able to participate freely and manage the commitment and responsibility successfully. For a great many students, such as Selena, there was a real difficulty in using these events as conversion factors to develop their capabilities. Specifically, many ‘work related’ events were not relevant to the kind of life they hoped to live, the efforts they were willing to put into non-curriculum participation were not accommodated within the school, and the forms of non-curriculum activity that were available within the school were felt irrelevant to their goals and aspirations. However, for several students, these events proved to be life changing and secure important aspects of wellbeing.

EVENTS	Positive conversion	No conversion	Analysis	Overall
Raising Aspirations & work experiences	Positive conversion factor where students felt event was relevant to their values and aspirations, and were able to develop a view of their self across the long term.	Events where students felt little or no relevance – outside their interests or view of what they wanted for the future.	Needed to be compatible with students’ self-concept.	Collaborative factors versus competitive factors.  Events works as positive conversion factors when: they aligned with students’ values, presented achievable commitments, and could be invested with self-purpose under conditions of freedom.
Volunteering	Positive conversion where students were able to balance commitment and responsibility to develop their sense of potential and self-efficacy.	Where commitments or responsibilities were too great, becoming a burden on students.	Depended on students’ being open to challenge and able to manage commitments (self-control).	
Clubs and Societies (tutor time)	Positive conversion where students enjoy freedom and opportunity to express values and make sense of failures and setbacks.	Where commitments are irrelevant, unstructured, or purposeless.	Depending on students investing events with self-purpose and using freedom as resources to develop this.	

**Table 8:** Analysis of events as conversion factors

### 6.2.3 Summary: a focus on conditions

To summarise, the discussion has outlined the various categories of external conversion factors that were found in the data. These were the places, people, process and events, that make up the post-16 environment, and each of these categories contain examples of specific forms of conversion factor (for instance, classrooms, teachers, workload, and volunteering). In places, the discussion has tentatively connected these conversion factors to the linked capabilities established in the Chapter 5. For instance, it

suggested ways in which interaction with places enhanced the capability for self-concept, interaction with people provided opportunities for self-expression, grappling with processes enabled the exercise of self-control, and the experience of events enriched the capability for self-purpose. However, a fuller treatment of the data could unpick how each of these categories of conversion factors play a role in realising each of the linked-capabilities for identity formation.

Moreover, the discussion has also highlighted that utilising the post-16 environment through these conversion factors is dependent upon particular environmental conditions. It is this notion of ‘conditions’ that forms the basis for the following discussion. Here, the focus is on attempting to make sense of the structural realities of the post-16 environment, on the one hand, and the different effects these have on different students, on the other hand. This requires explaining how the post-16 environment serves to situate but not govern student agency, and how conversion factors take on individualised meanings in student life as young people become part of the institutional fabric or social context. The following section attempts this by developing a socio-ecological account of the post-16 environment.

### **6.3 The Social Ecology of the Post-16 Environment**

Here, a model of the post-16 environment is created with reference to Urie Bronfenbrenner’s understanding of human development (1979; 1989; 2006). His socio-ecological framework is particularly useful because it offers a profile that melds well with other approaches as a result of ‘its interdisciplinary and integrative focus on the age periods of childhood and adolescence and its explicit interest in applications to policies and programs pertinent to enhancing youth and family development’ (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006, p.794). The socio-ecological model assumes three particular and interrelated claims about youth development and agency:

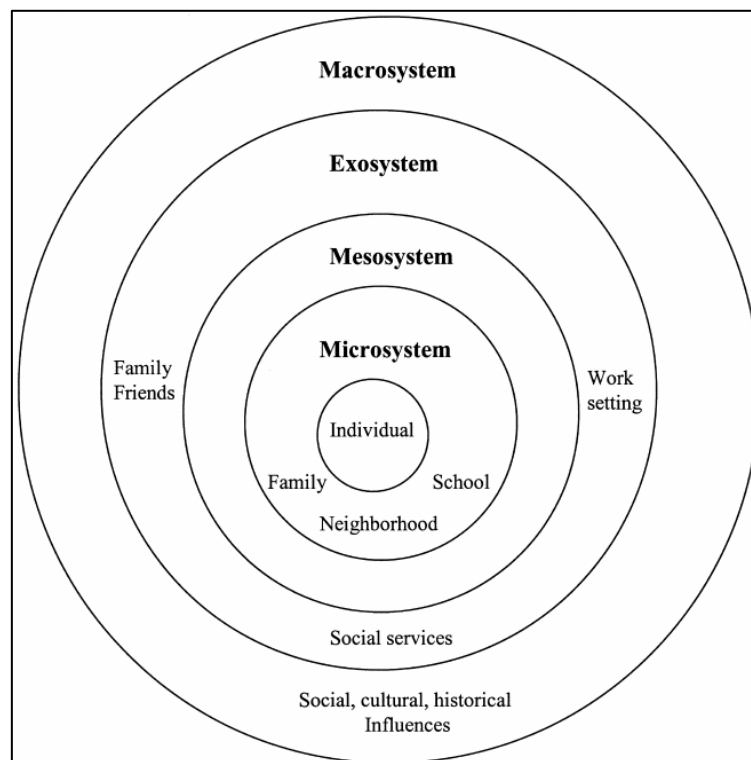
1. It does not pursue a single trajectory according to strictly defined goals,
2. It is not biologically ‘hardwired’ but continually, and significantly, influenced by culture and environment.
3. It is a continuous, complex and dynamic process and outcomes have multiple causal factors.

These claims are useful for positioning the socio-ecological model’s position regarding the agency/structure debate. On the one hand, youth development is a process of ‘agency achievement’, as Sen might have it, where outcomes do not pursue a single trajectory but capable of change. On the other hand, the environment serves to situate young people and influence the range of possible lives they might live, as notion of ‘bounded agency’ has it.

#### **6.3.1 Socio-ecological model of human development**

Bronfenbrenner conceives of the individual’s environment ‘as a set of nested structures, each inside each other like a set of Russian dolls’ (1994, p.39), that is comprised of four interrelated systems or layers: the

microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem (Figure 6). This offers a ‘highly differentiated reconceptualization of the environment from the perspective of the developing person’ (1994, p.39).<sup>14</sup> As such, this framework enables us to think about the post-16 setting in terms of individual students’ capability; what they are able to be and do as agents at the centre of their environment. More specifically, this provides an account of how agency can be ‘bound’ by structure: the various aspects of a student’s context that interwork to shape and influence development. Bronfenbrenner’s account of how context can influence individual development and the conceptualisation of environmental systems has seen applications in fields such as public health (Richard et al. 2011), epidemiology (Baral et al. 2013), social policy (Ostrom et al. 2014), environmental studies (Benessaiah and Sengupta 2014) and education policy (Hodgson and Spours 2009; 2013). Working from these applications and the original model proposed by Bronfenbrenner, it is possible to assemble a detailed understanding of the influence that the external environment can have on individual students, and how students engage with it in order to convert resources and opportunities into achievements.



**Figure 6:** Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model. (Bronfenbrenner, 2006)

Importantly, Bronfenbrenner’s later work developed an operating principle of human development in terms of ‘proximal process’, which refers to the interrelation between a person and their context (Tudge et al. 2009). This is a vital but often overlooked aspect of Bronfenbrenner’s work (Tudge et al. 2009; Darlin 2007). Proximal processes refer to the interactionist dynamic that exist between an individual and

<sup>14</sup> This understanding of context is deeply influenced by Kurt Lewin’s notion of psychological fields (Lewin 1931; 1935); Theodore Wachs’ work on childhood development (Wachs 1979) and Melvin Kohn’s sociological research on the effect of workplaces on intellectual development (Kohn and Slomczynski 1990).

their immediate surroundings. This means that there is a 'process of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment' (Bronfenbrenner 1994, p.38). The importance of this is that the ecological model places dual importance on both (i) the individual as an agent and their capability to engage with (ii) their external environment or context, where the combination between the two provides the 'engine of development' (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006, p.801). Nancy Darling (2007) suggests that this is the core and promise of Bronfenbrenner's work, where 'the central force in development is the active person: shaping environments, evoking responses from them, and reacting to them', which means that environments are highly individualised and therefore 'one will find ecological niches in which distinct processes and outcomes will be observed' (p.204). In this respect, our analysis of student capability development is directed towards identifying these 'ecological niches', taking an evaluative interest in the *processes* of development for individual students that underpin conversion from resources to outcomes.

### **6.3.2 The 'look of freedom' and agency achievement in a social ecology**

The focus of this discussion is to illustrate how the CA's notion of conversion factors can be blended with an account of individual development taking place within a social ecology. This can be achieved by drawing on Sen's notion of process-freedom, which is central to his account of how capabilities can be defined. For Sen (1992; 1999), freedom is not only the ability of an individual to achieve what they value (opportunity-freedom), it can also be understood as the ability of an individual to play an agentic role in achieving what they value (process-freedom). In this sense, an individual has a capability where they have the potential to bring about valued achievements for themselves, playing a part in the process, and thereby asserting themselves in the environment. Following this, conversion factors correspond to those aspects of an individual's environment that enable them to play a part in the process of bringing about achievements they value. Thus, for the present analysis, we are interested in how the post-16 environment structures students' process-freedom, bringing resources and opportunities into the reach of individual students and designing how they might be used.

Analysing the post-16 environment in this way, we might ask whether it has the 'look of freedom' in general. In other words, we are interested in 'political aesthetics', akin to Jeremy Waldron's notion that a 'look of hate' is perceptible in a racist society (2010). In his writing, Waldron supposes that we can infer political values from observing aesthetic aspects of the environment: the look, sound, feel, smell of a place. For example, feet stomping or banging, racist signage, empty or grubby spaces, might be viewed as a 'look of hate' within a society. Conversely, we can ask what the 'look of freedom' might look like within a post-16 environment, specifically with the notion of process-freedom in mind. At Fulbright, this was perceptible when observing: students participating in activities after school, groups of young people debating or exploring ideas in small groups in purposeful and quiet discussion, posters about extra-curricular activities or celebrations of success, representations of diverse aspirations either in posters or

assemblies, informal and genial discussions between staff and students, and so on. This 'look of freedom' is one way of thinking about the various forms of agency achievement that might arise in a post-16 environment. Moreover, we can view this 'look of freedom' as emerging in social environments where multiple conversion factors are at play in the interactions between students and their environments. From this perspective, a 'look of freedom' in the post-16 environment is associated with conditions that create positive conversion factors, where young people are realising achievements they value through processes they participate in. This process of positive conversion enables young people to pursue different outcomes related to their own values and therefore, this 'look of freedom' also contains ecological niches where student agency can become highly individualised.

Social ecology views the environment as a socially organised series of layers of varying distances from the individual. Taking this model as its basis, this analysis suggests that the 'look of freedom' gives us a sense of the specific conditions that create positive conversion factors and support the agency achievements of post-16 students, in each layer of students' post-16 environment. The following section outlines how the conditions of the social ecology in the post-16 setting, in other words the nature of structural influences, make possible particular forms of interactional agency, which in turn make possible forms of achievements. The focus of discussion here is to explore what types of conditions support the development of identity capabilities.

### **6.3.3 Microsystem and transformed agency**

The most immediate way in which students engage with external conversion factors is via their microsystem. The microsystem is 'any environment, such as home, school, or peer group, in which the developing person spends a good deal of time engaging in activities and interactions' (Tudge et al. 2009, p.39). As such, a student's microsystem is made up of a 'pattern of activities, social roles and interpersonal relations' that take place in their immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner 1994, p.39). With reference to the discussion above, these include the places, people, processes and events that make up the everyday life of the student. Within the microsystem, therefore, conversion factors include subject teachers, tutors, close friends, classmates, homework, and routines.

As students enter the post-16 setting in Year 12, they are introduced to a new microcosm that affects their agency in at least three ways. Firstly, it provides new external conversion factors that students have no previous experience with, such as persons (new teachers to engage with), places (a sixth form study room), processes, (A-level curricula), and so on. Secondly, it positions students as 'newcomers' to their environment where they take up identity-challenges to determine their new position, including how to manage new social relations (e.g. how they talk with teachers), and how to interact in spaces (e.g. how to participate in classrooms). Thirdly, it provides new expectations about how make use of the new environment, with an emphasis on independence and autonomy (e.g. what opportunities to sign up for,

how use independent study time). As such, agency achievement in the microcosm of post-16 presented students with the tasks of overcoming ‘newness’, ‘outsider status’, and ‘the expectation of autonomy’ as central identity-challenges. Based on the findings reported above, overcoming these identity challenges required students to undertake ‘transformative agency.’ This means using external conversion factors to support new forms of agency, such as participating in the classroom or talking to staff in new ways.

The look of freedom here, therefore, consists of ‘transformative agency’ which closely connects to the development of the capability for self-concept. Considering the conversion factors above, the resources and opportunities that students had to develop their self-concept depended upon three governing conditions. Firstly, the condition of relevance is important, where students recognise that their agency in the post-16 environment is related to their future agency in life after school. For example, the recognition that managing their A-level workload, developing relationships with staff, or working with other students, are relevant forms of agency for the kind of life they hope to live after school. Secondly, a condition of incorporation refers to the efforts of post-16 leadership and teachers to ensure students are actively ‘brought into’ the life of the community. Incorporation might be achieved through pedagogy (e.g. discussions in the classroom), through utilising tutor times for debates about social and cultural issues, or providing wider opportunities for self-expression in the post-16 setting (e.g. giving students the freedom to design their study rooms, organise performance or social events, and so on). Lastly, transformative agency is supported by the condition of encouragement. This entails that students are afforded guidance and feedback on how to make use of their post-16 environment, such as encouraging participation in extra-curricular activities or working with students on weekly timetables.

#### **6.3.4 Mesosystem and expanded agency**

As noted, post-16 students typically participate in multiple of microcosms, especially the school, the home and peer groups. With this in mind, the mesosystem is comprised of ‘the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings... (in) a system of microsystems’ (Bronfenbrenner 1994, p.40). The mesosystem, therefore, corresponds to the relationships that exist between microsystems. It was found that as students transition into the post-16 setting sees developments in existing microsystems (taking on responsibilities in the family, new forms of young adult socialisation with peers) and the availability of new ‘adult’ microsystems (beginning part-time employment, enrolling on new volunteer schemes or university preparation programmes). This creates new possibilities and complexities in the mesosystem, as competing values and ideas vie with each other in the life of the student.

The look of freedom in the mesosystem, involved the use of ‘expanded agency’, where students made use of increased freedom to move between settings and take on more responsibility to integrate their lives across microsystems. This study found three primary concerns that arose for students in respect of this ‘expanded agency.’ Firstly, students encountered expectations about how and when to work on their

studies outside of the post-16 environment, where friends and family might support or discourage them. Secondly, in the other direction, students encountered expectations about how to manage their studies within the post-16 environment, based on the attitudes of family or friends. Here, students sometimes faced deciding between incommensurable goods that begin to arise at post-16 (spending time on independent study, employment, with friends, on family responsibilities, etc.). Moreover, students experience the influence of aspirations from home or peers about the kinds of pathways they should pursue, and therefore the kinds of events they engaged with in the post-16 environment. Lastly, expanded agency in the post-16 environment depended upon effective functioning in other microsystems, particularly the home or workplace. For instance, students needed to balance a healthy lifestyle, part-time work, family responsibilities and relationships, and so on, in order to function well at school at other times of day. In this respect, the study found that transitioning into post-16 requires students to renegotiate the linkages and processes taking place between multiple settings, as their mesosystem becomes more complex and subject to expansion.

This account of ‘expanded agency’ corresponds closely with the capability for self-expression and self-control. As students familiarised themselves with the post-16 microcosm, new challenges emerged around expressing and sustaining their sense of self in other environments. In particular, the mesosystem for post-16 students exposed them to particular risks, corrosive disadvantages and insecure functionings. For example, where students had to take on part-time employment due to material poverty at home, this necessarily limited their post-16 education agency. In this respect, creating positive conversion factors in the post-16 setting related to two conditions. Firstly, students benefitted from a condition of grace that accompanied the expansion of their mesosystems. The risks of getting it wrong in post-16, especially during the transition phase, and the fear of failure was a widely reported source of anxiety. Moments of misjudgement or miscalculation arose from their expanded agency including taking on too many commitments or struggling with managing workload and teacher expectations. Here, a condition of grace refers to helping students learn from these mistakes. Secondly, this study also found that increased communication between microsystems enhanced the agency of students significantly. Erica, for example, highlighted a difficulty where her family expected her to spend evenings on housework but her teachers expected her to spend her evenings completing school work. Here, Erica made the point that her situation demanded that the two settings communicated more often so that they had a better understanding of her environment.

### **6.3.5 Exosystem and intentional agency**

Student development is also indirectly shaped by an outer context or exosystem: a part of the student’s environment in which they are not directly situated but are nevertheless affected by. For instance, the external conversion factors discussed above depend upon wider environmental concerns, such as staff

recruitment, policy enactment, arrangement of physical spaces, and so on. Each of these lie outside the direct experience of students but nevertheless have a powerful effect on their possibility for agency. Moreover, we might distinguish between an ‘internal’ exosystem of individual schools, and an ‘external’ exosystem representing the general social and economic landscape that school operates within, such as national policy contexts or labour market opportunities. Importantly, the exosystem shapes what kinds of resources and opportunities students are able to access and what kinds of aspirations they are likely to form.

Here, the look of freedom consists in students being made conscious of this exosystem, enabling them to develop their capability for self-purpose and see beyond the limits of their everyday school life and immediate environment. The forms of agency associated with self-purpose can be viewed as ‘intentional agency’, where students attempt to do or be things that corresponded with their view of the future. Yet, by definition, the exosystem refer to features of school life that are outside of students’ jurisdiction. In teaching departments, decisions are made about classroom layouts, the delivery of courses, pedagogy to be used, and staff development targets are set, all of which fed into student’s everyday experiences in important ways. In addition, work experiences were closely associated with professional sectors that volunteered to work with the school, steering students to forming particular aspirations. University admissions departments choose and develop particular outreach opportunities or information days, which influence student ideas about higher education. In the Post-16 office, decisions were made regarding the curriculum offer for students, the behaviour and dress code was set, policies about eligibility for the student bursary scheme were developed, and so on. In each of these ways, a reality is constructed for students, informing their understanding of what the post-16 environment, working world or higher education, is *really* about. A result of this is that students develop a fixed view of the resources and opportunities available to them as a means to achieve *particular* goals. What this means is that the exosystem was particularly habitable for those students who aspired to pursue ‘traditional’ or ‘established’ pathways, such as medicine or law, and their capability for self-purpose was a secure one. However, for those students who remained uncertain or aspired to do things differently, their capability for self-purpose was increasingly insecure; for example, it could be openly challenged by staff, they might be encouraged to reconsider their aspirations, or opportunities might be few and far between.

However, the findings of this study identified students who used conversion factors in the exosystem in ways that supported ‘intentional agency.’ Firstly, there are examples of students who challenged the status quo and asked the school for support in organising work placements that were specific to their aspirations. Here, the students benefitted from being in central London and from the agency of the member of staff who secured their placements. Here, we can highlight the linked-capability process explored in the previous chapter: these were students with a high level of self-concept, confidence expressing their ideas, and proactive in organising their lives. Secondly, the capability for self-purpose was enhanced by ‘experts’

who some students met. For instance, Bianca benefitted from a mentor during her work experience who offered a narrative about the journey in life after school. For Bianca, the complex and sometimes contradictory information she received from the school about career progression was put into a coherent and clear message by her mentor's life experience. As a result, Bianca became more confident in her ability to exercise 'intentional agency' by deciding to participate in more work experience programmes.

### **6.3.6 Macrosystem and contested agency**

The final layer of the post-16 environment is the macrosystem. This describes the cultural context in which students are situated. Whilst this is most abstract and least concrete element of a student's environment, there was evidence this could be the most 'structuring.' Moreover, there was a reciprocal dynamic in the way that school cultural context influenced student development and student cultural contexts influenced the school environment. Specifically, we might consider how the human-capital and performative aspects of the school environment interacted and were influenced by the social and cultural values of the students, and vice versa. This interaction meant that the school environment was a product of a complex and specific assimilation of competing values, creating a unique 'cultural blueprint' that represents the moral life of the school.

The dynamic described above created conditions for 'contested agency', where the look of freedom consists of developing a 'view of the good' through combining or contrasting the various sources of cultural or ideological values. This is to say that by developing the capability for the 'view of the good', students made use of conversion factors that enabled them to establish particular values within their macrosystems. Here, there are at three sources of cultural or ideological value are manifest in the school environment. Firstly, the school itself promoted particular political values focused on enacting neoliberal attitudes related to performance, competition, and accountability. Secondly, the persons within the school, especially teachers, promoted particular social values that reflected the position of the school as a modern, liberal, institution. Thirdly, and connected to this, students were free to express particular personal values that promoted a school culture characterised by plurality and diversity. These personal values were expressed through a range of identity practices, the subject of the previous chapter, and these were seen in the expression of religious beliefs, political beliefs, social attitudes, and so on. As such, an important aspect of this macrosystem is that is offered a contested space, where student agency might contradict, disrupt or embrace the different cultural and political contexts the coexist in the school environment.

'Contested agency' drew on particular conversion factors in order for students to define their own view of the good. For example, the set of conversion factors that supported 'contested agency' took place under the condition of 'inclusiveness'. For instance, classrooms where students could express beliefs and values

that challenged what they were learning, or discussions with teachers where students could critique policies and practices that they objected to. The condition of inclusiveness here ensured that students felt a sense of belonging within the school community and were confident in expressing their own beliefs. Secondly, 'contested agency' was supported by a set of conversion factors that took place under the condition of 'inquiry'. This refers to the ability to critique and challenge aspects of the school environment, where critical examination was encouraged. Lastly, contested agency is supported by a condition of 'diversity', where multiple beliefs, values and ideas are not only accommodated but encouraged. Examples of this included students being able to express their religious or cultural identities through dress, to be able to come and go from the school grounds independently, or to undertake work experience that related to unusual or atypical placements.

#### **6.4 Conclusion**

The discussion above has argued for a series of interconnecting points, which have developed our account of agency further by moving from *what* it might do (identity practices) to *how* it might achieve it (agency that is transformative, expanded, and so on). It has highlighted the importance of considering the role of external conversion factors in student development. Drawing on the data, these have been characterised as the tangible and intangible infrastructure of the post-16 setting, which provide students with resources to develop and exercise their capabilities, specifically those related to the linked-capabilities for identity building. Moreover, this discussion grouped the school infrastructure into four categories: places, people, processes, and events. In doing so, it accounted for how these might be utilised as positive conversion factors for capability development and how they might not. By exploring how students make use of these factors in the data, this chapter has argued that particular conditions accompany 'positive conversion' for students.

The chapter proceeded to use a social ecology model with which to show that students encounter these external conversion factors in distinct ways. The aim of this was to introduce a clearer account of 'structure' into the capability framework, in a way that maintained the importance of agency that is at the core of the capability perspective. In doing so, it moved away from the idea of 'structure' per se, and developed an account of social ecology in its place; a more holistic, connected, and individualistic account of the environment than sociological conceptions of structure generally offer. With this, it was argued that a distinct look of freedom can be seen in different exercises of student agency in ecological niches: transformative, expanded, contested and intentional. When taking place under particular conditions of freedom, these exercises of agency could bring about achievements related to identity formation via the conversion factors found in the post-16 environment.

This chapter offers an original contribution to research in two respects. Firstly, it offers an account of the post-16 setting in terms of infrastructure, mapping out what the external environment consists of and

how it influences the life of individual students. This provides an understanding of post-16 education that extends our interest beyond what happens in the classroom and toward recognising the school as a social institution where processes of human development take place for young people. Secondly, this chapter has used a social ecology model to better understand how this complex relationship between the school environment and individual student results in such processes of human development. Here, the key argument is that the environment does not simply structure agency, as is commonly supposed, but rather necessitates particular modes of agency that support human development processes.

Drawing on the CA, the discussion has demonstrated that the post-16 environment necessitates particular modes of agency that are specific to post-16 students and which develop their capabilities. These modes of agency are particular to the lives of 16-19 year olds and specific to the post-16 setting, connecting processes of human development with 'transitioning into' and 'transitioning out of' post-16 education (or preparing for life 'in post-16' and 'beyond post-16') in four ways. Firstly, the post-16 setting creates a new environment in which students develop their identities, which necessitates transformative modes of agency. The discussion identified this as a form of agency primarily engaged in the microsystem, where the everyday experiences of post-16 life are found and identity-building practices take place. Secondly, the post-16 setting is distinguished from lower-school by the increased interaction between different microsystems in the life of the student; where family life, employment experiences, friendship groups, and so on, transect and become increasingly influential in the processes of human development. Here, the analysis identified the post-16 environment as necessitating expanded modes of agency, where students' capability development includes making sense of the connections between and decisions about the different spheres of life (the 'wider world' young people become exposed to). Both of these modes of agency are indicative of the increasingly individuating processes of human development within the post-16 environment and the greater freedom for self-definition and relevance to later life that it offers.

The analysis then argued that this increasing complexity in the lives of post-16 students as they approach young adulthood entails the need for developing a sense of purpose and an imagined future life. Here, the use of the school environment necessitates the third and fourth modes of agency: the intentional and contested modes. The function of the intentional mode is to develop long-term goals or intentions for life beyond school, and this necessitates the conversion of a range of resources found in the exosystem, the outer-layer of the student environment that students themselves are not directly situated in but nevertheless interact with. The contested mode of agency relates to the relationship between young people and the environment at its outermost layer, the macrosystem, where various and diverse historical, ideological and cultural values act as influences on student development. The analysis above sought to demonstrate that the post-16 environment serves to mediate these influences and make possible forms of contestation that are expressed through student agency, particularly regarding students' moral outlook.

The value of such an analysis is that it enables us to recognise that processes of capability development in post-16 are not restricted to academic domains or aspects of formal schooling. Rather, they are the product of an interactional relationship between student and school infrastructure, broadly construed and inclusive of informal or non-formal aspects of school-life. The challenge, therefore, is to construct suitable infrastructure for capability development in the post-16 setting. Suitable infrastructures, this chapter has identified, are those places, people, processes and events that support autonomy and dignity; in other words, the deep practices of identity building. In the final chapter, the discussion proceeds to consider how participation in post-16 education might develop the internal capabilities of students towards the same goal.

## Chapter 7

### The Role of Inner Life

#### 7.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have argued that we ought to view young people as agents in their educational lives, where ‘preparedness’ means paying attention to how students use the resources and opportunities available to them to reason about what they value in life. Chapter 5 considered the lives of students as individuals, advancing an account of school life where student agency consisted in identity practices. The perspective of analysis shifted in Chapter 6, which considered the life of the school, and it was argued we can recognise a capability friendly post-16 by the ‘look of freedom.’ This developed the account of agency further, moving from *what* it might do (identity practices) to *how* it might achieve it (agency that is transformative, expanded, and so on). Here, emphasis was placed on the need for schools to be highly individuating institutions, where the development of young people takes place in ecological niches. What remains of the analysis, then, is to consider *why* students engage in the forms of agency that they do. In other words, an exploration of why young people might thrive in post-16 education more than others, not in terms of structural influences (as it was in Chapter 6) or individual agents (as it was in Chapter 5) but in terms of persons who possess their own attitudes, beliefs and ideas about themselves as agents. A central claim here is that the agency of students is logically anterior to the internal capabilities of students, which can be explored in terms of their desires, abilities, understandings, knowledge, aspirations, feelings, skills, interests, values, and so on.

Consequently, this chapter aims to delve deeper into what was called, in Chapter 5, the ‘inner situation’ of students and sketch out what might be considered students’ ‘capability for capability development.’ In doing so, the chapter hopes to provide a qualitative account of the inner-experience of post-16 education, what post-16 participation consists of, and the kinds of internal conversion factors that young people draw on to derive value from their educational experience. This entails exploring the reasons that students give for their actions and, by extension, the meaning they ascribe to their education and how this might affect their capability development. Ultimately, the chapter rejects the view that an exhaustive or complete list of ‘internal capabilities’ is possible but does advance the view that (a) an account of internal capabilities provides a coherent and compatible extension of the discussion of the CA so far, (b) different internal capabilities can be situated in relation to one another, giving some organisation to them, and (c) the value and purpose of different internal capabilities can be evaluated in relation to whether they improve young people’s wellbeing. From this, it follows that a broad account of student wellbeing can be constructed that includes both objective and subjective dimensions and which is supported by particular internal capabilities.

To achieve this, the chapter is structured as follows. It begins by explaining the account of internal capabilities found in Martha Nussbaum’s writing, with reference to ‘internal conversion factors’

(extending the discussion in Chapter 6) and the ‘inner situation’ of students (developing the discussion in Chapter 5). It then goes on to explain the process of data analysis and provides three contrasting student portraits, with which to consider internal capabilities. The chapter moves on to analyse the inner lives of students using the notion of ‘internal orientations’ to capture the contrasting ways in which experiences within the school environment might take on multiple meanings for young people. Lastly, the discussion evaluates how internal capabilities might be developed to improve the inner situation of young people, so that they might achieve greater wellbeing with reference to identity practices.

### **7.1.1 Inner conversion factors**

The task of this chapter is to focus on the internal or personal conversion factors that students have to exercise forms of agency to realise the kinds of achievements that they value. In the previous chapter external conversion factors were discussed with reference to riding a bicycle, specifically personal, social and environmental factors that create the conditions for that capability. But, we might add that the ‘lived experience’ of developing the capability to ride a bicycle demands more than this because learning how to ride a bicycle is difficult: the acquisition and development of the capability involves a transformation in the self to some degree. In other words, a kind of transformative agency underpinned by the individual’s *determination* to move from a potential condition to an actual condition. There is more to developing a capability than simply ‘doing it’; to be able to ride a bicycle requires a particular mind-set that is able to suffer set-backs, draw on self-determination, and persist in the exercise so as to expand one’s capability in the direction of bicycle riding. Indeed, depending on the task, an account of transformative agency might include these attitudes or traits as important ingredients. In the same way, we might view the acquisition or development of any capability as requiring a state of mind or form of character that is inherent in its practice or agency. With this in mind, this chapter explores which states of mind or forms of character are inherent in the identity practices, particularly those identified as ‘deep practices.’ In doing so, the analysis presents a subtle shift in its application of the CA by drawing on the work of Martha Nussbaum for greater conceptual support.

### **7.1.2 Interiority of education**

Writing in the ‘Energies of Men’, William James suggests:

Everyone is familiar with the phenomenon of feeling more or less alive on different days. Everyone knows on any given day that there are energies slumbering in him which the incitements of that day do not call forth...Compared with what we ought to be, we are only half awake. (1907, p.322)

This sentiment touches on that aspect of human experience that forms the basis of this discussion. James highlights one sense in which our capability is affected by our state of mind, which shapes how we make use of our potential for agency. We might distinguish between a young person who goes through their education ‘awake’ to the possibilities around them from one who is ‘only half awake’. Something like this

was discussed in Chapter 5, which argued that students' lived experience of post-16 education involved a condition of 'interiority.' This meant that students' everyday educational experiences had an internal value, connecting to their inner-lives, and this internal value governed the ways that they chose to participate.

To illustrate, Clemens Sedmak tells us that objects have a symbolic value and that our material possessions connect to our personal identity, writing:

In this sense, things are not flat; things have an outside and an inside representing certain values; things say a lot about the people who own them. Things have something to say; they have both message and meaning beyond their tangible surface. (2015, p.475)

This is relevant to the picture of post-16 education that was advanced earlier: we might say that the life of post-16 education is not flat, it has an inner-side for students that has meaning for them. The condition of interiority, therefore, is a claim that students are committed to exploring this inner-side of their education and finding value in it through the identity practices that were outlined in that discussion.

Taking this argument further, the notion of interiority connects well with Martha Nussbaum's view of human capabilities and human development. Nussbaum purposes the CA to think about the character of persons, their abilities, and their inner lives. She argues that a capability is not defined as an opportunity or set of choices about how one lives their life, as it is for Sen, but refers to the power or ability that someone has the potential to exercise. For Nussbaum, capabilities are not only freedoms to choose between a set of options, although that is important at the end of the process, they are 'general powers that can be nurtured, acquired, developed, maintained, exercised, impeded, diminished, lost and (sometimes) restored' (Crocker 1996, p.161). Indeed, this is why she, and not Sen, specifies a list of 'central capabilities' from which she can argue that 'human beings are creatures such that, provided with the right educational and material support, they can become fully capable of these human functions' (Nussbaum 2000, p.233).

### 7.1.3 Internal capability

Nussbaum defines internal capabilities as 'conditions of the person (of body, mind, character) that make that person in a state of readiness to choose the various valued functions' (1990, p.228). Thus, it is not simply the characteristics of a person that Nussbaum has in mind but something deeper: the condition of a person, or as she writes elsewhere, the 'state' of a person (2000, p.234). Indeed, where she does refer to internal capabilities as 'characteristics', we find a depth of concern absent in Sen's writings:

the characteristics of a person (personality traits, intellectual and emotional capabilities, states of bodily fitness and health, internalised learning, skills of perception and movement) ...I call these states of the person (not fixed, but fluid and dynamic) *internal capabilities*. They are to be distinguished from innate equipment: they are trained or developed traits and abilities, developed,

in most cases, in interaction with the social, economic, familial, and political environment. (2000, p.234)

Here, Nussbaum’s theory of personhood is a ‘rich picture of thought, including emotions, and the influences on them’ (Gasper 2003, p.9). According to her account of the CA, every individual possesses basic and internal capabilities that can be nurtured and developed. The inner state or condition of a person is ‘fluid and dynamic’, and therefore open to the processes of human development. Once these internal capabilities are developed in a person then Nussbaum holds, like Sen, that the CA is interested in securing freedom of choice: ‘it does not push people into functioning: once the stage is fully set, the choice is theirs’ (2000, p.236). This to say that a just society is one that provides the appropriate external circumstances for individuals to make use of their internal capabilities to pursue what is valuable to them. Where an individual has both internal capability and external circumstances to do this, Nussbaum argues they have ‘combined capability.’<sup>15</sup> And so, we have something of an equation that looks like:

“internal capabilities + external circumstances = combined capabilities”

In this way, Nussbaum’s account of capability takes us toward thinking about education as a process where the development of students’ inner lives is fundamentally important for their more general human development. As David Crocker has it, for Nussbaum ‘it is important conceptually to characterise and institutionally to promote valuable internal features of human beings if these citizens are to be able to take advantage of valuable external opportunities (resources and options)’ (Crocker 1996, p.170-171). This develops the analysis of this study to now include:<sup>16</sup>

Internal Capabilities	+	External Circumstances	=	Combined Capabilities
Chapter 7	+	Chapter 6	=	Chapter 5

## 7.2 Methodology and Findings

The analysis works with what might be understood as a ‘Nussbaumian methodology’ in order to sketch out an account of internal capabilities particular to the post-16 experience. David Crocker has described this methodology as working out a ‘general and systematic account of good human functioning in in two levels or stages’:

The first step in constructing an account of good human functioning is to work out an ‘outline sketch’ of being human, a ‘thick vague conception of the human being’ or ‘the shape of the human form of life’. The second step, the thick vague conception of good human functioning, goes further and provisionally identifies, in a more determinate but still general way, the most important or ‘basic human functional capabilities’, ‘the totality of functionings’ that constitute the good human life. (Crocker 1996, p.170-171; citing Nussbaum 1990)

<sup>15</sup> Previously, ‘combined capabilities’ were termed ‘external capabilities’ (see: Nussbaum 1990 p.228). However, Nussbaum updated this terminology, influenced by Crocker (1996).

<sup>16</sup> This provides a direction of travel for this study’s analysis: however, further elaboration would be required to situate Chapter 4’s discussion as ‘combined capabilities.’

This offers us a determinedly Aristotelian account of human flourishing, working from a teleological ‘outline sketch’ of the ‘shape of the human form of life’ to deduce ‘good human functioning.’ Something like this was achieved in Chapter 5, where an account of linked-capabilities for identity formation was presented culminating in a ‘view of the good life’ when deep practices of identity formation are undertaken. In other words, the first step was an outline sketch of the ideal form of life of a student as consisting in deep identity practices, and the second step was the account of functional linked-capabilities that assist with identity formation. The methodology employed in this analysis, therefore, seeks to focus on the data with an interest uncovering something of student’s emotional lives, character dispositions, and states of mind (what Nussbaum broadly refers to as internal capabilities), and assesses how these contribute to identity formation for different students. To achieve this, a two-step process of analysis was undertaken.

### **7.2.1 Data analysis**

The first step of analysis reviewed interview transcripts coding for participant expressions of their states of mind, attitudes to school life, and emotional experiences. These codes were drawn from student’s own descriptions, for instance: frustration with assessments, boredom with lessons, happiness with teachers, and so on. This produced a list of recurring codes that related to experiences of school life that was analytically quite thin, insofar as it did not provide much insight into what we might consider the general character of the student or how their internal capabilities fared in the post-16 setting. What it did provide, however, was an insight into the differences between students in relation to their educational participation; particularly how their non-cognitive dispositions directed their agency into different domains. As a result, the first stage of analysis resulted in identifying four domains of post-16 participation (academic, co-curricular, extra-curricular and recreational) and produced a general understanding of what post-16 participation might look like from ‘the inside’, revealing particular tensions such as coping with academic setbacks whilst managing extracurricular successes, for instance.

The second stage of analysis sought to allocate the different codes from step 1 into the different domains of school life. The aim here was to return to individual transcripts and build up a holistic understanding of students’ post-16 experience across and within the different domains. This stage of analysis provided an insight into the different types of character disposition in the study and a framework for thinking about how participation in school life differs. Specifically, this produced an account of internal capabilities based on an understanding of different student ‘orientations.’ The notion of ‘orientation’ describes the complex and contradictory nature of post-16 participation, referring to the ways in which students might focus their agency in different domains of school life in different ways and for different reasons. Importantly, ‘orientation’ is a heuristically useful concept for understanding how students made use of their agency in the school setting.

These stages of analysis, taken together, provided an in-depth portrait of individual students' post-16 participation and a framework for making sense of it. The aim of this analysis was to develop an understanding of participants 'capability for capability development'; the extent to which they were prepared to engage in, make use of, and achieve things in their educational lives. In doing so, practical and ethical concerns arise, and it was useful to keep in mind Caroline Hart's recollection of Riessman:

An investigator sits with pages of tape-recorded stories, snips away at the flow of talk to make it fit between the covers of a book and tries to create sense and dramatic tension. There are decisions about form, ordering, style of presentation, and how the fragments of the lives that have been given in interviews will be housed.' (Reissman 1993; cited in Hart 2009, p.400)

As such, it was important not to over-fragment the data and lose sight of the context of student lives. This was especially important in considering aspects of character and demanded careful treatment of student narratives to achieve a degree of empathy for their experiences. This empathy might be understood as 'the power of projecting one's self into another or into a work of art in order to understand it' (Noddings 2010, p.146). Before presenting the outcomes of this analysis, it is useful to consider three examples from the data to sketch out a picture of what internal capabilities in post-16 students might look like and how they operate. These examples are student portraits, designed to characterise and portray a distilled account of the life of the student reconstructed from the student's own narrative. The aim of this is to help us focus on how they discuss their inner-situation, what possible conflicts they encounter, and how they set about resolving these conflicts or accommodating them as part of their daily lives. Each portrait offers us something distinct, developed alongside comparisons where useful.

### **7.2.2 Elijah as a 'policy ideal'**

Elijah is an exceptionally high-achieving student, predicted A\*s in the sciences and maths, who aspires to study engineering at a leading university. He is confident about life after school, commenting: 'I pretty much want to have everything laid out and a secure plan that would allow me to straight away make progress, firstly university, no complications as soon as I get my results.' The emphasis is on having 'everything' in a 'secure' position, so that he might make 'progress' without 'complications.' This continued when we discussed where he might go from there:

In my first year of university I've already planned it out to move out and live on campus. My second year, depending on how much money I have left, I'll try and stay outside my house. But most likely move back into my house during my third year and my fourth year. When I'm in my mid-20s, I definitely won't be living at home, I'll move out. I'll stay out. I do want to start a family and I want to have children.

Here, Elijah offers a decisive outline for what he plans to achieve over the coming years. His language is based on a series of contracted 'I will' statements with a carefully sequenced series of achievements he

expects to secure, which suggest a determination and certainty absent from other student narratives. Relating this to his educational experience, Elijah responded:

So, I was actually thinking of doing a Masters, so doing 4 years. If I enjoy the subject, which I probably will, I was actually thinking of doing a PhD. And after that, with my degree, I did work experience at [corporation]. So, if I get a Chemical Engineering degree, I would like to go to [corporation] and work there for a few years because I quite liked the atmosphere there'

Here, Elijah might be considered the 'ideal' imagined in education policy. As a STEM student, his personal interests, academic qualifications, and work experience are closely related and enable him to pursue a linear trajectory based on a commitment to a single pathway. Elijah is quick to recognise this advantage, suggesting:

Well personally, yes, I am happy. Because I know that I want to be an engineer. So, to me, it doesn't really matter what path I have to take to get there, I will get there. Luckily, I'm a science and maths man.... So it didn't really matter to me at all.

The 'luck' of being 'science and maths man' was widely recognised across the students interviewed. For instance, Sofia highlighted: 'I feel like people who study Science or Maths and stuff like that, I think they genuinely love it so much. And they know they want to be a doctor, or something, so they like love all this stuff.' In this respect, it is possible to view Elijah's position as one that enjoys a clustering of advantages, offering him the confidence to invest his educational participation with purpose.

Elijah's school life is orientated around a sense of purpose and direction. He appears as a proactive student who seeks out opportunities to ensure that he makes the right choices about what he wants to do in the future:

I wasn't sure about Medicine or Engineering. So, I started attending these weekly lectures...and it helped me get a feel ...it also helped me to make an informed decision in what I want to do in the future...I feel like you have to go out your way to get a different aspect on different things.

This highlights how Elijah makes use of resources and opportunities to exercise valuable forms of agency that shaped decisions about who and what he hoped to be and do in the future. Yet, we might frame his educational participation as consisting in a degree of hyperprosexia; an exclusive focus on one thing at the cost of other things of value. I have in mind the wider personal goods that students pursued through developing large social networks, being inspired by teachers and friends, investing education with emotional and personal qualities, and so on. We might perhaps frame this by saying that whilst some students shape their educational life according to their values, Elijah's values were shaped by his educational life. Certainly, the discipline and focus that Elijah injects into his education to support his future is admirable, however there is something of a sense of a missed inner-capability related to having a moral view of the world around him.

### 7.2.3 Sofia and the difficulty with agency freedom

In contrast, Sofia offers a more familiar account of post-16 life. Her academic profile is mixed, with high predicted grades in sociology, media studies and philosophy, but low attendance (80%). She offers a casual attitude to school life: she is often late in mornings (because she struggles to wake up on time) and to her tutor group sessions (because she views this as less relevant to her time in school).

Sofia expressed significant uncertainty about her time in post-16. She had little idea about what she would do in life after school ('what if I don't know?'), but held tentative plans to apply to study Islamic Studies at a London university ('because I really don't know what job I want'), and she felt it was important to do something she might be interested in ('otherwise I'll drop out'). But beyond this, Sofia said; 'I don't really know what person I see myself as in 3 years or however long.' She was, however, hopeful about her future. Bianca expressed the same kind of hope in a clearer way:

I am hoping that I'll be getting good results. And if I do get good results, then I'll obviously go on to Year 13 and hopefully I'll get good results again and I want to go to a good uni...it's not only the educational aspect of uni, it's like going through another experience. From the people I've spoken to, it's worthwhile I guess. And obviously it does help you a lot. Or it should, I guess.

Sofia and Bianca both express a kind of 'shallow hope' in contrast to Elijah's certainty. They place trust in the system because 'it's obvious' but lack direction, offering aspirations connected to abstract desires rather than clear expectations.

There was a strong tension in Sofia's narrative, and students like her. On the one hand, Sofia described her daily school life as inherently boring ('I just want to get out of education, I'm bored of it'). She was hesitant about university because, 'I'll probably drop out because I'm not good at sticking to things that I don't like.' When we spoke about how she chose her university, she reported:

Yeah, just the vibe...we walked into the bar area and that was just so cool. I think they were playing Nas and my friend just looked at me and I said "yeah, I need to come here" ...it just seemed, I can imagine myself going there. Whereas with other unis, it's just so boring.<sup>17</sup>

Sofia presents her character as one that is more invested in 'the vibe', where a 'cool' experience helps her 'imagine' herself there in the future. Yet, like 'shallow hope', this appears to be something like 'shallow aspiration' that did not really serve to give Sofia confidence about where she was going or what she would be doing in the future. Despite this, school-life continued because 'other than just being tired and obviously not wanting to come.... I do it because I'm supposed to.' A tension emerges here because Sofia felt anxiety about how this might play out, connecting the ideas of hope, uncertainty, resistance and boredom in a way that reminded me of Tolstoy's dilemma, where he writes: 'I did not know myself what it was I wanted: I was afraid of life, strove to get away from it, and, at the same time, expected something

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<sup>17</sup> Nas refers to the prominent hip hop recording artist, Nasir bin Olu Dara Jones.

from it' (1987, p.30). The source of anxiety, Sofia said, was 'just the fact that I have no idea. So, I don't like not knowing what's going to happen.' Her coping strategy for this, she suggested, was to 'try not to think about it. So, I kind of just push it to the side and don't think about it at all.' Specifically, when we spoke about her experience of preparing for exams, she felt; 'ideally, I'd be like, really working towards exams, so I can do well. But yeah, I don't know. I'm just not really like that.' We might consider Sofia's state of mind here as one that suffers from a form of *velleity*, an inclination to do particular things but without enough desire to actually do them, which contributes to or drives her anxiety. Furthermore, whilst Elijah's educational participation was compared to a condition of *hyperprosexia* (a focus on academic excellence to the exclusion of other areas of school life), we might compare Sofia's attitude to one of *aprosexia*, meaning that she is often feels unable to pay proper attention to any aspect of her education, which is presented as a near-complete indifference to her post-16 participation.

Connected to this, Sofia sometimes feels guilty about what she feels is her unfulfilled potential. She placed some value on academic achievement and recognised she had underperformed. Importantly, this was a common attitude held by students, where Bianca, for example, felt that 'I just think that, I definitely could have done better... I think I just need to put my head down. It's that simple to be honest.' This desire to 'do better' and the hope that this is a simple case of 'putting one's head down' is, of course, a simplification of the complex underlying difficulties that these students have with developing their character. There is a sense of a missing, underlying 'internal capability' that needs to be made use of in order to be the student and person these students aspire to be. This was well captured by one student, who had come to the end of her studies and reflected back on her mind-set during Year 12:

I feel like I was just coasting and I would eventually get better. Rather than practice at making progress, I thought progress was me waiting for it to happen. (Mia, end of Year 13).

#### **7.2.4 Mabel and intrinsic goods of education**

Mabel studies Sociology, Psychology and Biology and is predicted to achieve A\*AB. Mabel's attendance is high (98%) and she participates in various extra-curricular activities. A particularly interesting aspect of Mabel's narrative is how this form of agency and participation closely corresponds to her view of wellbeing.

Mabel applied for Fulbright's sixth form because, she said, 'I wanted a change in environment...I also wanted a change in myself.' This suggests the kind of 'transformative agency' discussed in Chapter 6. Mabel described her previous school as a place with low-aspirations, poor teaching, and a hostile environment. Mabel often articulated a belief in the post-16 setting as phase of self-development and an arena to explore ideas, values, knowledge, beliefs, and so on. The notion of 'transformation' was at the heart of her understanding of post-16 life:

I remember at the beginning of Sociology, how we were talking about different sexualities and stuff, and loads of people thought it should be a crime – and to me, that was like, ‘whoa, that’s a bit much’. But, I don’t know, you stay with them, you grow with them, and see how their opinions change as well, and I think that’s important. It’s good because you know you have an influence on the people around you as well

This idea of ‘staying’, ‘growing’, ‘changing’, and ‘influencing’, supports a view of education that is inherently more participatory than the view offered by Elijah or Sofia. There is certainly less sense of boredom or cynicism about the school day. Mabel hoped her education would ‘keep going’ and she would ‘do a Masters, PhD, everything.... I just really enjoy learning.’ In this sense, she shared the same idea of agency achievement that Elijah had (PhD study) but with a very different orientation regarding wellbeing: for Elijah, further study relates to employment, whereas for Mabel it relates to enjoyment. In many ways, her form of hopeful agency reminded me of John Updike’s sentiment that: “I have the persistent sensation, in my life and art that I am just beginning’ (1989, p.239).

There are other ways in which Mabel appeared to take a ‘wholehearted’ view of post-16 life. She participated in a range of clubs including running, poetry, creative writing, butterfly keeping, charity projects, a visit to Ethiopia, debating club, and so on. Whereas most students chose not to participate in these, Mabel argued:

There is definitely some value in (it) because you get to speak about your ideas and thoughts and feelings, and I think that feelings are definitely important because they’re subjective and they’re yours, and no one can really own that. And to be able to talk about your feelings is really good...you have no power if you can’t express your thoughts and your feelings. And when you can do that here, you feel a sense of belonging and a sense of being a part of the community. And of just really wanting to be a part of something.

The way in which Mabel connects her participation in extracurricular activities to broader aspects of personal and civic wellbeing is quite explicit here. Another reason that Mabel gave for participating in extra-curricular activities that is not listed here is the importance of play within the school environment. Like many students, she highlighted the lack of opportunities to play and ‘be a kid’. For Mabel, this acted as a form of therapy that helped relieve the pressures of school life. The therapeutic aspect of this was highlighted in her closing comments:

I think, overall, it’s good to play because it teaches you not to take things too seriously. You can just step back from anything that’s going on a let go of all the stress and stuff.

Yet, Mabel’s belief in the value of education made her vulnerable to forms of anxiety and depression. Her narrative offers an insight into the difficulty she faced with post-16 life, describing the emotional changes (‘I never used to cry. I cry so much now’) that ‘have become normalised’ with her and her friends. This emotional experience related to academic achievements (‘In Year 12, when I got my results, I was so hard

on myself. I hated what I got’) and being able to express her feeling about them (‘I held that in a lot. ... And... you can’t hold it in. It’s ridiculous to think that you can hold it in. So, we just scream.’). What made matters worse for Mabel was that the school ‘tell us to work so hard’ but ‘they’re also telling us that we should maintain a healthy lifestyle.’ For Mabel, she felt she was in an impossible situation and she said there were times when she had ‘given up’ by coming into school badly dressed and going through the motions of participation. Mabel was aware of the politics of education and this was another source of frustration: ‘sometimes I don’t feel like I’m learning, I feel like I’m just memorising things.’ What is interesting is that Mabel’s willingness to invest real value into her post-16 life makes her vulnerable to these kinds of disillusionment, creating anxieties and forms of depression entirely distinct from those that Sofia experiences. Indeed, her disillusionment and anxiety is possibly a symptom of a school environment that is not equipped or resourced to support this degree of agency. Here, in contrast to Elijah’s hyperprosexia (focusing on one thing) or Sofia’s aprosexia (indifference to all things) we might compare Mabel’s participation to a form of paraprosexia: a tendency to focus on too many things at once. Her agency is certainly commendable, but without sufficient support from the school it leaves her vulnerable to dejection.

#### **7.2.5 Discussion of findings: magical thinking and the pursuit of well-being.**

The student portraits above offer a minimal sense of the array of character dispositions and attitudes to ‘the good life’ that can exist within post-16 education. In other words, they point to the different ways in which young people can define, or struggle to define, what their wellbeing consists in. Hopefully, they draw out some of the key contours of the post-16 landscape and hint at the myriad of ways in which youth development and educational experience might intersect in ways that reveal something of the internal situation of these young people and their internal capabilities. In particular, this highlights the challenges young people can face in the post-16 environment when they set about using or converting their ‘internal abilities’ into forms of functioning in their academic lives and beyond. We see students invest themselves into different aspects of their educational experience with the hope of securing their own wellbeing, often only with partial or conditional success. Many participants, a ‘bulky middle’ in the analysis, found themselves in the same situations as Sofia and Bianca, living under conditions of uncertainty or with feelings of displacement.

Approaching these students’ lives from a person-centred position and understanding their narratives from the inside, through their own perspective, is a particularly useful exercise. It helps expose patterns of thinking that are non-rational and rooted in something deeper based on the attitudes, beliefs, or desires of the student. These patterns of thought correspond to what Margolit (2003) might view as ‘magical thinking’, a notion that can be connected to the inner, emotional, lives of young people. Margolit sketches out this argument, from Jean-Paul Satre, that such thinking (like Sofia’s ‘shallow hope’) is a product of the uncertainty of real-life:

Living in the world in constant states of uncertainty creates in us a tendency for magical thinking, as a substitute for causal thinking. Emotions are a species of magical thinking, due to our inability to have a sure sense of what is going to happen to us in the world, and with this a lack of control over our life (Margolit 2003, p.145).

This tells us several things about the relationship between post-16 participation and wellbeing achievement, and the role that internal capabilities might play. For each of the participants in this study, their post-16 life was characterised by the natural emotion of being uncertain, to some degree, of what the future might hold. For many students, when thinking about life beyond school it was difficult to project very far into the future. As a result, their participation in post-16 was shaped by their response to this uncertainty, which often took the form of emotional or non-causal thinking and involved attempts from students to exercise some control over their lives by investing their agency into different domains of school life. Such an account of student participation is useful, in particular, for considering the relationship between a students' agency and their achievement of things they value; specifically, it enables us to recognise that a significant barrier to achievement in post-16 education stems from the inchoate and sometimes contradictory nature of participation.

To summarise, firstly, the data show that are multiple shared domains of participation open to students, such as 'academic' or 'extracurricular', and students' can pursue valued achievements in each of them. Secondly, the data shows that students invest more intentional agency in some domains than others, affecting the level of achievement they might produce within those domains. Table 9 illustrates the four domains of post-16 participation. Associated with each of these domains, students highlighted specific wellbeing achievements that they valued, and some examples of these are provided. Securing these achievements, or functionings, demanded the conversion of specific internal capabilities and external conversion factors. The internal capabilities listed offer an incomplete but informative account of the kinds of 'states of character' that participants highlighted, including desires, abilities, understandings, knowledge, aspirations, feelings, skills, interests, values, and so on.

Domain of participation	Agency	Wellbeing achievement	Internal capability	External conversion factors
<b>Academic</b> (activities related to study programme)	Going to lessons	Academic participation	Desire to be in lessons / attitude to learning	Number of competing ‘commitments’
	Being on time for lessons	Academic commitment	Ability to be organised	Distance from school, transport
	Working on homework	Academic knowledge	Literacy, prior knowledge, understanding of task, motivation	Teacher instruction, guidance notes, study-friendly space, friend’s advice
	Responding to targets	Academic progress	Understanding of targets, motivation, enthusiasm to improve	Tasks to implement targets, understandable teacher feedback
<b>Co-curricular</b> (activities that extend study programme)	Visiting universities	Aspiration for university	‘Aspiration for aspiration’	Availability/Relevance of information
	Applying for taster-courses	Informed about university	Interest in university study	Availability/Relevance of information
	Applying for work experience	Information about careers	Ambition to undertake work placement,	Availability/Relevance of information
	Applying for study-programme	Wider academic knowledge	Interest in wider academic knowledge	Availability/Relevance of information
<b>Extra-curricular</b> (activities that enrich study programme)	Signing up for clubs	Skills and	Having skills/aptitude for activity, desire to participate, feeling positive towards participation, openness to using personal time, management of work/study demands	Co-ordination of school timetable and activity, advertising/promotion of activity, funding/resourcing of activity
	Joining societies	Social networks		
	Offering to volunteer	Supporting the community		
	Membership to sports team	Playing/Competing in sports		
<b>Recreational</b> (activities outside of study programme)	Spending time with friends	Friendship	Social/peer group skills	Places or spaces suitable for affiliation
	Playing sports with peers	Physical fitness	Interest in sports	Facility to play sports, organisation of training and matches
	Playing games with peers	Happiness, enjoyment	Openness to play	Places or spaces in which to play
	Eating in the restaurant	Physical health	Valuing healthy eating	Amenable school routine, availability of food, price of food

**Table 9:** domains of participation in post-16 education

### **7.3 Internal Orientations to Wellbeing in Post-16 Life**

Table 9 aims to show how different characteristics might secure different achievements within different domains. The benefit of this analysis is that it shows that important components of a student's internal capability, such as what they aspire to or what they are open to achieving, will vary in important ways across domains. This is to say that internal capabilities, broadly construed as traits of character, are affective of educational participation. For instance, a student might be highly motivated and achievement orientated on the sports field but not in the classroom. This provides us with some understanding of what internal capabilities students exercise in post-16 and how they exercise them across different domains. In other words, how character plays out in the post-16 setting. However, this does not explain the nature of this 'playing out' and what types of internal capability are more effective in securing wellbeing achievements.

A further analysis, therefore, goes beyond describing internal capabilities and focuses on which internal capabilities represent a 'capability for capability development.' Integral to this analysis is the assumption that things are 'not flat' (as Sedmak has it, above), but rather they have an 'inner value', which means that when students exercised their internal capabilities, they did so with a particular orientation or intention. In other words, where students are conceived of as agents, who 'do' agency, they always do so with a particular agenda or 'inner view' that is shaped by their internal capabilities and which determines the meaning they ascribe to their school life. The line of thought that how students participate in their education reveals something of their character, and that this character is not 'of a piece' but rather made up of multiple components that are articulated differently in different domains and orientated in particular directions, forms the core of this analysis.

#### **7.3.1 Internal orientations**

How, then, might we make sense of the complex and contradictory forms of agency and wellbeing that young people pursue? The argument that follows (illustrated in Table 10) suggests that a student's internal capabilities involve 'internal orientations', in the sense that a student's attitudes, states of mind and emotional characteristics, are guided toward valuing particular 'beings and doings' related to specific contexts. Thus, these 'internal orientations' are analytically prior to the exercise of agency because it provides students with a lens through which to consider a range of possible options and decide between them. In this sense, internal orientations are logically prior to the modes of agency (discussed in Chapter 6) and agency achievements (discussed in Chapter 5) relating to identity practices. This second-level of analysis explored five orientations: retrospective ('looking back'), social ('looking around'), processing ('looking at'), prospective ('looking forward'), and axiological ('looking for'). This view of internal capabilities, then, holds that internal capabilities give students a relational view of the world, assisting them with determining where they stand in relation to their past, their community, their present commitments, their imagined future, and the things they have reason to value, respectively.

Here, the five orientations of internal capabilities are presented and classifications of ‘ideal student types’ are described (Table 10). The methodology employed here, described above, was to identify repeated patterns of student behaviour or ‘character traits’ in educational participation. A difficulty that was encountered in the data is that students’ internal capabilities are not uniform but multifaceted. The notion of ‘internal orientation’ is conceptually useful because it delineates some of the complexity of these patterns, for instance the way in which a student might function effectively in relation to ‘looking back’ at past achievements but less effectively when ‘looking at’ present commitments. Moreover, this complements the earlier account of participatory domains in the post-16 setting, enabling us to analyse agency in a qualitatively rich way. For example, we might contrast a students’ social orientation in the academic domain with their social orientation in the recreational domain. Here, our investigation might explore how a student develops social relationships in the post-16 setting, contrasting how this is approached in the classroom with how this is approached in non-academic contexts. The 5 internal orientations and 4 domains, therefore, give rise to 20 ways in which to situate an individual students’ internal capabilities in the post-16 setting. The value of such an analysis is that it creates important distinctions in the life of a post-16 student, where their internal capabilities might be orientated in different ways in different domains. In doing so, an analysis can capture a greater level of detail concerning educational participation that might be otherwise achieved with a more generalised analytical framework.

### 7.3.2 Retrospective orientation

Retrospection refers to the way young people look back on the events of their lives, particularly with regards to making sense of their present situation. The analysis found that students related to these past experiences in one of five ways that, broadly, involved whether or not they found their school experiences valuable and how they ‘critically’ explored these experiences. Two interesting examples from the data are Bella and Cassandra, both students who had failed Year 12 and were interviewed after repeating it, the following year. When both students were asked to look back at where it had gone wrong, the two responses were illustrative of the students’ different internal capabilities to make sense of their past experience:

Well, lessons last year. Tom was in my class. And we just pretty much messed up. We would just make jokes and the thing is that we’d get the work done in class, but we’d have a mess about time as well...I don’t know. Exams were just, like whole of the class, no one got above a C. Like, both units and then the coursework. (Trisha: Year 12 repeater)

I don’t know. Maybe if I had a clearer idea in my head of what to expect going in to Year 12. This year maybe it was the clearer image in my head of what to expect that lead me to be so different. Because, I don’t know, even in Year 11, with my GCSEs looking back, I wish I had

done so much differently. So, I guess I didn't think I understood how important it was. I just thought, I don't know. I just didn't understand. (Alia Year 12 repeater)

What we see here is that students display different internal capabilities when looking back at past experiences. For Trisha, her experience of failing is couched in terms of shared responsibility with Tom, who passed the course, and the whole class, most of whom also passed. She can be framed as a 'contestor', who seeks to challenge and resist past failures to maintain a conception of herself. In contrast, Alia's retrospection is focused on what the ideas in her head were, her expectations at the time, how these connected to experiences further back in Year 11, and her past understandings. She presents as a 'builder', albeit a little later in her school career, as she begun to process how she could learn from her mistakes. What we learn about a student's internal capabilities from the position of retrospective orientation is closely connected to the notion of critical self-examination and, by extension, the linked-capability for self-concept.

### **7.3.3 Social orientation**

The social orientation refers to the way students 'look around' their social environment, particularly at those people within it. Both inside and outside of the classroom, students discussed how they positioned themselves in relation to their friends, peers, and staff. Specifically, their internal capabilities to form, develop, and maintain these relationships played an important part in the way these students functioned across each domain. For instance, when 'looking around' her school environment, Sofia was primarily invested in sustaining her friendships outside the classroom (a 'socialiser'), rather than developing study focused student networks or working relationships with tutors or staff. This meant that she valued her time in the recreational domain much more than the time she spent in the academic domain. In contrast to this, Mabel 'looked around' her school environment as a place in which to develop new friendships that could form a valued part of her personal life, not simply within the school environment (an 'affilator'). Elijah, however, sought to maintain a stable friendship group based around his interest in STEM pursuits (a 'networker'), and when 'looking around' his school environment he was not interested in wider social opportunities. The students' social orientation supported their retrospective orientation: Sofia valued 'settling' for her academic experience giving her greater opportunity to socialise, Mabel 'redefined' herself in relation to her academic experiences and sought new social opportunities from it, and Elijah viewed his past experience as 'building' towards the future in which he viewed his social group as committed to that same end. In such a way, these connections between the retrospective and social orientations are suggestive of an underlying logic, whether innate or manufactured by students, in the way they exercise their internal capabilities.

### **7.3.4 Processing Orientation**

The processing orientation refers to the way students 'look at' their present situation and chose to act upon the responsibilities and commitments they have. Chapter 5 and 6 have offered some insight into the range of commitments, expectations and demands that students experience, all of which contributed to their individual situation. Of course, making sense of these commitments entails 'looking at' them to give them order, prioritise them, and so on. The way in which students achieved this 'looking at' was suggestive of the attitudes they took to school life in general and the value they placed on particular domains, people, and goals in particular.

For Sofia, as a 'settler' and 'socialiser', it is perhaps unsurprising that she was a 'drifter' in respect of her attitude to her school commitments. This meant that she would complete academic work, for instance, but with little effort because she found it easier to do it than not do it. In our interviews, Sofia would talk about the need to do homework and come to class as 'boring', asking 'who could possibly enjoy that', and suggesting that her time in class was only enjoyable if it involved discussion rather than 'textbook work.' In contrast to this, Elijah highlighted his target-orientated behaviour (a 'processor'), who worked from clearly set goals and targets from his academic and vocational experience. Mabel, on the other hand, was a 'collaborator' who sought support from peers, either in the form of study groups or peer-based revision, and advice from teachers so that she could achieve mutually shared goals. In each case, what we have are specific internal capabilities playing out that lay behind the capability for self-control. Sofia's boredom, Elijah's determination, and Mabel's social values each help us understand the ways in which the 'inner life' of a person affects their power to be and do particular things; specifically, their capability for self-control.

### 7.3.5 **Prospective Orientation**

The prospective orientation refers to the way students 'looked ahead' to imagined futures. The character traits associated with this are closely linked to the capability for self-purpose, and reflects the attitudes or beliefs students held about aspirations or imagined future. Here the data showed that student character traits were expressed by the quality of goal they had on the one hand, and their attitude to updating or revising goals based on past or current experiences (retrospective or processing orientations). For Sofia, her attitude to the future is characterised by an optimistic uncertainty, she is a 'hoper' that has little idea about her possible future and does little in the way of exploring possibilities. This stands in contrast to Mabel, an 'explorer', who spends her time in post-16 trying out new activities and developing new skills over a sustained period. Elijah is characterised as an 'affirmer' because his prospective orientation focuses on the achievement of pre-held goals, without the discovery of new goals that characterises some of the other students' outlook. Understanding a students' prospective orientation enables research to better understand how and why students form a capability for self-purpose by drawing attention to the attitudes and character traits they exercise when 'looking ahead' to such imagined futures. Pursuing this interest with a capability analysis entails exploring whether some students' prospective orientations are in some sense adaptive as a result of particular disadvantages they experience.

### 7.3.6 Axiological Orientation

Lastly, the axiological orientation consists of what students ‘look for’ in the educational environment. This orientation involves exercising character traits that focus on what to value or find worthwhile as part of students’ school life. For example, Sofia is characterised as a ‘giver’ as many of her values related to serving the needs of her friends and family, those with whom she shared interests outside of school. When thinking ahead to the future, Sofia was confident that she would start a family and continue to live with her family because she valued the relationships she had with them, but less confident about defining her own educational or career values. In contrast, Mabel is characterised as a ‘creator’ because she valued creating new opportunities around the school, for instance by running the creative writing club. Rather than undertaking commitments around the school to develop her own profile or serve her own needs, Mabel was motivated by opportunities to find new ways of contributing to the community. In other words, she was more confident in developing aspirations outside of the educational context. This stands in contrast to Elijah, a student who we have seen is highly motivated and goal-orientated, who spoke about valuing only those opportunities that would support his interests and trajectory. For a capability analysis, this raises particular questions surrounding the capability of young people to determine their own view of wellbeing, and the extent to which a narrow policy focus can influence the ways in which young people develop beliefs about what their wellbeing consists of.

### 7.3.7 Summary: what do orientations reveal?

In discussing the nature of each internal orientation, it is useful to highlight the collective value of them in relation to individual wellbeing. The post-16 setting, and school life in general, offers opportunities for young people to ‘look back’ at what they have done (drawing on memories of past ‘beings and doings’), ‘look around’ for affiliation (experiencing collaboration and inclusion), ‘look at’ tasks or commitments (demanding focus and attention), ‘look forward’ to the future for reasons to do things in the present (developing aspirations and expectations), and ‘look for’ value in one’s experience of the world (offering one a moral and aesthetic view of life): each speak to what the development our character traits and emotional lives *do* for us. It is difficult to imagine a life in which one of these orientations is absent; for instance, the life of an amnesiac is one in which the ‘retrospective orientation’ is lost or injured, and this surely suggests something of a lost or diminished capability in that person that reduces their potential wellbeing. Similarly, we can imagine the life of persons without ‘prospective orientation’, who lack the capacity to imagine their future life (because of poverty or illness as discussed in Chapter 3) or without ‘social orientation’, who lack the capacity to belong to a community or experience social inclusion (because of social stigma); both are lives that we recognise as less well-off as a result. In this respect, these orientations are essential ingredients for the ‘inner-wellbeing’ of students

More can be said about the importance of these internal orientations as capturing the process in which young people rely on their personal dispositions to make sense of who they are and what they want in life during their development. In the Introduction, it was argued that the increasingly popular use of ‘character education’ programmes to educate young people in the virtues relies on a limited view of how character development *actually* takes place. The account of internal orientations highlights the complex interplay between past experiences, present situation and future aspirations that uniquely construct *who* young people are. Moreover, in the context of school-life, there are multiple iterations this might take as young people continually review how they participate in the life of the school (within and across the academic and non-academic domains). Here, a more nuanced account of character development, particularly during the transition between childhood and adulthood that characterises youth development during the post-16 phase, can be drawn from the work of Christopher Hamilton (2009). Whilst Hamilton writes on the challenges of middle age, his understanding of ‘identity crisis’ (broadly put) is relevant to the difficulty post-16 students have in determining who they are and what they want to be, and which is guided by their internal orientations.

Hamilton describes ‘the necessity of coping with who one is, within coming to terms with one’s being the (kind of) person one is’ (2009, p.70). This is process of ‘coping’ and ‘coming to terms’ is precisely the process we can observe in conversation with post-16 students and the role of internal orientations in guiding this process is paramount here. Hamilton unpacks this thought further

one aspect of this is brought out in Proust’s phrase “the intermittencies of the heart”. By this, Proust meant, roughly, that we are each of us a kind of bundle of different voices or persons...These voices compete in us, and most of us spend a great deal of our lives trying to elevate one of them to the supreme voice, a voice that will drown out all the others, subdue them, remove them, so that we can become whole and complete. (p.70-71).

This account of how individuals might come to pursue particular forms of life and develop particular attitudes, character traits, or value reminds us that this is a process of negotiation. The students in this study offered multiple ‘voices’ concerning what they valued and wanted from life: whether that was deciding upon career goals, choices about university, relationships, study routines, and so on. Students such as Sofia and Bianca clearly comment on their desire to establish a ‘supreme voice’ that will represent their desire to study harder and focus on their school work.

From a capability perspective, therefore, we are inclined to ask how these internal orientations, and the kinds of agency they encourage, might contribute to the wellbeing of young people. We have seen that young people participate in different domains of post-16, and we have seen that this participation is guided by the ideas and beliefs that make up each orientation. This picture of post-16 participation involves students committing to forms of life that may or may not be valued over the long term. Here, we can inquire (i) why students come value particular achievements in particular domains, (ii) the extent

to which students enjoyed effective freedom to develop these values, (iii) whether some values, goals, or aspirations are the result of adaptive preferences due to a lack of effective freedom, and (iv) whether students come to form particular goals due to a lack of self-examination. As such, the importance of developing ‘internal capabilities’, or character traits, within post-16 education so students begin to value the development of particular skills or opportunities is the subject of the next section, which focuses on how the development of internal capabilities might improve student wellbeing and, by extension, preparedness for later life.

**Orientations for the exercise of internal capabilities**

Orientations	Description of orientation	Internal Capability	Linked Capability	Classifications of character traits found in the data
<b>Retrospective orientation</b>	‘Looking back’ and making sense of past experiences.	Self-examination (transformative agency)	Self-concept	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Non-investors – defined themselves in relation to non-educational experience.</li> <li>2. Settlers – defined self in relation to academic experience without critically challenging it.</li> <li>3. Contestors – defined self in relation to academic experience but negotiated, challenged, re-interpreted it.</li> <li>4. Builders – saw themselves in developmental terms, emphasising ‘potential’.</li> <li>5. Dreamers – saw themselves in terms of aspired achievements rather than present or past achievements.</li> </ol>
<b>Social orientation</b>	‘Looking around’ and positioning oneself in relation to others.	Kindness (expanded agency)	Self-expression	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Outsider – little or no social interest in the life of the school, preferring to attend lessons and leave.</li> <li>2. Isolaters – little or no social involvement in the life of the school, but preferring to remain on school site to work.</li> <li>3. Socialiser – sought to invent and sustain social activities as a priority.</li> <li>4. Affiliators: sought friendships with peers, mostly within the school environment.</li> <li>5. Networkers – sought to build links inside and outside of school with people who held common interests, ideas, or aspirations.</li> </ol>
<b>Processing orientation</b>	‘Looking at’ one’s current situation, the expectations, roles, duties, opportunities, freedoms, etc.	Self-sufficiency (expanded agency)	Self-control	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Processors – target orientated behaviour.</li> <li>2. Drifters – complete work but with little effort or purpose.</li> <li>3. Avoiders – prioritise other aspects of life before schoolwork.</li> <li>4. Negotiators: seeking short cuts to complete high-quality work.</li> <li>5. Collaborators: seek support from peers or teachers to achieve shared goals.</li> </ol>
<b>Prospective orientation</b>	‘Looking ahead’ at the future, imagining potential and possibility.	Inspiration (intentional agency)	Self-purpose	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Aspirers – persistently looking for new opportunities and goals, open to change.</li> <li>2. Affirmers – looking to achieve already held goals with no exploration for new goals.</li> <li>3. Hoppers – little or no idea about possible futures and with no exploration for new goals.</li> <li>4. Adapters – able to revise goals and ideas in light of failure or success.</li> <li>5. Explorers – try several things to identify new goals each with sustained involvement.</li> </ol>
<b>Axiological orientation</b>	‘Looking for’ valued states of doing and being,	Wholeheartedness (contested agency)	View of the good	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Gainers – orientated around needs of self, self-interested values.</li> <li>2. Givers – orientated around needs of friends or family, shared-interest values.</li> <li>3. Providers – orientated around needs of community and school.</li> <li>4. Creators – orientated around discovery of new values.</li> </ol>

**Table 10:** orientations of internal capabilities, which make possible combined (linked) capabilities for agency. Here, each orientation is presented with a corresponding internal capability. A tentative connection is made to how each internal capability might be connected to a linked capability for identity development, thereby supporting a case that the deep practice of identity development (Chapter 5) might be pursued by each student through the development of internal capabilities and opportunities for specific modes of agency in the school environment (Chapter 6). Alongside this, classifications of ‘ideal student types’ is presented in the final column which have been referred in the preceding section.

## 7.4 A Capability Perspective: developing internal capabilities

The CA that is associated with Nussbaum presents an argument that internal capabilities can be developed within individuals. Here, the discussion argues that developing internal capabilities is one way of thinking about the process of youth development, particularly within the post-16 setting. Broadly, the argument suggests that all persons have undeveloped potential within them relating to skills, ideas, and reasons to value beings and doings. During the course of a person's life, this potential can be developed so that persons form internal capabilities that are like skills: competencies or 'know how' to bring about valued achievements. In the discussion below, this argument is set out with reference to the CA literature. Then, using the notion of internal orientation as a way to position the different aspects of the inner-situation of young persons, it considers how a specific internal capability associated with each internal orientation might improve young people's wellbeing freedom and wellbeing achievement.

### 7.4.1 Developing internal capabilities: from P to S

The argument that internal capabilities can be developed has been set out in greater detail by Des Gasper (1997), who argues for a reinterpretation of the types of capability in Nussbaum's work. He introduces the notions of 'potential', 'skill', and 'option' capability (termed P-, S-, O-capability) to offer greater conceptual clarity to this interpretation of Nussbaum (1997, p.291 ff.10). He writes that Nussbaum:

considers that 'capability' implies a power or a skill. A potential, 'an 'undeveloped' or latent state, is in Nussbaum's terms a basic capability. For precision, I call it a P-capability (P for potential) since 'basic' has too many possible meanings. It can via training or experience be moved to a developed level (S-capability). P-capabilities are the preliminary, incomplete, personal and species 'programmes', which can be extended into more complex, complete, and potentially actionable S-capability programmes. An S-capability in turn requires suitable conditions in order to give an O-capability, i.e. to give a real possibility for action. This more substantive, grounded, three-fold conceptualization is a strength of Nussbaum over Sen (1997, p.291).

The analysis below, therefore, frames student character as a P-capability that can be moved to a developed level, an S-capability, where it has identity building properties. Relevant to this discussion, Gasper argues that Nussbaum's use of 'internal capability' can refer to both P- and S-capability because skills and potentials are both internal to the individual (1997, p.291 ff.10). In that respect, this chapter follows Gasper in distinguishing between these two inner-states. Figure 7 presents Gasper's typology of the different terms used in the CA literature relevant here.

Sen's and Nussbaum's capability concepts and labels				
<i>CONCEPT</i>	An undeveloped human potential, skill, capacity	A developed human potential, skill, capacity	The attainable (set of) functioning(s), given a person's skills and external conditions	A priority for attainable (&/or achieved) functioning
<i>SEN'S LABEL</i>		Capability (this is also a periodic usage in the HDRs)	Capability	Basic capability (occasional usage)
<i>NUSSBAUM'S LABEL</i> (2000a: 84)	Basic capability; innate	Internal capability	Combined capability (earlier: external capability)	Central capability (Basic capability – occasional usage; e.g. 1999a: 87)
<i>ALTERNATIVE LABEL</i> (Gasper 1997)	P-capability (P for potential)	S-capability (S for skill)	O-capability, or option (O for option)	Priority capability / Basic need or basic right

**Figure 7:** Comparing the language in the CA literature. Source: Gasper (2003, p.11)

#### 7.4.2 How this applies to post-16 life: process freedom

The argument set out by Gasper is particularly apt for thinking in terms of educating 16-19 year olds, where we have seen in the discussion above that the attitudes and mind-sets that they take to their school life and wider learning environment (their psychological capability) are important features in shaping their potential to learn particular skills and take advantage of particular opportunities that are of value to them. Indeed, Biggeri and Santi (2012) have adapted Gasper's work here to distinguish between capabilities as potentialities (P-capability) and capabilities as abilities (A-capability, akin to Gasper's S-capability, and focused on acquired competencies), where the former make up:

the set of the imagined prospects or conceivable chances of improving well-being or alternatives that can be considered admissible—beliefs, attitudes, and institutional expectations thus represent a 'constriction of perspectives' in which what is acceptable has the same value as what is available (2012, p.387).

In this sense, and especially for educational research focused on the development of young people, it is useful to distinguish between the perspectives that students have (beliefs, attitudes, character traits) and the skills, abilities, or competencies that they learn through and during their educational lives related to their wellbeing achievement. For example, Biggeri and Santi highlight the need to foster children's P-capabilities in education in order for them to develop instrumental capacities, or S-capabilities, such as; listen to others, express their own mind, resolve differences with others, advance proposals, welcome challenge, avoid reasoning mistakes, and learn from experiential errors (2012, p.380). The direction of analysis here, therefore, argues that post-16 participation provides students with the opportunity to cultivate their inner-situation, moving from potential-capability to skills-capability in relation to securing their wellbeing.

A critical feature of this analysis rests on a distinction Sen has made between 'process freedom' and 'opportunity freedom' (Sen 1999). Process freedom refers to an individual's role in decision making, the

extent to which a person is free to participate and 'be involved' in what matters to them. Opportunity freedom, a defining characteristic of Sen's approach, refers to the range of valued opportunities that are attainable for an individual. This connects well to the findings presented in Table 9 (above), where we saw that post-16 students have freedom to participate across various domains and to various extents in their everyday lives. In that sense, there is a rich picture for 'opportunity freedom' because students are typically able to access achievements that they value, depending on the nature of external conversion factors available to them. However, this neglects a vital interest in student agency: the way in which students make use of these freedoms. Here, the data points to the ways in which many students contest, negotiate and challenge the process aspects of their freedom: resisting, as it were, the achievement of their wellbeing in favour of other achievements that they might have less reason to value, especially in life beyond school. In this regard, an interest in process freedom is central to an account of student preparedness, and one way of describing process freedom is to consider how internal capabilities might be developed in the post-16 setting.

### **7.4.3 The development of internal capabilities**

This discussion, then, has set up a distinction between undeveloped and developed internal capabilities. Recalling that internal capabilities might also be viewed as 'capabilities for capability development', there is an argument that post-16 participation ought to support the development of internal capabilities that will lead to students' wellbeing or flourishing. For the sake of clarity, this chapter has suggested thinking about the range of internal capabilities relevant to post-16 participation in terms of internal orientations, or ways that students perceive their educational life. Moving on, the discussion considers how particular internal capabilities, each associated with an internal orientation, might support student wellbeing.

#### **7.4.3.1 Retrospection and the capability for critical self-examination**

One way of thinking about how wellbeing can be secured through retrospection in the activity of critical self-examination. In the discussion above, there is a difference between Trisha, who is uncritical about her past mistakes and failures, and Alia, who examines her past mistakes and failures. This difference, I would argue, is the capability to look back on the events of one's life with critical self-examination or Socratic inquiry, a character orientation that supports self-understanding. For Nussbaum, cultivating self-examination is the ultimate aim of education, offering students the capability to live a 'life that questions all beliefs and accepts only those that survive reason's demand for consistency and for justification' (1997, p.9). The claim, in other words, is that Alia has a tighter grasp on 'who' she is than Trisha because she recognises the reasons for why she is in a better position now, and this tighter grasp is what enables her to participate more successfully (in terms of realising her own aspirations) in her 'repeat' year.

Self-examination and practical reason are closely related because they encourage a 'life that questions.' Practical reason is included in Nussbaum's list of central capabilities; indeed, she describes it as one of

two capabilities that are architectonic: ‘they organise and pervade the others’ (2011, p.39). This is specifically true of practical reason, Nussbaum argues, because it refers to the ‘opportunity to plan one’s own life’ and this ‘is an opportunity to choose and order the functionings corresponding to the various other capabilities’ (2011, p.39). On these grounds, promoting self-understanding in students is justified on the grounds that this enables engage in ‘education as Bildung’: a process of self-cultivation, formation, and development in youth that is especially relevant to education (Andresen et al. 2010). This is to say, the students that practice self-understanding are characters that are capability-orientated in the sense that they explore their own capabilities. In other words, self-examination of this kind acts like an ‘internal conversion factor’, effecting a change in the individual’s way of thinking about their own potential as agents. This offers us a case for supporting the development of the potential-capability for self-understanding in young people.

The critical question here refers to how a student might develop self-understanding, as a trait, to support self-examination, as a skill. A second question is how a school might resource such a development, or provide the kinds of freedoms and opportunities that would benefit a student in such a way. One way of framing these questions is to ask what the opposite might consist in: what the conditions of a student might be that cannot reason in a practical manner about their self nor develop a life plan. We might argue this would entail three conditions consisting of material poverty (where basic needs are not met), imaginative poverty (where a student is not able to see how things might otherwise be), and informational poverty (where a student is not able to see how things currently stand). Each of these conditions would serve to diminish the capability of the student to effectively engage in retrospective orientation. I have used to notion of poverty here to focus on social dimensions of deprivation and disadvantage: the ways in which lacking social goods can transform the inner-situation of individuals for the worse. It is intuitively correct, I believe, that these conditions would inhibit a student’s potential-capability for self-understanding and avoiding these conditions would have the opposite effect. For example, imaginative and informational poverty might be avoided by discussing the narratives of former students or professionals, from which students can begin to identify with and see possibilities (something like this was achieved for Bianca through her work experience, where she met a mentor), and then connecting these to specific opportunities open to these students at that time.

#### **7.4.3.2 Affiliation and the capability for kindness**

Regarding a student’s social orientation, how they look at those around them, there is a natural connection here to the social practice of affiliation. Within the capability literature, affiliation is widely regarded as an important functioning. Indeed, Nussbaum lists it as a central capability in support of:

- (A) Being able to live with and toward others, to recognise and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the

situation of another...(B) Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others (2011, p.34).

Thus, in thinking about the potential-capability that young people need to have to affiliate with one another well, Nussbaum draws attention to the potential-capabilities of 'recognition', 'concern', 'engagement' and 'imagination.' An interest in affiliation encourages us to consider the ways in which students can recognise the needs of other members in the school community, feel concern for their wellbeing, engage with them in ways that are non-humiliating and respectful, and imagine life from their viewpoint so as to respect their dignity (and be subject to these concerns themselves). This vision of affiliation in institutions can be promoted through the development of a form of kindness in student character.

Here, the term kindness is borrowed from Clegg and Rowland (2010), but developed with an emphasis on how it might be understood specifically as a social orientation using Nussbaum's notion of affiliation (2011). It is not used to refer to 'sentimentalised' form of social interaction: Clegg and Rowland argue against conceiving of kindness as a 'sentimental and un-rigorous approach taking us into field better addressed by therapy' that rests on a dualism which places kindness on side and intellect on the other (2010, p.722). Moreover, Rowland argues for a conceptual difference between this form of kindness and notions of 'care', 'leniency', or 'softness' (2009, p.208-209). Rather, Clegg and Rowland seek to resuscitate a notion of kindness from its etymological ties to ideas of kind-ness, writing it 'is suggestive of a natural relationship of kindness between members of the same family, group or species' (2010, p.720). And here we have a conceptual bridge between kindness, as a practice of kinship, and affiliation, as a practice of community-building that stems from a 'natural predisposition' (Rowland 2009, p.208). This connects well Nussbaum's views of her CA, writing that it is 'frankly universalist and essentialist': 'it asks us to focus on what is common to all, rather than on differences' (2000, p.63).

In practice, it is evident that many students struggled to develop this kind of internal capability or orientation. Most commonly, participants emphasised a lack of engagement between them and staff that confined their sense of agency within the school. The example below highlights this well:

I think that there should be more opportunities for me to just speak about how my day is going at school. Because it's like you can just swim through it quite easily, and be struggling and you can seem fine on the outside but there would be no way of them recognising that. And it can be quite daunting to have to go through that by yourself and then go and say, 'I've got a problem' and whether it's recognisable as a problem, or whether they've got time to deal with it. (Arabella, Year 13)

This provides an insight into the ways in which staff might recognise difficulties that students face, but perhaps remain unfamiliar with their 'inner situation.' Here, Arabella wants opportunities to 'just speak' about how her day is going and she draws on imagery of a person swimming on the surface but struggling

under the water. Her social orientation is problematized by a lack of language: Arabella cannot articulate her need for help because she cannot speak a common 'language of help' with staff.

Therefore, the practical element of this understanding involves building links between individuals, a process of affiliation, that we can view as a practice of kindness where social interaction aims at 'recognition', 'concern', 'engagement' and 'imagination.' Peter Bieri (2017) argues for an account of dignity that comes about through a particular practice of living, which is relevant here. For Bieri, dignity emerges from the interweaving of three dimensions of daily life: the way I am treated by others, the way I treat others, and the view I have of myself in relation to this (2017, p.2-3). In Bieri's account we find a deeply social orientation to the notion of dignity as a form of life that can be achieved through the practice of kindness, particularly in educational institutes. Practically speaking, this account of kindness is rooted in producing dignity and entails a form of life within the school where both students and staff are committed to recognition (e.g. greeting each other, referring to each other by name), concern (e.g. taking time to consider difficulties or constraints that others might experience), engagement (e.g. speaking to each other outside of institutionally-specified routines, taking an interest in the wider values and interests of others), and imagination (e.g. developing empathy to imagine the inner situation of others, or thinking seriously about the potential others have to participate in different areas of school life).

#### **7.4.3.3 Self-accusation and the capability for self-sufficiency**

The capability to 'have control over one's environment' is cited as a central capability by Nussbaum (2011) and a fertile functioning by Wolf and de-Shalit (2007). For Nussbaum, control over one's environment takes two forms:

- (A) Political. Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life...
- (B) Material...In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers. (2011, p.34)

Here, the concept of control over one's environment is understood as both a process-freedom and opportunity-freedom; in a political sense it is the opportunity for participation in a community and to play a part in the process of decision making, and in a material sense it is the possession of particular rights that confers status as a member of the community. On the surface of this, there is little reason to connect the capability Nussbaum has in mind with the processing orientation characterised above. However, whilst Nussbaum's emphasis is on how social arrangements might make these freedoms available to individuals, the emphasis of this chapter is on how individuals might develop the potential-capability to make use of these social arrangements. As such, the capability to have control over one's environment has particular preconditions that relate to the personal characteristics of persons to be able to exercise such control.

In Chapter 5, the capability for self-control was discussed and the notion of ‘self-accusation’ introduced as a reading of students’ inner situation. Here, we might consider how this corresponds to students’ internal capability within the processing orientation, how they look at the commitments in front of them. Specifically, this means exploring the process of moving from self-accusation to self-sufficiency in order to become autonomous. Sedmak defines self-accusation as a ‘non-comparing and non-competitive attitude’ that ‘seeks the truth about one’s moral situation’, which is necessary for ‘preparing real change within one’s own realm of agency’ (Sedmak 2016a, p.3). In other words, the capacity to ‘seek truth’ about our situation gives us the potential to bring about a change of agency within us. In this context, a case has been made that many students struggle to make sense of the contradiction between what they would like to and what actually they do. Therefore, self-accusation is a necessary step to taking control over one’s environment. For students, this means learning to be self-sufficient in the way they manage commitments and responsibilities in the present.

In this respect, we can view the potential capability for viewing things ‘self-sufficiently’ (i.e. under the condition of self-accusation) as necessary for a range of goods that can broadly connected to the development of the skill-capability self-control. From this it follows that the potential capability of viewing things self-sufficiently and the skill-capability of self-control, taken together, are the internal capabilities that can produce the combined capability of having control over one’s environment, where the necessary external conversion factors are available. Here, there is a link between the character trait of ‘self-accusation’ and the development of self-control, and the development of self-control as a constituent part of a wider notion of autonomy in education.

#### **7.4.3.4 Aspiration and the capability for inspiration**

A way of thinking about the capability young people have to ‘look ahead’ in their lives might be approached by thinking about the ways in which they become inspired. Here, inspiration refers to a process through which students develop a view of themselves over the long run, giving them a sense of direction and purpose with which to work toward. In this sense, the ways in which students ‘look ahead’ to their imagined futures demands upon both their freedom to ‘aspire’ and, it is argued here, being inspired.

This distinction between aspiration and inspiration is important because aspiration alone is insufficient to inspire relevant aspects of student agency. To distinguish between these further, consider these examples of how students might look ahead:

- i. ‘If I do Y, I will go on to achieve X, X is a socially valuable aspiration, therefore I ought to do Y.’
- ii. ‘I have reason to value desiring to be or do X, Y is means to achieve X, therefore I have reason to do Y.’

In (i) X relates to propositions about external goods, such as becoming a doctor because it is highly respected, working in banking because it pays well, and so on. Students may well form aspirations

according to this model, where their view of the future is orientated towards ‘external values.’ However, (ii) presents a different way for thinking about where aspirations might be derived. Here, they are orientated towards ‘internal values’, the idea that their inspiration is based on what they have reason to value (provided a condition of self-accusation is met).

In the case of Sofia, above, there is a common frustration that many of the opportunities and resources that they encountered in the post-16 setting lacked personal value for them, and attempted to draw on skill-capabilities connected to self-purpose in half-hearted, non-committal ways. The distinction, therefore, between the opportunity freedom to aspire (which may be quite well catered for in schools through raising aspiration programmes) and the process aspect of the freedom to aspire (which necessitates some participation from students and a role for them in decision-making) is an important consideration for gauging the effectiveness of aspiration formation programmes within the school setting. It is argued here that the latter, the process freedom to aspire, is critical in producing agency achievements consisting in aspirations that are ‘inspiring’ for young people, galvanizing their potential capabilities in relation to their prospective orientation.

In Chapter 6, the work of Caroline Hart (2012) was introduced which considers how post-16 students form aspirations about their future. It was argued that her blending of Bourdieu and Sen resulted in an overly structuralist account of student ‘beings and doings.’ However, Hart’s emphasis that students might only reveal part of their aspirations, and that their aspirations, even when revealed, might not be pure expressions of what they really want in life due to structural influences, is both useful and I think true of the students who participated in this study. Aspirations are decidedly complex things, and the formation of them is generally subject to manipulation and over-direction from institutional factors, including influences from staff, popular media, friends, and so on. For Hart, this sets up distinctions between revealed and concealed aspirations, and apparent and true aspirations (2012, p.86-84 and p.92), that are resonant with the findings of this study when thinking about how students discussed their prospects. For instance, her emphasis on ‘concealed’ and ‘apparent’ aspirations provide a useful nuance for thinking about the issues outlined above, where the ‘opportunity freedom’ to form aspirations does not necessarily translate into the formation of valued goals or future achievements (agency achievements) for students.

#### **7.4.4 Moral development and the capability for wholeheartedness**

The way in which young people ‘look for’ value in the world, their axiological orientation, is tied to the capability to form a view of the good, discussed in Chapter 5. What is considered here is how this view of the good is connected to the internal capabilities of students: how particular attitudes or traits might support what was identified as the deep practice of identity development. In Chapter 5, the capability to form a view of the good was discussed as a product of the interworking of the other linked-capabilities through deep practice. Indeed, we can argue that there is a similar relationship with the internal

capabilities, outlined above, and their effect on the axiological orientation. Extending this discussion further, the aim is to present the internal capabilities of self-examination, kindness, self-sufficiency and inspiration as internal components to the deep practice of identity formation and, by extension, forming a view of the good. These internal capabilities can be housed within the notion of ‘wholeheartedness’, also discussed in Chapter 5, and here expanded to refer to a character in which the individual engages in critical reasoning about themselves and their place in the world.

The internal capability for wholeheartedness, whilst dependent on these other internal capabilities, can be considered a distinct trait, likened to taking a ‘wholehearted view’ of the world. Such a view demands that we aspire (or are inspired) to contribute to our environments, improve them, and sustain them, based on an honest and critical reading of who we are (critical examination and self-accusation) and our relationship with others (kindness). This internal capability is well-described by Martha Nussbaum’s account of a liberal-humanist education and the cultivation of humanity through education (1997). Nussbaum argues that there are three essential capacities involved in cultivating humanity. The first of these is the capacity for critical self-examination, the second is the capacity to view the world from a cosmopolitan perspective, and the third is the capacity for narrative imagination. The capacity for self-examination has been recognised in the discussion above. The capacity for a cosmopolitan perspective is similarly found in the discussion above, in the account of kindness and affiliation. Lastly, the capability for narrative imagination is closely related to the account of inspiration and aspiration. This is because having a narrative imagination is, at its most essential, the ability to recognise a life-story about oneself and others. For Nussbaum, this is an essential ingredient for eliciting empathy with others and understanding the world around us. However, the capacity for narrative imagination is also an essential element to situate yourself in the world and to view your own agency from the position of (i) self-understanding and (ii) kindness.

The capability for critical self-examination, cosmopolitan thinking, and narrative imagination extend our account of wholeheartedness to thinking about education as a process of moral development. It brings us close to an account of ‘education as Bildung’, which has had surprisingly little treatment in the CA literature (Andresen et al. 2010). Whilst the notion of Bildung is contested and associated with forms of cultural conservatism and political nationalism, a conception of Bildung that aligns with the values of the CA can be asserted. For instance, Josef Bleicher traces the development of Bildung, as a concept, to the precepts of Wilhelm von Humboldt (2006, p.364), to whom John Stuart Mill cites as an influence for *On Liberty*, and to whom Amartya Sen cites as an influence in the *Idea of Justice* (2009). Beyond these tentative connections, Bleicher avers that Bildung frames educational aims and values as ‘transcending mere acquisition of knowledge...It entails openness to difference and a willingness to self-correct.... (it) contains a projective anticipation of the “good life”, of human freedom enacted with responsibility for self and other in the open-ended project of self-creation’ 2006, p.365). For Andresen (et al) this supports

a notion of education which reflects ‘a relation between formal, non-formal, and informal processes of learning, training and developing social and personal identity’ (2010, p.165) and human capabilities are thought of ‘as consequences of educational processes’ (p.166). Indeed, in many ways there is a strong resonance between ‘education as Bildung’ and the view of ‘education as autonomy’ that has been advanced in this study, and to which concerns of social and personal identity have been central. The connection here reminds us that education, like human life in general, is a personal and social practice and one that, when conducted with wholeheartedness, anticipates the ‘good life.’

## 7.5 Conclusion

Writing in *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt tells us that:

The moment we want to say who somebody is our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying what he is; we get entangled in a description of his qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type of “character” ...with the result that his special uniqueness escapes us’ (1998, p.81).

This reminds us that accounting for ‘who’ people are and not simply ‘what’ they do is an elusive task. At best, we are left with an understanding of ‘types of character’ that cannot fully capture the special uniqueness of individual persons. Despite this, this chapter has set out to explore the ways in which the ‘who’ of students is inextricably tied to ‘what’ they choose to do and are capable of doing. The line of argument this has advanced is that post-16 education must go beyond ‘provision’ (thinking about what students do) and extend to ‘participation’ (thinking about why students do what they do) as a necessary condition for being valuable to students and preparing them for life beyond school. In particular, this analysis has highlighted that a significant challenge for post-16 education is that student agency is typically made up of a complex interleaving of competing and contradictory desires and aspirations that threaten to self-sabotage the educational project young people are otherwise committed to. Responding to this challenge demands that this psychological complexity is, firstly, acknowledged and then addressed through an emphasis on process freedom.

This emphasis on participation is determined by two features of post-16 education. Firstly, throughout their time as students, young people are continuously oriented towards particular dimensions of their education. Whilst much of post-16 policy directs our attention towards the classroom and academic endeavour, the agency of students goes beyond the classroom and into the wider life of the school. For many students, personal characteristics and internal capabilities that might produce educationally valuable outcomes are directed towards less valuable ends, specifically when thinking about student wellbeing achievement. Typically, this was the case where they viewed their participation outside of the classroom as more useful than inside of it. Secondly, by examining the internal capabilities of students, it was possible to view post-16 education as an on-going, fluid and dynamic process for students. Throughout their education, students’ views about what they valued being and doing were revised and evolved. Typically, however, this was not accounted for in aspects of post-16 provision that did not include them in

decision-making procedures and school processes. The effect of this exclusion was that some students felt that their values and aspirations were out of place in the post-26 setting and were less inclined to participate in areas of their school life that were not social or recreational as a result.

In the second half of the chapter, suggestions have been made concerning how the internal capabilities of post-16 students might be developed. This presented an account where specific preconditions helped transform potential internal capabilities (P) into realised internal capabilities (S). These preconditions consisted of process freedoms relating to: (i) critical self-examination in order to be able to look back at one's life and reason about who one is and what one does; (ii) kindness and affiliation in order to look around one's environment and develop relationships with others; (iii) self-accusation and self-sufficiency in order to look at what one needs to do in life in order to go on and achieve those things; (iv) inspiration and aspiration in order to look ahead to what one hopes to achieve over the long term and works towards that; (v) wholeheartedness to embrace one's situation in the world and invest one's actions with moral purpose.

This chapter has sought to provide an original contribution to knowledge in three areas. Firstly, by working with the individual perspectives of post-16 students, it has developed an account of participating in post-16 education as consisting of four domains. This broadens our understanding of how and where human development might take place in the post-16 setting and indicates that resources and opportunities for capability development exist beyond the classroom. Secondly, by focusing on the inner-life of post-16 students, this analysis has developed an account of internal orientations which describe the different ways students might situate themselves in relation to the post-16 setting. This provides a complex but analytically useful tool to consider how internal capabilities might underpin student agency, in a way that appreciates the non-causal, or magical, forms of thinking and action that take place in the post-16 setting. Lastly, the discussion has offered an account of how post-16 students' internal capabilities might be developed in light of the CA's account of process freedoms. This is to say that the line of argument presented here is that internal capabilities, broadly construed as student character traits, are best developed towards student wellbeing through engaging students in particular forms of agency or participation. This contrasts with alternative understandings of 'student character development', which hold that character is a uniform property attributable to individual students, and alternative models of 'student character development', that focus on character-building programmes that are disassociated with everyday school life.

What this chapter offers is an account of how internal capabilities might be developed through specific process freedoms. Firstly, it argues that students' self-understanding can be enhanced through improved opportunities for information and guidance about life-course trajectories. In practical terms, this might be achieved through a tutoring programme, a one-to-one mentoring programme, or delivered by a 'Raising

Aspirations' department that ensures each individual student is supported to critically assess and explore the possible forms that life beyond school might take. Secondly, this chapter argues that the internal capability for kindness or affiliation is vital to wellbeing. It argues that this might be developed through the implementation of shared languages, specifically the 'language of help', in addition to establishing practices of recognition between students and staff. Thirdly, this argument identifies self-sufficiency as an important internal capability that involves students appraising their own participation in post-16 as a necessary basis for transformative agency to take place. This might be achieved through regular self-reviews with the support of tutors or mentors, where students can establish their own targets or strategies and review their progress against these at regular intervals. Critical to this process, however, is a school environment that welcomes the development of new goals or aspirations based on self-understanding or self-examination, even where these necessitate abandoning previously held goals or aspirations. Fourthly, this chapter has identified inspiration, as a component of aspiration, as an important internal capability. Here, the focus is on placing student reasoning at the basis of aspiration development programmes and ensuring that the availability or supply of work experience opportunities, or similar, does not constrict aspiration formation. The examples found in the data indicated that the prevalence of engineering and business work experiences served to coerce aspirations and exclude or marginalise a proportion of students who did not value these career paths, with then had a negative impact on their post-16 participation. Lastly, this chapter has argued that the cultivation of wholeheartedness, as an internal capability, is a vital feature of preparing students for life beyond school. A case was made that this is a cumulative process drawing on each of the internal capabilities previously identified, which enable the deep practices of identify building to be undertaken that enable individual students to take a moral view of the world around them.

## Conclusion

‘when I began to consider the subject...I soon saw that it had one fatal drawback. I should never be able to come to a conclusion. I should never be able to ...hand you...a nugget of pure truth... All I could do was to offer you an opinion...One can only give one’s audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker.’

Virginia Woolf. *A Room of One’s Own*. (1928 p.5-6)

### 8.1 Summary of thesis

This study has explored how 16-19 year olds might be better prepared for life beyond school. It has drawn on the CA to conceptualise and problematise post-16 policies and practices, to draw attention to lived experience of post-16 students and to, hopefully, make a case for considering the human development of post-16 students in a fuller sense than is currently the case. Yet, as Virginia Woolf observes, it is sometimes difficult to reach a conclusion. The aim of this conclusion is to draw together to some of the key findings from this study, but also to draw attention to some of its limitations including my own prejudices and idiosyncrasies as a researcher.

If there is a connecting thread that runs through this discussion, it is that there is both a need for, and a way for, social decency to be reasserted in post-16 education. In making this case, perhaps unsurprisingly, this study has criticised the existing policy framework for post-16 education and identified some of its more coercive practices. In Chapter 2 and 3, the shortcomings of the human-capital framework were discussed and it was argued that post-16 policy is governed by a short-termism and monomania that is focused on the educational achievement of young people as an economic outcome. The current framework strives to pursue practical and rational aims; preparing young people for a competitive world of work. Yet, these utilitarian virtues have a tendency to flatten our understanding of student lives as they are lived and construct a holding pen that forestalls valuable forms of capability development. They cannot account of the various ways that young people are motivated to participate in education, especially during their final two years that comprise post-16 education, and they cannot recognise the many ways in which post-16 providers cultivate humanity in their students. Important but complex dimensions of post-16 life are neglected in traditional analysis, notably the *quality* of opportunities, relationships and individual autonomy that might exist in the post-16 setting. These dimensions are neglected because they are an organic product of the interplay between the school environment and student agency, which lay outside of the mechanical framework of current policy.

In this vein, this thesis has set out to demonstrate that the policy environment both simplifies and diminishes the reality of education. Writing against the trend to overly systematise our understanding of reality, Wittgenstein suggests:

We have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk so we need friction. Back to the rough ground! (2009 p.107)

Here, the thought is that post-16 policy has become ‘slippery ice’ where the details of everyday life and the uncertainty of youth development are smoothed out. The conditions might be ideal for the policymakers to promote economic growth and output. Simplified accounts of post-16 provision are reached through funding formulas, retention and accountability measures, and performance tables. But if we are to take the lives of young people seriously we need the ‘friction’ of everyday life. This study, therefore, has sought to bring discussions about post-16 education ‘back to the rough ground.’ This is to say, it has aimed to attend to the everyday life of young people and present an understanding of how life in post-16 education is actually lived. Drawing on the discussion of the previous chapters, it is possible to bring together some general findings before identifying five practical policy recommendations and three contributions this study has made to the CA literature.

### **8.1.1 Research questions**

The aim of this study has been to explore what capabilities young people develop through the process of participating in post-16 education, particularly those that play a role in preparing for life beyond school. In order to achieve this, a qualitative research design was developed using a combination of generic qualitative methods, supported by Grounded Theory, and an evaluative framework developed from a CA. The findings of this study relate to the three research questions that shaped its investigation.

Firstly, the study considered what capabilities are developed in the post-16 setting that prepare students for life after school. In Chapter 5, the discussion identified five spheres of agency that governed post-16 participation. This is to say that these spheres of agency corresponded to ‘reasons to value’ particular beings and doings in student lives. The discussion outlined a set of linked-capabilities which supported these spheres of agency and related to identity formation. These were the capability for self-concept, self-expression, self-control, self-purpose, and a view of the good. This ‘linked capability’ approach drew on existing literature that recognises that a single capability will enlarge the possibility for other capabilities, but has contributed an original model for thinking about how a specific set of capabilities might achieve this. The chapter, therefore, presented ‘preparedness’ as a complex, meta-capability that is developed through identity practices. Moreover, it highlighted that the most effective forms of capability development consisted of deep identity practices that enabled young people to develop reasons to value particular beings and doings in accordance with the moral values of the community.

Secondly, the study considered how resources and opportunities in post-16 education support the development of these capabilities. By taking Amartya Sen’s concept of ‘external conversion factors’, the discussion identified specific aspects of post-16 infrastructure and presented these in a social ecology

model. This enabled the discussion to see how the students engaged with their environment through particular modes of agency that support capability development. In doing so, an account of ‘bounded agency’ was advanced to conceptualise how the range of possible functionings, specifically those related to identity formation, depends upon particular environmental conditions. This built on the discussion from the previous chapter by identifying ‘capability friendly’ conditions that have the ‘look of freedom’ to support student development.

Lastly, the study considered how differences between students might affect their potential for capability development. Here, the analysis focused on the inner-situation of students, meaning the attitudes and values that directed how they participated in their education. An argument was made for thinking about how students orient themselves within the school environment as a way to recognise that the emotional and psychological aspects of student life are not separate from what they can and do achieve. In keeping with the analysis from Chapter 5 and 6, a series of ‘internal capabilities’ were identified to support the linked-capabilities for identity formation. A case was made for thinking about capability development from the position of process freedom, where the participation and agency of students is essential to cultivating their preparedness for life after school.

### **8.1.2 Limitations**

Writing the in the Magician’s Nephew (1998), C. S. Lewis’s narrator observes:

For what you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing: it also depends on what sort of person you are (p. 76).

In many ways, this observation reflects the limitations of this study, which has sought provide a thorough analysis of the everyday life of post-16 students. In order to do this, it has considered the lives of 20 participants in an in-depth manner and the analysis has attempted to work with and through the complexity, incoherence, and uncertainty that characterises student life between the ages of 16 and 19. However, in doing so, the study has at least four inevitable shortcomings connected to ‘where I am standing’ and the ‘sort of person I am’, as a researcher.

Firstly, as is the case with much qualitative research, this study cannot claim its findings are generalizable for the whole student population with certainty. The lives and experiences of 20 inner-city students, however contrastive in terms of aspirations and family backgrounds, are not representative of all young people; indeed, much more might be said regarding the relevance of gender and ethnicity minority backgrounds from the discussion. Moreover, participants were self-selecting and so the sample is not purposeful regarding generalizability. Furthermore, as a researcher, my pre-existing relationships with the participants means our interviews were coloured by prior knowledge, experiences, and attitudes towards each other. Secondly, the validity of the analysis might be questioned. The study has attempted to clearly account for the analytical approach which has been taken to data in each chapter, however it remains

open to criticism. In particular, the analysis of data offers a particularly philosophical character and it is likely that a different researcher would handle the data differently and draw out information that has been overlooked in the discussion. Thirdly, a general criticism might be levelled at the persuasiveness of the analysis. Here, readers might feel that connections made between theory and reality have been conjectural, perhaps reading too much into some aspects of social life and missing others. Lastly, it is important to reflect on the possibility that, however positive my working relationship with these young people, as participants there is no doubt much that was left unsaid in respect of our personal, gendered, class, ethnic and age differences. Again, it is useful to highlight that 19 out of 20 participants in this study were female and that only 2 out of 20 were from white British backgrounds. In this sense, there is a certain mystery about what else participants might have liked to have said in response to the questions they were asked: are there narratives of privilege and disadvantage missing from the data, which are withheld because of 'the sort of person I am', specifically my position as a white, middle class, able-bodied, 29-year-old male member of staff? Each of these limitations might encourage a 'so what' or 'and what' response in the reader, where the research is too parochial or too theoretical to offer practical value.

Despite this, a general defence of this study can be maintained that it does offer something of value. Throughout the discussion, it has strived for a condition of 'resonance', where the aim has been to produce an account of student life that 'rings true' for young people and those of us who work in schools or with 16-19 year olds. This is not to say that the study aims to present 'objective truths' about the reality of post-16 education. Rather, it has attempted to uncover those aspects of educational life that are neglected or coerced by policy and practice and draw attention to them. As such, the discussion has aimed to offer a kind of philosophical anthropology; an account of post-16 life that has not been offered before and which reproduces the personal realities of those inside the 'holding pen'. Elsewhere in the *Magician's Nephew* (1998), C. S. Lewis describes the 'wood between the worlds'; a pond-filled forest where each pond provides a portal through which the characters can travel to a world very different from their own. In a sense, the research here has attempted to achieve something similar: drawing on interviews to dip into the lives of post-16 students and better understand what makes their education valuable. Consequently, it has been able to locate and interrogate particular aspects of post-16 experience that affect the wellbeing and development of students, and which serve to prepare them for life beyond school.

### **8.1.3 Directions for further research**

Reflecting on the research and development of this study, it is useful to consider what might have been done differently or what more might be done. Chapter 4 outlined the methodology of this project and, in conjunction with Chapter 5, explained how the critical concept of 'identity formation' emerged from the interviews. This was not anticipated in the research aim nor in the selection of participants for this study. As a researcher, I set out to explore this concept through the lens of personal identities and focus the

analysis on how young people experience institutional life within school. However, throughout the analysis, questions of social identity have often come to bear on the discussion. This was particularly the case where ‘powerful findings’ emerged, which were encounters or experiences that participants had of the ‘reality’ of social structures that disadvantaged them or which they felt powerless to change. Such powerful findings included: significant levels of anxiety in response to the ‘high stakes’ of post-16 education; the complex factors that shaped university or subject choice, often connected to being positioned as a daughter or a member of a religious faith; the differing degrees of institutional coercion that students felt when thinking about the future, especially in relation to professional career paths; and the shallow hope that many students had for the future based on their (lack of) knowledge of who or what they would want in the future. Indeed, the discussion has engaged with these issues throughout the previous chapters from the point of view of individual students, but it has not attempted to say something more about the nature of social categories, especially in terms of gender or ethnicity.

In light of the participant sample, where almost all of the interviewees were young women (19 out of 20) and from black or ethnic minority backgrounds (18 out of 20), it seems obvious that an opportunity exists to consider questions about the relationship between capability development in post-16 education and social divisions in greater depth. This is to say, there is an open question about the findings of this project in terms of the degree to which they reflect the experiences of young women, especially from mixed minority backgrounds, as they navigate their post-16 education. Several avenues of consideration seem apparent in this respect, which might consider the extent to which identity formation practices contrast between gender and/or ethnic background. Questions that might be explored include:

- In what ways might social divisions affect students’ development of self-concept during post-16 education? Here, analysis might consider whether social categories influence the extent to which young people are able to reason about the kinds of lives they want to live. For example, the research from this project highlights that, in general, many participants struggled with this form of agency and only had a limited capability for self-concept. It would be useful to consider the extent to which feminist theories, for example, might be able to explain what ‘real freedom’ or ‘real opportunity’ for this capability might look like in post-16 education. Moreover, further research might contrast the position of (white) male students in post-16 education with female students (from ethnic minority backgrounds) to better capture critical and intersectional issues related to young people exercising the power for self-definition through their education.
- In what ways might social divisions affect students’ capability for self-expression in their post-16 education? One finding that is touched upon in Chapter 6 (6.2.2.1) is that the places which make up post-16 life have a powerful influence over the kinds of agency that students can practice. During one interview (attached in the Appendix), Selena highlights how the study room could become a space dominated by heteronormative forms of expression, where some male students would assert their views of the world in way that marginalised women around them. Selena went

on to say that this lead to complex interactions, where some female students from particular cultural groups would confront the male students whereas some female students would not. The exchange invites a line of analysis, consistent with overall argument of this thesis, which would consider the extent to which the freedom for self-expression and recognition is shaped by social, political and cultural attitudes that reflect wider social inequalities and are reproduced within everyday life at school. The implication here is that it might be systematically harder for young women or students from minority groups to command an equal capability for self-respect in the post-16 environment; a finding that critical theory would, I expect, be able to interrogate further.

- In what ways might students' capability for self-purpose be determined by their social identity? Here, an analysis might look closer at why so many female students struggled to form clear aspirations about the future. For some, such as Sofia and Bianca, the notion of shallow hope was explored (Chapter 7). However, issues about university choice and subject choice also emerged for other students (Chapter 6), where family expectations and cultural attitudes were powerful forces in shaping what these young women would be able to be and do in the future. A future direction for research here would explore whether it is the case that it is systematically harder for female students to develop a capability for self-purpose and form aspirations, and develop this analysis to account for the differences found between different cultural and ethnic traditions identified in this study.

A final example of further research, which speaks to the concerns of the study as a whole, regards the ways in which the social identity of young people might be connected to the kinds of 'beings and doings' which they value (or feel encouraged to value). Here, it is useful to return to an observation from the Introduction made by Andrew Halls, in the aptly titled chapter 'Structure and the Individual' (2013), that post-16 education requires 'miraculous' work (p. 91). The study has highlighted thematic concerns about the forms of coercion or pressure that students experience, related to the forms of work or aspiration that they *ought* to value, imposed by schools, friends, family and wider society. These represent the antithesis of miraculous work; where the views and values of the post-16 environment and its actors (described in Chapter 6) ride roughshod over the agency and wellbeing of students themselves. These concerns might be further explored, especially in terms of how the moral outlook of young people (their view of the good) is affected by such processes. For instance, in what ways were female participants from particular ethnic backgrounds encouraged to value ideas about 'the good life' that are distinct from their male counterparts. There is, I think, a wider avenue of enquiry available here that might investigate how normative propositions that young people hold about their own lives during their post-16 education (what they ought to be and do, during their education and in the future) is connected to their social identity in profound ways that might not correspond to the kinds of lives they would otherwise choose to value.

## 8.2 Policy recommendations

A governing theme of this study has been to argue that youth development during the post-16 phase consists of forms of agency that can be understood as identity practices. These identity practices, the subject of Chapter 5, shape how students participate in education and what they hope to gain from it. Moreover, supporting the development of these identity practices is central to ensuring that these young people move towards their potential in both an academic and personal sense. There is, therefore, an important policy implication to taking these forms of agency seriously if we are to get the best out of young people.

### **8.2.1 Trusted Experts**

A first recommendation that emerges from the results of this study is that there is a significant need for recognising the place of trusted experts within the post-16 setting. This setting serves as a phase of transition, where in a very short space of time young people ‘move into’ and ‘move out of’ the post-16 setting. During this time, critical choices are made and ‘rites of passage’ undertaken (Van Gennep’s 1960; Astin 1993; Tinto 1998). This study has connected this phase of transition to ‘transformative’ modes of agency (Chapter 6), where young people engage in tremendous amounts of identity work and identity play during their development. Throughout this phase, critical decisions are made that affect future life possibilities and depend upon the use of practical reason and critical self-examination of students (Chapter 7). It was clear that student experience and development was significantly improved where they had access to trusted experts, with whom they could rely on for support during these transitions. There was a clear sense of disadvantage for those students who had not forged close relationships with staff and did not have family to assist them in this respect. In practical terms, this supports the presence of trusted experts within school who can offer impartial and personalised advice to young people. These experts ought to cross the boundaries between ‘formal schooling’ and ‘informal schooling’ where the values and priorities of the young person override institutional priorities or practices. How these trusted experts might operate within a school environment is an avenue for further research.

### **8.2.2 Student voice**

A second recommendation relates to the importance of protecting and promoting student voice within the post-16 environment. Here, findings showed that young people felt that they were incapacitated or that their agency was diminished when they did not have a voice in the school community. This withheld opportunities for self-expression and, by extension, the development of self-respect and self-esteem. Therefore, it is important to consider the modes and opportunities for communication in the post-16 setting. In particular, Chapter 6 highlighted the onset of ‘expanded agency’, where young people increasingly govern or are subject to relations between the school, home, and workplace. It was typical for students to feel that the post-16 environment was ‘high stakes’ and ‘high risk’, where errors of judgement or misperceptions could result in failure. In the worst cases, students felt that misappropriated blame was a signal of disrespect and, as a result, were dissuaded from feeling a sense of responsibility about their

studies: a finding that resonates with previous studies (Honerød Hoveid and Hoveid 2009). As such, there is an important sense in which the post-16 setting suffers from a paucity of educational respect (Stonjanov 2010) that needs to be addressed. Tentative findings here found that student voice activities including subject feedback, parent meetings, and surveys contributed to a sense of control over the post-16 environment. Moreover, classroom practices might be enhanced by encouraging students to assert and interrogate their points of view; a practice that many students felt was avoided due to the pressure teachers faced to prepare for assessments or deliver exam content. However, further research is needed to explore how the capability for student voice in post-16 could be better operationalised.

### **8.2.3 Autonomy as an explicit interest**

Throughout this study, a case has been made for framing education as an autonomy building enterprise. In Chapter 5, it was argued that a central capability for post-16 students corresponded to having self-control. This meant that students felt able to act on their self-concept in a practical sense; organising their daily lives around what they had reason to value being and doing. In reality, many students struggled with this exercise and, as a result, they struggled to form clear or coherent aspirations that connected with their daily lives. Research has already investigated what an ‘autonomy supporting’ school might look like: Pintrich (2000) has argued that strong classroom contexts are goal orientated; research by Reeve et al. (1999) argues that autonomy supporting teachers listening to students, adapt materials and resources to suit their needs, ask about individual student wants and respond to student-generated questions; and Assor et al. (2002) found that educational activities need to give students freedom to express dissatisfaction and choose activities that are consistent with their own interests. Many of these practices could be implemented in post-16 setting, where (as the Introduction highlighted), there has been a historic neglect of pedagogical standards in teaching 16-19 year olds. More could be done to consider how post-16 curricula might encourage students to investigate their interests through structured academic opportunities, such as encouraging deeper levels of independent study through project-based curricula. Outside of the classroom, a case was made in Chapter 7 for promoting ‘self-accusation’ in students. This involves students being honest with themselves about the degree to which they are managing their daily lives and the autonomy they are exercising. In practical terms, this form of ‘self-auditing’ ought to be a central aspect of pastoral support that post-16 students receive, where they can identify goals and ways to reach them, and then self-audit their progress on a regular basis.

### **8.2.4 Modelling aspirations**

Throughout this study, the work of Caroline Hart (2012) has been a useful resource for thinking about post-16 students’ aspirations. In agreement with Hart, a fourth recommendation this study makes is that post-16 practitioners do not need to ‘raise aspirations’, as it is commonly touted in policy, rather, more needs to be done to think about the processes through which aspirations are formed. Promoting the kind of ‘intentional agency’ that Chapter 6 identified, where students exercise self-purpose about what they hope to achieve over the long-run, demands two connected concerns. Firstly, students ought to be given the freedom to change their minds and rethink their trajectories. Secondly, schools can unintentionally

impose aspirations on students that limit their agency and wellbeing, where students ‘take on aspirations’ that are not *honestly* connected to what they would like to do. In either case, there is a central concern of institutional coercion around the freedom of choice that young people have in relation to the process of forming aspirations. A more nuanced approach to supporting the development of aspirations might consist in the development of ‘narrative imagination’ in young people (Chapter 7), where they are given resources to see how trajectories play out in life beyond school. The example of Bianca was used in this study to illustrate how mentors from work experiences can support this. Further research might consider how mentoring relationships between students and ‘professionals’ might better model the development of aspirations.

### **8.2.5 Viewing schools as social intuitions**

A final, more general, policy recommendation involves rethinking the role that post-16 providers play in society. Presently, policy frameworks position schools and colleges in narrow, economic terms where they are in competition with each other and subject to aggressive funding models that ensure resources are scarce. This is a symptom of a social pathology, as discussed in the Introduction that makes it difficult for communities to be sustained in the long-term. This study has shown that, despite this policy context, schools can and do support students to feel a sense of commitment and moral purpose through their education. In Chapter 5, this was discussed with reference to ‘*geborgenheit*’; where students felt a strong sense of belonging and commitment to their post-16 life. There is, no doubt, much more that might be done in this respect to encourage a ‘moral seriousness’ in young people that fosters resilience and inspires a wholehearted approach to living. In practical terms, this could be achieved through quality assurance frameworks that take an interest in the moral life of schools. Moreover, this necessitates a ‘lowering of the stakes’, recognising that there are good reasons why a post-16 education might take three years (for instance, where a student reconsiders their aspirations), or that there is good reason for funding non-curricula activities in schools as part of a student’s learning programme.

## **8.3 Theoretical Contributions:**

In addition to offering practical policy recommendations, this conclusion also aims to highlight the theoretical contribution this study has made to the CA literature. There are three respects in which it has developed under-researched aspects of the approach, notably in sociological directions.

### **8.3.1 Personhood in the CA**

Firstly, Chapter 5 identified that individual agency remains under-specified and under-theorised in the CA, specifically because it fails to provide an adequate conception of personhood or individuality (Gasper 2002; Giri 2000; Zimmerman 2006). This area is vital because, in order for the CA to offer a complete account of ethical individualism (Denulin et al. 2009; Robyens 2005; Gore 1997), it needs to explain how individuals come to value particular beings and doings: how they come to make choices about the way they want to live their lives. Addressing this, Chapter 5 set out a ‘linked-capability’ perspective that

positioned different spheres, or aspects, of agency within a single framework related to identity formation. Throughout the following chapters, this model was returned to and ‘thickened out’: firstly, with reference to external conversion factors related to identity development, and secondly, with reference to internal capabilities related to identity development. This use of the CA provides new grounds for exploring its connections with psychological development and individual agency, and it provides a new model for thinking about how a series second-order linked-capabilities might be housed within a first-order meta-capability.

### **8.3.2 Social Ecology in the CA**

Secondly, this study has advanced an understanding of Sen’s ‘external conversion factors’ with use of a socio-ecological framework for human development. In doing so, it has highlighted the ways in which different modes of agency come into play in relation to specific interactions with the environment, which support human development. This enabled the study to introduce an account of ‘bounded agency’ (Evans 2002; 2007) that addressed the structure/agency divide in an original way related to the post-16 setting. Further research in both of these areas would be possible, taking the ‘structural model’ of the CA into different fields or investigating the dynamics of environmental layers within the post-16 setting and their influence on student capabilities in more detail.

### **8.3.3 Internal capabilities and character**

Lastly, an account of internal capabilities has been advanced that (i) advances the account of agency and personhood provided in Chapter 5, and (ii) challenges the traditional notion of ‘character building’ in education. In this sense, the study has developed distinctly ‘Nussbaumian methodology’ (Crocker 1996 p.170-171) that has suggested a ‘form of life’ and ‘good functioning’ in the post-16 setting that is contextually-situated and does not rely on a naturalistic account of virtues. Building on this, the study extended the discussion to consider tentative links between the model of education as autonomy building (supported here) and the model of ‘education as Bildung’, which has had little treatment in the CA literature (Andresen et.al. 2010). In this respect, a particular area of further research might consider how the culturally and conceptually rich tradition of ‘Bildung’ literature might enhance future applications of the CA to education.

## **9 Final remarks: a sense of belonging in the holding pen**

In the Introduction, post-16 education was compared to a ‘holding pen’ in which young people wait to get on with their lives beyond school. It highlighted that for many young people, this becomes a process akin to warehousing where they are faced with ‘painful silence’: threatening to make their participation both absurd and meaningless. Despite this, the study has shown that the life of post-16 students is remarkably rich and varied, and the goods available to young people extend far beyond their ‘retention’ or ‘performance’. Either in response to this, or in addition to it, the study has found that young people consistently rely on the post-16 setting as a place for self-exploration and identity building. Yet, these

everyday aspects of schooling remain entirely implicit, beneath the surface, and sometimes unavailable to students. For many young people, there is a lack of guidance, support and direction for how they spend their time or what they choose to value.

This gives rise to a concern that is well-described by Richard Sennett's analysis of the 'corrosion of character' in modern social organisations:

"Who needs me?" is a question of character which suffers a radical challenge in modern capitalism. The system radiates indifference. It does so in terms of the outcomes of human striving, as in winner-takes-all markets, where there is little connection between risk and reward. It radiates indifference in the organisation of absence of trust, where there is no reason to be needed. And it does so through reengineering of institutions in which people are treated as disposable. Such practices obviously and brutally diminish the sense of mattering as a person, of being necessary to others. (Sennett 1998, p.146)

This study has communicated the many ways in which education policy can 'radiate indifference' to student lives. For many young people, it is true that there is little connection between their striving to prepare for life beyond school, including the risks they might take, and the rewards they can expect in the future. Too many of the participants in this study felt that their sense of 'mattering as a person' was diminished in the post-16 setting. Despite this, it is certainly the case that young people, more than ever, must tackle the questions of 'who am I?', 'where do I belong?', and 'who needs me?' as they prepare for life beyond school. The responsibility of policymakers and practitioners is not to provide answers to these questions, but rather to provide the resources and opportunities for young people to come to their own conclusions through their own persistent endeavour. Critically, the education system must recognise that the participation and agency of students during their education matters more than their academic achievement, over the long-run. This is because, as Julian Barnes' narrator notes:

The more you learn, the less you fear. 'Learn' not in the sense of academic study, but in the practical understanding of life. (Barnes 2012, p.82).

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## Appendix

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*The following pages contain:*

- a. Letter to the Principal
- b. Information sheet for participants
- c. Consent form for participants
- d. Interview schedule
- e. Interview transcript: Bianca (excerpt)
- f. Interview transcript: Elijah (excerpt)
- g. Interview transcript: Mabel (excerpt)
- h. Interview transcript: Arabella (excerpt)
- i. Interview transcript: Selena (excerpt)

July 2014

XXXXX  
Principal  
XXXXX  
XXXXXX  
London  
XXXX XXXX

### **Request for Permission to Research**

Dear XXX,

As you know, I am currently studying for my PhD in Education Studies with King's College London. I am writing to request permission to involve *Fulbright* Post-16 in my research. The project is an appreciative study, rather than a critical study, and it should not disrupt the activities of the school or its members. I have outlined the study below and attached supplementary documents for your consideration.

**Project title:** A Capability Approach to Post-16 Education: Student Preparedness for Life after School

**Summary:** This project focuses on how the educational experience of 16-19 year olds prepares them for life-after-school, with a particular focus on student independence and dignity. The study aims to gain an in-depth and appreciative insight into the experiences of a small group of students as they move through their post-16 education. Of particular interest are the 'experiences' made possible by their school, including academic, extra-curricular, co-curricular, and everyday moments that contribute to their development. In addition to in-depth interviews with a small group of self-selecting students, this research will involve contributions from post-16 staff and some former students. This study is unique insofar as it draws on a 'capability approach' as a theoretical framework to analyse findings: an approach that is beginning to have an increasing influence on policy development worldwide. As such, this project will provide a new and timely re-imagining of post-16 education from a policy perspective, which emphasises the importance of capability development in addition to academic achievement. This research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council ([www.esrc.ac.uk](http://www.esrc.ac.uk)), a non-departmental public body that is the largest organisation for authoritative research on economic and social issues.

**Research Design & Participant Recruitment:** *please see information sheets, and indicative interview schedule attached.*

**Research Ethics:** This project has been granted ethical approval by King's College London's Research Ethics Committee ( [www.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/research/support/ethics](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/research/support/ethics)). It has been deemed 'low-risk'. I have attached the Information Sheets, which will be given to all potential participants to keep. They detail the steps taken to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, including the protection of their personal details, and steps taken to remove any pressure to participate that the students may feel. The principle of anonymity extends to *Fulbright* as an organisation, which will not be identifiable in the final project.

**Impact of the research:** This study is expected to make significant academic and societal impact, using King's College London, the ESRC, and the Human Development and Capability Association as primary dissemination channels. In providing a new and timely framework for understanding post-16 education, this study will be of instrumental use to education policy-makers and practitioners. A copy of the study will be made available to *Fulbright*, and disseminated to wider policy audiences through conferences and collaboration with third-sector organisations. Moreover, this study is expected to be of conceptual interest to the growing number of academics seeking to apply the capability approach to areas of social policy. As a result, during the research process and after completion, findings will be disseminated through academic seminars and conferences.

Thank you for considering my request XXX, and should you require any further information, please do let me know. I have enclosed my application for Ethical Approval from King's College London, including supplementary documents. I hope these documents highlight the rigorous and well-thought through nature of this research, which I believe could be of great use to the Academy.

Yours,

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REC Reference Number: **REP/13/14-133**

## INFORMATION SHEET FOR POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

### Participant Interviews:

**Title of study** A Capability Approach to Post-16 Education: Student Preparedness for Life after School

**Duration of study:** August 2014 - August 2016

**Researcher:** Oliver Wimborne ([oliver.wimborne@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:oliver.wimborne@kcl.ac.uk))

- 1. Invitation Paragraph** I would like to invite you to participate in this research project which forms part of my PhD research at King's College London. You should only participate if you want to; choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in anyway. Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.
- 2. What is the purpose of the study?** The purpose of the study is to explore how the school experience of 16-19 year-olds prepares them for life-after-school. The study aims to gain an in-depth and appreciative understanding of the experiences of a group of students as they move through their post-16 education. Of particular interest are the 'experiences' made possible by school, including academic, extra-curricular, co-curricular, and everyday moments that contribute to individual development. A key feature of this study is that it uses a 'capability approach' to offer a better understanding of the effects of school experience on life after school.
- 3. Why have I been invited to take part?** I am inviting members of post-16 management and recent school leavers to participate in this study, in addition to the participation of current students.
- 4. Do I have to take part?** Participation is voluntary. You do not have to take part. You should read this information sheet and if you have any questions you should ask the research team. You should not agree to take part in this research until you have had all your questions answered satisfactorily.
- 5. What will happen to me if I take part?** Before you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you will be invited to attend an interview for around 45 minutes on the school site. The interview will be recorded, subject to your permission. Recordings of interviews will be deleted after transcription. Even if you have decided to take part, you are still free to cease your participation at any time and to have research data/information relating to you withdrawn without giving any reason up 1<sup>st</sup> July 2016.
- 6. What are the possible risks of taking part?** There are no foreseeable risks in participating in the study. The main disadvantage to taking part in the study is that you will be donating your time to attend an interview. It is possible that you may find answering some of the questions challenging. This is unlikely but if it were to occur the interview could be terminated at any time.

- 7. What are the possible benefits of taking part?** There are no direct benefits to taking part and there is no financial incentive to participating. However, the information I get from the study will help to influence current policy reform in post-16 education. Furthermore, I will provide you with a summary of a final report describing the main findings, including good practice in post-16 education.
- 8. Will my taking part be kept confidential?** What is said in the interview is regarded as strictly confidential and will be held securely until the research is finished (Spring 2016). Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you change your mind, you are free to stop your participation and to have your data withdrawn without giving any reason up to 1<sup>st</sup> July 2016. All data for analysis will be anonymised and interviewees will be assigned pseudonyms. In reporting on the research findings, I will not reveal the names of any participants or the school where you work/studied. At all times there will be no possibility of you as individuals being linked with the data.  
The UK Data Protection Act 1998 will apply to all information gathered within the interviews and held on password-locked computer files. No data will be accessed by anyone other than me; and anonymity of the material will be protected by using false names. No data will be able to be linked back to any individual taking part in the interview. You may withdraw your data from the project anytime up to 1<sup>st</sup> July 2016. All recordings of data on audio-equipment will be deleted after transcription. If you ask me to withdraw your data at any time before 1<sup>st</sup> July 2016 I will remove all traces of it from the records.
- 9. How is the project being funded?** This project forms a part of my PhD, being undertaken at King's College London University. This project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC): the UK's largest organisation for funding research on economic and social issues (see: [www.esrc.ac.uk](http://www.esrc.ac.uk)).
- 10. What will happen to the results of the study?** I will produce a final report summarising the main findings, which will be sent to you. I also plan to disseminate the research findings through academic publications and conferences.
- 11. Who should I contact for further information?** If you have any questions or require more information about this study, please contact me using the following contact details:

Oliver Wimborne  
Department of Education & Professional Studies, Waterloo Bridge Wing, Franklin-Wilkins Building, Waterloo Road, London. SE1 9NH  
**Department Tel:** +44 (0)20 7848 3183  
**Email:** [oliver.wimborne@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:oliver.wimborne@kcl.ac.uk)

- 12. What if I have further questions, or if something goes wrong?** If this study has harmed you in any way or if you wish to make a complaint about the conduct of the study you can contact King's College London using the details below for further advice and information:

Primary supervisor:

Professor Alan Cribb  
Department of Education & Professional Studies, Waterloo Bridge Wing, Franklin-Wilkins Building, Waterloo Road, London. SE1 9NH  
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## CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH STUDIES

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research.



**Title of Study: A Capability Approach to Post-16 Education: Student Preparedness for Life after School**

### King's College Research Ethics Committee Ref: REP/13/14-133

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. The person organising the research must explain the project to you before you agree to take part. If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

**I confirm that I understand that by ticking/initialling each box I am consenting to this element of the study. I understand that it will be assumed that unticked/initialled boxes mean that I DO NOT consent to that part of the study. I understand that by not giving consent for any one element I may be deemed ineligible for the study.**

Please tick or initial

1. **\*I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated 12/06/12 (Version 3) for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and asked questions which have been answered satisfactorily.**
2. **\*I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. Furthermore, I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data up to 1<sup>st</sup> July 2016**
3. **\*I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes explained to me. I understand that such information will be handled in accordance with the terms of the UK Data Protection Act 1998.**
4. **\*I understand that my information may be subject to review by responsible individuals from the College for monitoring and audit purposes.**
5. **I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me in any publications**
6. I understand that any information I disclose that causes concern about my safety or well-being will be passed on to the school's Child Protection Officer and handled in line with the school's safeguarding policy.
7. I agree that the research team may access my academic records for the purposes of this research project.
8. I understand that the information I have submitted will be published as a report and I am entitled to a copy of it if I want one.
9. I consent to my interview being audio recorded.

Please tick or initial

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

## Interview Schedule

<b>1.</b>	<b>Outline of school life</b>
	How would you describe your school's Post-16? What kinds of aims do they have for students?
	What kinds of academic aims and values do you have: what kind of student are you?
	With these responses in mind: do you feel that your school's Post16 is well suited to you?
<b>2</b>	<b>Application to post-16</b>
	Why did you decide to apply for post-16 study?
	What were your expectations for post-16 study?
	During the interviews for post-16 in Year 11, what advice did you receive?
<b>3</b>	<b>Enrolment / transition into Year 12</b>
	What were your GCSE results like, in terms of your own expectations?
	On results day you enrolled for post-16. What was the process like in terms of choosing your subjects?
	During your enrolment, what kind of support or advice did you receive? Was it useful to you?
	How might your A-Level subjects be valuable to you in the future?
	What was it like being a post-16 student during the first few weeks?
	How would you describe your experience of Year 12?
	Did you find that your perspective on being a post-16 student changed after you
	How have you managed all the different aspects of being in post-16 alongside your studies, such the social and extra-curricular?
	What kinds of obstacles have you experienced during this year?
<b>4</b>	<b>Changes and transitions into post-16</b>
	Looking back on the first term of post-16, how would you describe A-Level study to someone in Year 11?
	Compared to Year 11, in what ways is a typical school day in Post-16 different?
	In what ways has your daily routine changed (or not changed) since you became a post-16 student?
	In what ways have you managed the transition to more independent work this year?
	Looking back at your subject choices in Year 12, do you think these were right for you?
	Now you have your AS grades, have you made any changes to your future plans?
	What are you hoping to do next year?
	Where do you see yourself in 3 years' time, 5 years' time, and 10 years' time?
	Do you have any goals for Year 13? If so, what are they why do you have them?
<b>5</b>	<b>Academic life / study programme.</b>
	How would you describe a 'good' A-Level lesson? What have 'good lessons looked like this year?
	In what ways have you found A-Level homework different to (or not) GCSE work?
	How well do you think your academic assessments reflect your ability?
	What kinds of academic targets have your teachers given you? And do you have any academic targets of your own?
<b>6</b>	<b>School support</b>
	What kinds of support does your school offer, and what do you think of it?
	Can you give an example of a time when you needed support this year?
	If you have received support, do you think it was effective or not, and why?
<b>7</b>	<b>Next steps: similarities or differences to school life.</b>
	In what ways do you think Year 13/university life might be the same as Year 12?
	In what ways do you think Year 13/university life might be different from Year 12?
	Is there anything you will need to do in Year 13 to help you in life after school (e.g. university applications, work experiences, etc)?
<b>8</b>	<b>Next steps: aspirations.</b>
	When you think of life after school, what kinds of things do you want do?
	What kind of obstacles exist that might prevent you from doing these things?
	When you think of life after school, what kind of person do you want to be?
	What kind of obstacles exist that might prevent you from being this person?

## Interview transcript: Bianca

First interview

10/01/2015

**Interviewer: If we think about life after school, what kind of things do you want to do?**

Bianca: I think it's sort of – a bit the end of teenage years. You're going to have a 9-5 job and stuff. I think it might be a bit boring.

**Interviewer: What do you think you're going to be doing straight after school? You've said you're probably be going on to uni, but in terms of a longer-term picture. What do you see yourself doing?**

Bianca: To be honest, I've done work experiences and stuff like that. A few of like banks, and some of the places that would be good to work in with the subjects that I do, because I do Politics and Economics and stuff. And it does seem a bit boring. You know, the sets of offices in rows and computers and running getting coffee in the morning. It just seems a bit boring. So, I'm really not sure to be honest if that's what I want to be doing. Even if it does get good pay.

**Interviewer: So what's important to you now, if you think what you might want to do?**

Bianca: At the moment, I think – more recently, in particular – I've noticed that there's no point in doing something that you're not going to enjoy, like literally. There's no point in doing it.

**Interviewer: So, for you, your career is going to be based on the idea of enjoying it?**

Bianca: No, no, definitely not. Definitely, I'll be thinking about the money. But I do have to enjoy it to an extent. I can't hate my job. Sitting in an office and just want to pull out my hair. Looking forward to Friday every week. Yeah, I think just going through – because obviously the work experiences were quite educational, they taught me about how...the way I saw those jobs to be was different to how I, you know, when I went there.

**Interviewer: In what way?**

Bianca: I just saw people and they just didn't look happy. And I just think that even though it does seem good to simply have a 9-5 job and do that, if you're not enjoying it it's just not much....

**Interviewer: Does that concern you at all, that there are jobs out there...**

Bianca: I think some people might like that though. I thought that I would like that sort of structured 9-5, go home, sleep, wake up the next day, bam. But, no I won't enjoy that.

**Interviewer: Was it surprising for you when you went and actually saw that?**

Bianca: The sessions I had with my mentor were sort of long, and I had to sit at the computer sometimes just doing research for a few hours or something. And it was just so boring, and it was so silent. All you can hear is 'tap tap tap tap.' And it's just – yeah, I don't think I like that.

*Excerpt...*

**Interviewer: And do you feel like, has anything in the last year, brought you any closer to overcoming that and finding out what you do find fulfilling? I get the impression that it's still kind of a mystery to you.**

Bianca: Yeah it is. It really is. I think I just need to do more, more work experience to be honest.

**Interviewer: Is work experience more of a process of eliminating**

Bianca: Yeah, it really is. It sort of helps me, like – because I don't really know that. There's so many different industries and companies, and jobs that do different things like...I was reading an article about a woman that has got a job in a company. But she does, like she did a uni degree in something like computer science, and her job is

the most random thing. And I didn't even sort of know that existed. There's so much to find out. There's so many possibilities of what I could enjoy. So I think the more experience I get, the better, so I can help figure out what I do want to do when I'm older.

**Interviewer: How do you feel about that? The fact that your career path is, at this stage, completely unpredictable?**

Bianca: It's a bit scary because I could go down the wrong route. And I could go down the right route. So, I'm just praying that...

**Interviewer: Is there anything that – apart from just getting the actual experience – is there anything more than that, which might help you with your decision making or make you feel more confident about your future?**

Bianca: I think that just building a wider network of knowing people. That's definitely helpful. Like, everyone I've gone to speak to they say tips for, like. When you're gathering information on what you want to do when you're older. It's definitely taking people's names and getting to know a wider range of people that have different jobs because it can definitely help you when you're older.

**Interviewer: Where does this network come from?**

Bianca: Obviously, work experience. Sometimes you just meet people randomly, like maybe – I don't know – because I was going to work in Starbucks for 2 weeks, and you never know sometimes, you'll see someone that has a name card or something – and you just say, can I talk to you for minute, or can I grab your email and maybe discuss this.

**Interviewer: Did anyone ever teach you how to network?**

Bianca: School's done a few workshops...

**Interviewer: Was that during the transition week, or the beginning of the year, or in between?**

Bianca: Transition week. But, I did a bit of it at Rabo Bank, because I had like a day where we just had to meet loads of different people that could be selected to be our mentors. So we just had to go and mingle, and find out which mentor that you'd feel was best suited to you.

*Except...*

**Interviewer: Why are you thinking about a gap year?**

Bianca: Yeah, because I want more life experiences.

**Interviewer: Why, what drives that?**

Bianca: Just, that life is really short. I was born 17 years ago. That's so weird. I feel like I started Fulbright – I feel like it was yesterday. And I'm going to be finished with secondary school in a year. I remember in Year 7 looking up to these massive sixth formers, like it's really crazy.

**Interviewer: So you want to make the most of it?**

Bianca: Yeah, I just don't want to look back and have any 'what ifs', or 'coulda, shoulda, woulda's'. I just really want to have a good time.

**Interviewer: In terms of working with Michelle (work experience mentor) – and that shaping some of your ideas about work and work experience, is it fair to say that it was more about the person than her job? Was it more about seeing her pathway and how she might not have done so well at uni and...**

Bianca: It was also. But it was also seeing how her and her pathway, how she sort of moulded that into doing her job. Like, I just wanted to – because she genuinely enjoys her job and she seemed like a similar sort of person that I could compare myself to. So, I was just like she appealed to me in most aspects.

**Interviewer: But, its that idea that someone couldn't just show you her job title and what she did**

Bianca: Yeah, I didn't know much about her job, as Head of Communications

**Interviewer: But was it more about matching it up with the person?**

Bianca: Yeah, and her journey. Definitely. Because its quite a high up station being the Head of Communications. And she also did a degree in computer science and she hated it. But she still went through with it, and she was like, I don't even use my degree that much. The way people...

**Interviewer: Okay. You're someone who you've said you're not spontaneous but I do think you like a bit of adventure, you enjoy living your life a bit.**

Bianca: Yeah, I'm as spontaneous as I can be at this age and with my money, and stuff.

**Interviewer: But I get the impression that you don't live a boring life**

Bianca: Yeah

**Interviewer: Your social life and going out**

Bianca: Definitely. I just don't have the, you know, I'm not...those resources aren't really available to me to go and do crazy stuff all the time

**Interviewer: Do you ever find ...are there aspects of your school life that hold you back a little bit?**

Bianca: Yeah. It's just waking up...the routine of it. But, the free periods definitely feel like...it's a bit...I enjoy it...sixth form is way better than secondary school. Because you have more time to, sort of, work on your subjects but relax while you're doing it. I think. So it's like, it can be draining the amount of work, but it's like – to be reasonable, we do have a lot of time to do it. It's like, what they ask of us, even though it is a step up, for me, I don't know if it is for others, but for me it is demanding but it's also doable. It's just if I don't get it done, it's just me being lazy.

**Interviewer: How have you found specifically the academically side – such as assessments and keeping up with work this year?**

Bianca: Keeping up with work this year, it's been a bit difficult for me, just because of outside side of school things. But, it's been alright I guess. At the start of the year it was a bit hard adjusting to the work load, obviously, it's been doubled since secondary school. But, it's been okay. It's been okay I guess. I think.

**Interviewer: One of the things that has emerged from other interviews is the freedom you get and the responsibility that you're expected to kind of take on.**

Bianca: I think everybody kind of underestimated the responsibility. Everyone is like 'yeah, do it later', and then...I think everybody just took a GCSE approach towards A-levels, and then when it came to the exams it was just kind of like 'oh crap.'

**Interviewer: There are...the school tries to structure your freedom for you and tries to set expectations, such as in the study room. Have you found that your attitude to your free time changed at all during the year? Have you always used your freedom well enough for study, is that something you developed as Year 12 went on, or do you still not like doing any work?**

Bianca: Well, work is boring. Because work is work. I think, I'm not really sure to be honest. Because during exams, obviously, I utilised the free time and study room a lot more, obviously. But, during the year I think I just didn't like doing work. I should have used it more wisely.

**Interviewer: Do you do much extracurricular activities?**

Bianca: Like, sports?

**Interviewer: Sports, or I mean anything that essentially not work but might be charity, mentoring, anything?**

Bianca: This year I haven't really had time for it. I did the Rabo Bank thing. That was really demanding, that felt like secondary school. And then after that I was like, okay, let me just not do...because I'd been asked to do mentoring, and after that I was like, it's so much of a drag.

**Interviewer: It's that because there's enough for you going on at home and there's enough work going on to keep you busy?**

Bianca: I think this year, for Year 13 I'll definitely have a lot more free-time. Last year was a bit hands-full. With stuff that was going on at home. So it was like, it was really hard to manage my time to doing some things. My sleeping pattern was really messed up.

**Interviewer: Looking back, do you think you could have done it better?**

Bianca: I would have liked to do it better. But I still think that for somebody's whose my age, I still think I did pretty well. I think I did pretty well. But there's always room for improvement. But I think there's definitely more.

**Interviewer: But you don't feel like there was wasted time, or anything like that?**

Bianca: No, I think I could have done better. There's always the 'I could have done better.' But I can't, there's no regrets. Because I can't do anything about it now. There's like 'I would have, I would have, I would have.' There's nothing you can do about it now, just take it on the shoulder.

**Interviewer: You're kind of happy with it now, you just want to move on to Year 13 and move on?**

Bianca: I really want, I just think that, I definitely could have done better so I just really want my Year 12 results to be decent or good. So that I can take advantage of my freedom that I'll have in year 13 now.

**Interviewer: In terms of how to succeed in Year 13, do you know what you need to do?**

Bianca: I think I just need to put my head down. It's that simple to be honest

**Interviewer: Where there ever moments where you felt that you really sustained concentration on a piece of work?**

Bianca: I think it's just...because sometimes it would be like that. And I'd realise that I wasn't doing so well in another subject. So I'd go from doing really well in one, to switching my focus onto another.

**Interviewer: Did you ever feel like you ever sustained concentration on one essay and did the best work that you were capable of?**

Bianca: Yeah, definitely. But then after that essay, I'd be like, urgh. Then it'd be like bad essay after that. There'd be like bad essay, bad essay, and then good essay because I'd be feeling bad about my results.

*Interview redacted....*

**Interviewer: Precisely. So my approach to the question 'what does a good sixth form look like' is one that prepares you well for your life after school. And that's not just getting you into the best university. That's putting you into a position where you can really do and be what you want to do and be.**

Bianca: But two years isn't enough time to be and know what you want to be. There's so many choices, different routes you can take. But now I think I do. I thought I just, sort of, picked 3 subjects that I sort of liked. And I'm just doing them because you need to do them. you need to do A-levels, and you don't like anything else

**Interviewer: So there was no design about your subject choice?**

Bianca: No, I just thought I'd enjoy them the most out of everything else. It's education. I don't now, there weren't any subjects that really stood out to me.

**Interviewer: Do you feel like any part of your wider life link up with your studies: has there ever been a moment when you felt really sure about what you wanted to do?**

Bianca: With my subjects or with my life?

**Interviewer: Just with your life in general**

Bianca: Not really to be honest.

**Interviewer: You've always had a bit of uncertainty.**

Bianca: Yeah

**Interviewer: Has there ever been anything in your school experience that has really tried to address that? I guess that this leads to the idea that you kind of live life, particularly school life...**

Bianca: By taking it moment by moment, exactly. Just crossing that bridge when we get there.

*Interview redacted...*

**Interviewer: Looking back at the capability list, I was going to ask you a bit about anxiety. Lots of people in your year seem to suffer quite a lot from anxiety surrounding failure and the school chasing you for attendance and contracts and things like that.**

Bianca: It's a bit annoying the way they make it seem like your life will end. When you get kicked out, if you get kicked out of sixth form, or if you drop out, or if ...I don't know, some teachers basically say to you that sixth form is your life, and it's just like, that's really not the case.

**Interviewer: Do you think is that quite a threatening environment?**

Bianca: Yeah, I don't like that. In fact, all my friends that don't go to Fulbright, always say - like Gemma, Gemma doesn't go to Fulbright, she goes to Chesnutt school - and she always says that the thing she hated about Fulbright was the way they went on as if academic, like being on time to education and stuff, was the most important thing of your life. And the way they were so strict about it. She said they don't really give you a way to express yourself. The strictness makes you feel as if you're, I don't know, it made sense to me. It's so true about this sixth form.

**Interviewer: Do you feel there's a lack of opportunity for things at this sixth form, like expressing yourself.**

Bianca: Yeah definitely. I think it's a bit to, like, you need to get ready for the prim and proper environment of work. like you need to get ready to dress up, with a shirt, and shiny shoes. Well, what if you go to a job that don't have to wear a shirt and shiny shoes. They sort of give off the image that everyone is striving for a good job, striving for job that requires all those things like having shiny shoes,

**Interviewer: It's very narrow?**

Bianca: Yeah, It's like that's not the way you should be thinking. There's so many different jobs, like there's so people who have, you could be working in flipping I don't know - the Bahama's, the manager of a hotel in flip flops and a t-shirt. I just don't think that they make it seem as if there are other opportunities that are available for us. They're more of a narrow-minded way of thinking, and it's a bit annoying.

**Interviewer: It's a capability that I missed out there - the capability to freely express yourself,**

Bianca: Yeah, I think this school lacks that. Even though it may specialise in the Arts, it's still a bit...

**Interviewer: Do you think that's something that would make any difference to you in your post-16 life, if there was more opportunities for discussion about political viewpoints, or artistic expression,**

Bianca: Yeah. I think that in this sixth form I think all the sixth formers like to talk about this sort of stuff. They like to give their opinion on discussions such as this. I think if somebody was just having a...instead of I-space, like sitting around talking about this sort of stuff. It would be much more beneficial.

**Interviewer: Definitely. I suppose with the idea though that that would have some input on the school organisation.**

Bianca: And when you talk about it, it's also realising 'yeah, this school does care.'

**Interviewer: This study room always used to be a hub for debate about religious beliefs and so on.**

Bianca: they do still do that. Literally, you'll come into the study room and somebody will be talking about whether or not, I don't know, they feel as if when you're older and you have a wife, what they should be doing or...some of their debates about Sociology and stuff are really good.

## Interview transcript: Elijah

First interview

20/11/2014

**Interviewer: What do you intend to be doing this time next year, in terms of securing university places?**

Elijah: So this time next year I would want to know, I'd get my A-levels. AS Results. I'd be waiting for my A2 results. I want to already have my places confirmed with conditional offers, yeah. And I pretty much want to have everything laid out and a secure plan that would allow me to straight away progress to, firstly university, no complications as soon as I get my results.

**Interviewer: Any ideas where you want to study and what you want to study?**

Elijah: I definitely want to go to a Russell Group university. If possible, UCL, Imperial, and Cambridge are my top 3 choices. I want to study Engineering. Most likely Chemical Engineering. But, I might change from Chemical. And that's pretty much it.

**Interviewer: And so you'll spend 3 years at uni doing an undergrad. What happens after that?**

Elijah: So I was actually thinking of doing a Masters, so doing 4 years. If I enjoy the subject, which I probably will, I was actually thinking of doing a PhD. And after that, with my degree, I did work experience at Shell. So if I get a Chemical Engineering degree, I would like to go to Shell and work there for a few years because I quite liked the atmosphere there, the work atmosphere there is quite nice. There's no hierarchical system. It's more you go and you do your work, and they obviously give you some benefits which I like.

**Interviewer: I'm interested in that as well, this idea of there not being any hierarchy there. And, the work benefits. How does this connect with the kind of life that you want to live, as someone in your mid-to-late 20s, early 30s? What kind of values, what kinds of things are doing to be important to you do you think?**

Elijah: Well, I think, certainly at Shell, the skills I want to gain they'll be used in my mid-30s, or mid-20s, They'll be that I want to be quite independent, so that wherever I'm working I know what I need to get done by the end of the week or by the end of the month and be able to set myself my own challenges and my own time restrictions for certain things that need to get done.

**Interviewer: So much thought given to things outside your career? Have you thought about whether or not you'd like to start a family, whether you'd want to leave London? Would you want to stay at home living with your own family, or move out and be your own person? Have you given any thought to that?**

Elijah: Yes. So, in my first year of university I've already planned it out to move out and live on campus. My second year depending on how much money I have left I'll try and stay outside my house. But most likely move back into my house during my third year and my fourth year. When I'm in my mid-20s, I definitely won't be living at home, I'll move out. I'll stay out. I do want to start a family and I want to have children. But, I think I'd end up starting a family late 20s, early 30s. I wouldn't want to leave it too long. That could change slightly but there's nothing planned at the moment.

**Interviewer: So it sounds like you're definitely more secure in your career goals and this idea of wanting to be independent that seems to be fundamental...**

Elijah: Yes

**Interviewer: To the life you want to live after school. You want to be an independent person.**

Elijah: Yes

**Interviewer: And when we talk about independence, the example you've given me is kind of intellectually independent. SO being able to get on with projects on your own without too much guidance or supervision. And you've said that you want to move out of home, which is I guess what the**

**idea of being independent in your person life. Is that how you see yourself in the next 10-15 years, progressively becoming free of any dependency on people or things?**

Elijah: Yes. And as for my plan for the academic aspect, I will still do the social stuff. So, my main....there's one thing I want to do which I to actually climb a mountain. I will actually try and get that done. I'll do a lot of quite new things, I want to try.

**Interviewer: So what kind of values does that say about you do you think? What kind of person are you if that's the kind of thing you want to do?**

Elijah: I think I'd say open to new things, I like to try different things and see what I like. I would say that I'm quite dedicated to what I want to go for and what I want to try. And, I'd say that I'm quite resilient, so there will be challenges. I expect there to be challenges, a lot of challenges. But I hope that I'll be able to overcome it, be it either in studies or for example, like a football match if I play when I'm older. So I think those are the 3 skills I would quite...learn for the future.

**Interviewer: And it's those that I'm going to pick up on now, and then maybe, as I've said try and look at how they may or may not be connected with your school experience...(explanation of CA). So, let's start with the academic life. Re-cap what you're a-levels are**

Elijah: Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and Maths

**Interviewer: And you say that with such determination. That makes me think that from the enrolment day into the sixth form, did you know what subjects you wanted to do?**

Elijah: No. I was considering Further Maths. I was actually split between Medicine and Engineering. But, I thought that because Further Maths is essential for Engineering, I should chose Biology because for the top universities like UCL, which I want to apply for, they said that I would need Biology A-level. So, I decided to do Biology A-level and carry on through so it wouldn't hinder my plans to become an engineer or doctor.

**Interviewer: And do you find that experience of then having to do Biology, because it wasn't necessarily – in one respect it was your choice because you knew that you had to do it in order to do something that you wanted to do in the future – but it wasn't necessarily your preference – are you happy with this situation that your studying a subject like Biology even though it may not have been your preference?**

Elijah: Well personally, yes, I am happy. Because I know that I want to be a doctor or engineer. So, to me, it doesn't really matter what path I have to take to get there, I will get there. Luckily, I'm a Science and Maths man, so I like the Sciences, I like Maths. So it didn't really matter to me at all.

**Interviewer: Yeah, I like that. I get the feeling that for you, career aspirations are always going to be what makes you happy. Pursing those isn't going to make you happier than indulging in subjects that, although they are interesting, they are not necessarily going to give you the best long term options. Is that fair?**

Elijah: Yeah

**Interviewer: Do you find the lessons that you have enriching? Or do you find them just a means to an end, just a way to achieve good grades in order to get into university.**

Elijah: Well, it's different for a few of my subjects. I would say for Chemistry, Physics, and Maths, it was enriching lessons and I enjoyed it. It was fun. At the same time, I soaked up the knowledge needed to do my exams. I enjoyed the lessons thoroughly, I didn't hate anything about it. But, for Biology, it was a case where I didn't really enjoy it. It felt more like the lessons was centred around giving you the information so that you could get good grades, so it felt like, here's the information: absorb it, use it. It didn't feel like a practical subject that I could fully involve myself with. But, even though I'm saying that, Biology is a subject that is not that practical compared to Chemistry. Biology or Physics are quite similar in terms of the amount of experiments you do, but I tend to enjoy Physics a lot more. The lessons seem quite boring for me.

**Interviewer: So what about your experience of things like assessment and exams. Not just learning about concepts, but then being tested on them. How do you find that? Do you find the experience of**

**being tested useful to you? Do you think it's the kind of thing that going to contribute to your success in life after school?**

Elijah: I think so because school life is quite representative of your real life. So, in real life when you're in a company or something, there'll always be times or that one moment when you have to give a presentation or that big speech, which you need to do well in. You can't afford to fail. Because that one presentation that one speech could help you improve your life dramatically. It could help you achieve a higher status: from a low worker who just joined a company to maybe a leader of a team. Or a leader of one of their side companies. SO I think exams help you in that respect. And, it gives us students, from a young age, it kind of forms this idea that we need to work hard and there'll be those moments that we need to succeed in. And I think that is what is quite good about exams, formal exams that we have now.

**Interviewer: I like that – it's that kind of working under pressure, resilience, demonstrating dedication or a rigour to meet targets and things like that. Okay, I'm going to move on. For you, I feel that something that stands out in your profile as a student is that you're someone who, as a student, has sought to supplement or add to their studies in as many ways as possible. So tell me a bit about that. Tell me all the ways in which you have tried to add on to your A-level study.**

Elijah: As I said before I wasn't sure about Medicine or Engineering. So I started attending these weekly lectures at the start of Year 12. And I found that these lectures quite interesting because it was given professors, top academics in their own field of research. And it helped me to get a feel of what there is outside of medicine, because I come from a family that loves medicine, loves science. But I didn't really get the opportunity to look at different types of sciences branches, for example a Chemistry degree, or Physics degree or a Bioscience degree. So I thought to use the UCL lectures would help me get a better understanding of what's out there. And it helped to consolidate my choices that I wanted to do Engineering or Medicine. But it was quite an interesting thing that helped me talk about it in a university interview, for example, it will also help me to make an informed decision in what I want to do in the future.

**Interviewer: So, there's an aspect that learning about all this stuff through A-levels is all good and well, but it's been necessary for you to go out of the school context to see how this works in practice in terms of your pathways and opportunities each of these subjects will give you. And this has helped you to make decisions regarding the future and your career aspirations and things like that.**

Elijah: Yeah, with A levels, it's quite restrictive. So it's certain things that they think you need to know. However, I feel like you need to go out of your way to get a different aspect on different things, to get information that you might find interesting.

**Interviewer: Alright, great. How have you found things like i-space, and if you've been involved in i-reading or anything like that?**

Elijah: Yes. So, in my school essentially you have to mentor a student. So we have a mentoring scheme, and a reading scheme. So first off, the reading the scheme is compulsory. So we read both with new students, so a student in Year 7, and it kind of feels like we take them under our wing. So I think that reading aspect is quite good because it helps you form a relationship with a younger student who just came into the school. And, from primary school to secondary school it must be a big step for them so I feel that this extra-curricular activity helps not just me but them as well.

**Interviewer: Tell me, how does it benefit you?**

Elijah: Well, there's 2 main benefits for me. So the first benefit is that I will be working with a younger student. In real life when I'm older, I won't be working with people all my age. So it helps me to develop an understanding and it helps me to get rid of any – how do I say it – mental, prejudice. So it helps me to get ready for the real life in that way. And secondly it benefits me just because I feel like I'm giving back to the community. And I feel like I'm doing something not just for myself but for other people. And it's that kind of feeling that I want to have when I'm older. So I want to be helping people and not getting anything in return. Helping to develop the next generation.

**Interviewer: What's interesting is that it doesn't conflict, but it doesn't necessarily match what you said at the start – which is that you want to be somebody who is completely independent. Obviously, that means that you don't take from other people. But it also gave me the impression that it also meant you didn't want to get involved with people. So, it's interesting that you also speak about wanting to be**

**involved in a community. Is that something that you give much thought about in terms of your future, or do you not really consider that as part of a future plan?**

Elijah: So, I feel that that's just who I am. So no matter what – even if I don't realise I will be helping people, and other people will be helping me. When I talked about independent I meant that I won't be relying on people too much, but I know that to be independent you still need to get help from other people because no one can complete stuff on their own. Rome wasn't built in a day, so...there are different workers and help, so that's what I need.

**Interviewer: So, I suppose a part of this extra-curricular experience is to help you think more about that aspect your life in the future. Which is that not everything – your whole life, isn't necessarily going to be your career. It's also going to involve you contributing to communities and things like that.**

Elijah: From actually doing this i-reading, these schemes at my school makes us get involved. And I was actually thinking that if I was older, and I did become rich somehow from maybe starting a business, I would actually end up making a charity or a foundation to help younger people. Not necessarily younger people, but people who need help so, like a charity.

**Interviewer: Social enterprise?**

Elijah: Yeah

**Interviewer: That's really interesting. Lots of students like to sit around and not do very much and not use their time productively perhaps. How have you found free time: are you someone that has been able to use it in productive ways, or have you struggled with all the extra free time?**

Elijah: Well, I'd say that I use my free time quite well. I'm part of a few clubs that I take part in. For example, I take part in debating. I play basketball. And I started playing basketball again because I played younger down the school, but I started playing again at the beginning of the year. And took time off to start revising for my exams. But that's my school extra-curricular activities, which I enjoy quite a lot. But outside school, for example after school, I do quite often play tennis. With some of my school friends, and we find that's quite – an activity like that and doing something like that is a great way to relieve stress. To help you relax. To help you keep active.

**Interviewer: Is that new this year, is this the first time?**

Elijah: I'd actually say that it's new starting from this year. Because we feel that it's – there's quite a lot work to do and from the start of Year 12 there's this image given to us by the teachers saying that you need to start doing work this year, if you don't do work this year then it'll be a lot harder next year. And you won't be able to reach the aims that you set for yourself. We'll feel that, overall, we don't find managing our time that hard. We feel that it's still important to go outside and have a little bit of fresh air, play tennis, and unwind. Because even if we don't realise that we're stressed out, or if we do, if we don't find a way to get rid of that stress it'll have an adverse effect on us.

**Interviewer: Sure. Last question. You've said that you've found that it's been up to you guys to find a way to unwind a bit. Does the school provide those kinds of opportunities or do you find that you've had to go off and find ways to do that for yourself?**

Elijah: Well, because I'm in sixth form it has been more of a case of I need to be independent and find my own ways to relax. So one example, one key example I can give you, is that actually at the beginning of the year there is no sixth form basketball team. So when I want basketball with some of my school friends, it was actually just training and playing some matches after training sessions. And I had to go out my way to actually talk to the coach and get us a way to get practice matches with other schools so in a sense I had to talk to my school friends and set up opportunities for us to play with other sixth forms. Which was, it gave me an insight into how I could complete something, a challenge like that, but at the same time I feel that this school should of actually provided us an opportunity like that. But then, further down in the year, so around January time, the school actually organised a basketball competition with us. So we were involved, one of our teachers who monitors the study room, and she took us – took me and my school friends to an academy to take part in a competition that was quite good. I actually enjoyed it so much that I want to ask, 'look can we organise more things like this?' But, she tried to organise it, but no response.

## Interview transcript: Mabel

First interview

30/11/2014

**Interviewer: How would you describe the Fulbright post-16?**

Mabel: It's definitely more inclusive than my other school. There, you were either with them or against them. In the sense that if teachers didn't like you much, or the department didn't, I think in my school the Art department hated me. And they didn't really include me much in Art, so I didn't really go to most of the lessons so I never really had the ability to meet my full potential. I really wanted to do it at GCSE, but I never had the chance to. But in this school it seems like everybody, I don't know why, but everyone really wants you to do well. Even with Ms Monty, you know that she's like a super Marxist and she believes that the functionalist perspective, like meritocracy, is all false. But she does believe in you. But she hopes that one day we can overthrow the ideology, and she really wants you to do well.

**Interviewer: Does her beliefs resonate with you?**

Mabel: Yeah, to be perfectly honest, I wouldn't still be in this school, or doing the subjects in this school if teachers didn't believe in me. Because, even if I do anything, the teachers want to know how I feel about it, they go over it with me. If I do an essay and ask Ms Loose to mark it, she'll ask if I can stay after school and she'll go over it with me. They really care about how you feel about a subject as well.

**Interviewer: So, for you, part of this post-16 experience is defined by your academic study.**

Mabel: Yeah

**Interviewer: And I suppose the personalities of the teachers are important for you?**

Mabel: Yeah

**Interviewer: DO you want to be a teacher at all?**

Mabel: I don't think I want to be a teacher, but I am definitely more interested in learning. More so than I was before. Like, when I think about after education, I don't really want that to happen yet any time soon. I plan to go to university and do Sociology, and plan to keep going and do a Masters, PhD, and everything. Because, I just really enjoy learning for the sake of it, just knowing things, learning different theories and ideologies. Just knowing things.

**Interviewer: Did you have a passion for Sociology before you came here?**

Mabel: Yeah, I did. I can never do wrong to Sociology. All my teachers are really nice. Even at Chislehurst Green. Every Sociology teacher I had as really nice. It gives you a differently worldly view I think. It definitely does.

**Interviewer: If you think back to your GCSE self, are you still the same person, particularly in Sociology, in the way that you work and think. Or have teachers here changed the way you think about the subject, your own values, when you think about what social theories you agree and disagree with.**

Mabel: In Sociology the change hasn't been very drastic, I don't think. But overall, I always think I did just enough work to get by. Now I think about it, it's ridiculous. I was always very good at getting by and being average, or just above average. And now coming here and trying to do really well is a bit more difficult. I wish I had got here a bit earlier and tried to do really really well.

**Interviewer: In terms of a school culture, is it high expectations and high achievement here?**

Mabel: It's definitely high expectations. It's for everyone, but sometimes teachers particularly see more in you than you do yourself. So, even for Biology, I don't understand how they have more faith in me than I have in myself. They really believe in me. They often talk to me outside of the lessons as well, saying 'Mabel, you should

definitely Biology, it's something you're good at', and I'm like 'I'm not good at that!'. It's really good that people believe in you but yourself, you almost feel like you owe it to them. Like someone believes in you so much, the least you can do is show them that you are something.

**Interviewer: So in that sense, do you ever feel, that there is a certain expectation on you because teachers are so committed and believe in you so much. Does that ever give you a sense of added responsibility?**

Mabel: Yeah, definitely. I think there is, but you also feel very good about yourself when you do well. Even in Sociology, if Ms Mackerel gives me an A, she's like, 'Mabel you should have got an A\*', and I think, 'god, I should have got an A\*, I should have worked harder, I should have done more.' You know, they're pushing you, so you can do well. That's always important in life, that you do the best you can. You should never be satisfied. Even if I am in an exam, my teacher is like, 'if you get a B, you'll get enough UCAS points or whatever', but I don't come to school for a B. I don't know, I come to school for As. I just really want to do well for my own personal sake.

**Interviewer: So, what's behind this drive for you to do really well. You said that it kicked in at post-16 – is this you want to do well to get the best possible job, because there are people around you and they are pushing you and you want to make them happy, it may be because you value the success in it self, it could be because you have a love for the subjects. There are lots of different ways for me to understand the drive for success – so what do you think?**

Mabel: Well, behind educational success, in the most basic way I just don't want to be like my parents. In the sense that my dad left school when he was like 14, because he was orphaned, and my mother left school when she was 16. And they've always expected well of me and wanted me to do well, but they've always seemed complacent with what they had in life. And I feel like complacency is the worst thing ever because you just don't move from there, you don't grow.

**Interviewer: To clarify, is this then that they do push you to work hard, or they are happy for you to pass.**

Mabel: Yeah, my parents are so weird. They're like, once you pass it's fine. But if I do need a tutor, my parent's will pay for that. They do care about my educational success but they don't want to push me in the sense that I start to hate it, or I'm just in a mood all the time.

**Interviewer: So they are very supportive?**

Mabel: They're definitely supportive. But even sometimes when I go home and work, my dad is like 'you work too much', and I think 'I don't work enough.'

**Interviewer: That's right – I forgot about our meeting last year when your dad was concerned that you worked too much!**

Mabel: Yeah, he's very relaxed. I think he's too relaxed. It's scary!

**Interviewer: Do your parents have any particular idea about what you are going to do in the future?**

Mabel: I told them that I wanted to do social psychology, and they thought I would do that. But recently, I decided that I'm not going to do psychology. Because the only reason I can see myself doing a subject is to think about it as – like people who are going to do medicine, they are going to spend like 10 years at med school – and I'm thinking would I spend 10 years doing psychology. I wouldn't. I'd happily spend 10 years doing Sociology. I'd do sociology for the rest of my life. I wouldn't mind just doing that – like forever studying, that's fine

**Interviewer: Is there an area of Sociology that interests you?**

Mabel: Yeah, I guess education always interests me. And gender, I guess, because I have my little brother. And my parents, I feel terrible for or sorry for him, because my parents always compare him to me. They say 'Mabel does really well in school' and stuff like that. At the end of the day, for some reason, he's never been into education. And it's just never seemed a big deal because he plays football. And I always wondered if that was just because of his gender, because he's a male. Do they place as much emphasis on education as they do for me?

**Interviewer: How old is he?**

Mabel: 13.

**Interviewer: What were your very first subjects you enrolled for**

Mabel: Biology, Psychology, Sociology and Maths

**Interviewer: So you started with Maths?**

Mabel: I walked out of the first lesson. He just started saying things and he was like 'you should remember this from GCSE'. And again, from school, because I already had a B, they became complacent and were like 'we don't need to teach you any more, so what you are going to do is go to a room by yourself and teach yourself' – so I never achieved more than a B and never knew the stuff I should have.

**Interviewer: So your learning was influenced very much by the teachers, so it's a real lottery for you that having a rotten teacher could have put you on a very different track. Going back to your decision to leave Chislehurst – what was behind that, what did you want as a 15/16 year old?**

Mabel: I wanted a change in environment. And I guess, I also wanted a change in myself. I don't know how to explain it. It's like, I always feel that you can always go somewhere and be a different person. I always feel like that is possible. Even if your master status is terrible, and people always treat you terrible, if you go to a totally different place you're a totally different person. And you have that ability to start again. You're fresh, you're new. You can be whatever you want to be. In Chislehurst Green again, it's like I adapted to all the struggle and difficulties we faced, people were bullies there, teachers were bullies, teachers were so horrible. So, if a teacher is horrible to you – like in Year 7, teachers were really horrible to me, and if I got to year 9, if a teacher was horrible to me it would be war.

*Interview redacted...*

**Interviewer: But a lot of students at your age, they start a new place or even the ones from lower school, turn away from all of this and but you seem to have really thrown yourself into it - so where does that come from with you?**

Mabel: I don't know. You have to – depending more on what you see something as – there always has to be something you compare it to. So if you see value in something, you must see no value in the opposite. And I've been to the opposite. I've been there. And I've actually seen it. So I see value in so many things, like poetry club- I love poetry club, that's kind of my life right now.

**Interviewer: Is poetry club still going on?**

Mabel: Yeah, we do it ourselves. And there is definitely some value in that because you get to speak about your ideas and thoughts and feelings, and I think that feelings are definitely important because they're subjective and they're yours, and no one can really own that. And to be able to talk about your feelings is really good. Back to my old school again, they gave use a questionnaire and I have the worst handwriting ever, but I must of written something and they were like 'no, we're not putting that through. How dare you'. And I was like 'oh my God', if your thoughts and your feelings are not allowed to be expressed, then they're not yours. Then, you have no power if you can't express your thoughts and your feelings. And when you can do that here, you feel a sense of belonging and a sense of being a part of the community. And of just really wanting to be a part of something. And I don't know, I guess as humans we are all kind of selfish in a way – I just want to feel rewarded in some way and if someone is going to reward me by saying 'oh you go to loads of clubs' then that's good enough, or saying 'you did really well in poetry, or debate club', I guess that's good enough.

**Interviewer: When you say rewarding, you mean people being impressed and saying it's a good thing to be a part of that.**

Mabel: Yeah

**Interviewer: It's interesting that you formed a really strong friendship group with other students who**

**joined in Year 12, did you find each other quickly?**

Mabel: Yeah we did. But no, to be honest, when I first saw Nicola she reminded me of the main character from the Swedish Love Story, so in my mind I was like 'oh my God, maybe she's foreign, maybe I can show her around'. Then I spoke to her and was like, 'oh my God, she speaks better English than me, she's super posh.' But she was really nice. I guess in a way, I don't know, certain people you just really get a liking to. I remember on the first day we went on that trip to the that university, I flat out fell asleep on her. First day we even met, just fell asleep on her. And thinking back it was ridiculous because I didn't know her, but I just felt so comfortable doing that. And it's been like that ever since. And I don't know why but Lydia, I guess we were all new so it kind of felt okay to be together but we generally found a liking to each other and our group kind of grew. And we all have really different personalities, and really different friendship groups and ideals, so our group has kind of grew. So we have Steve and Sharon now. And it's a bit bizarre because I've never seen myself as being really cool, and Steve and Sharon are super cool. And it's really funny, then we have Howard and Elizabeth, and they are so smart. And it's so good to be around people like that because you get a different take, you know different things about them, and they have all different tastes in music, and we are all like – I guess – knowledgeable about certain subjects. Nicola is a genius when it comes to Economics, she's always talking to me about economics. And I can never tell her – I will never say 'no, I don't want to listen to this', because I genuinely find her interesting even when she's going on about it because I'm like 'you know so much about your subject'. And I really hope she goes on to do something economics related at university. And Lucy, she's great at drama and she wants to do that definitely.

**Interviewer: And is there a lot of support for each other, geeing each other up?**

Mabel: Yeah – we do that a lot. If not too much! Even today, I was talking to Sharon and she wants to do pharmacology, and she said something to me and I was like – I was talking about my eating way to much popcorn – and she was like 'yeah, you get this because of this'. And I was like 'oh my gosh, you're brilliant, you should do this'. And she was like, 'yeah, I am going to try'. Even Nicola, she didn't want to apply to Oxbridge, and I was like what is wrong with you? We're all a bit pretentious when it comes to that, because we all don't want to seem like we want to go there and be turned down. But just do it – I don't know – I always told her to go for it, if you really want it, just go for it, you're not losing out on anything.

**Interviewer: Some of these big choices, it's meant to be on paper, the school that gives you this direction, and its meant ot be the school that tells you where to apply or how to apply etc. And, for you guys, and for you in particular but also as a group, do you feel quite self-sufficient?**

Mabel: The school has the ability to kind of push you towards certain directions. But as a group, when we talk about things, people always know what they want – I feel like people always know what they want to do. They always have other obstacles blocking them, like their thoughts of doubt. So when we do talk about it, you often find a person making their own decisions about what they want to do, and find that you don't even need to help them very much to get to that decision. So it's almost in the back of your head, what you want to do, you just have to speak to the person about it. When I decided not to do psychology at uni, I was just talking to Shian, and she was like 'how much do you love it?' And I was like 'I like it, I don't love it'. And I was like, 'yeah.'

**Interviewer: This is a really good example of you changing tack. A little while ago you really wanted to do Sociology and Psychology, and now it's not part of the picture. What was the thought process behind that?**

Mabel: Sociology: we even do discussions about it, like 'is it really a Science'? I guess the sciences in this worlds are seen as being more valid, more true, and more important. So I was like, 'Psychology would be really good'. And then I could do proper Psychology research and become important, maybe. B

**Interviewer: You decided you don't want to do Psychology any more: is that you coming to terms with that decision, was that conversations with friends, was that classroom discussions, was that teacher discussions?**

Mabel: It was definitely friends and myself more than teachers or classroom discussions. Because even before, I told Ms Lawrence, and she was like 'yeah, I didn't really like doing it as a combined course'. And I was like 'whatever' – it's not really a big deal if you don't because I plan to do it anyway. I talked about it over and over again, and even when you finish having a conversation you go over it in your head a bit.

*Interview redacted...*

**Interviewer: Sketch out for me all the different things you did in Year 12? The key moments you were involved in.**

Mabel: Definitely Ethiopia, that would come first. The Challenge. All of the clubs – Debate Mate, poetry, I went to that English lunchtime club – you just discussed literature. Went to running club with Mr James, that was good while it lasted. It was definitely good – good when your running, not good the day after.

**Interviewer: Were these things – like running, was that something you had ever done before?**

Mabel: I've done sprinting before, but I'd never done running. It was good in the sense that maybe I could keep fit and do work. You have to have some time to relax, or play.

**Interviewer: And thinking about Y12, do you feel that all of these things have been valuable: were they fun at the time, or were the benefits longer lasting. Things like running club. English club, debate mate: what was the point in all this?**

Mabel: It was definitely fun at the time. When I see different clubs going on I was like 'yeah, we should definitely do that', or 'I should definitely do that'. And they were always things that I wanted to do. I didn't do them for any ulterior motive. Even when I was growing butterflies with Archie, I was like 'yeah sure, why not, it seems like a good thing to do.' Even within that – I remember the day after I did my mock assessment, it wasn't even a mock, it was an actual assessment for Biology. And I failed, and I knew I failed when I did it. And I went to all of the caterpillars and I was just like 'ergh'. It was definitely calming - it was an environment that I needed. I think that I did – everything I done – I definitely should have. I don't regret doing anything.

**Interviewer: Is there anything, if you could go back, is there anything you would have done differently?**

Mabel: Yes. In the sense that – I think – I could definitely have done more work. I always think I can – even if it's not true or not possible. I definitely think I should have.

**Interviewer: Does that mean – if you could go back and give up one of these clubs, would you prioritise the work over clubs?**

Mabel: Yeah, I guess I would – no, no. No I would find different ways to do it I guess. I spend loads of time on the tube, I'm always travelling to and from school – I could have done more work on the tube or the bus. Or something like that. Or just worked smarter – definitely smarter than harder. Because the way I was revising wasn't effective in any way, I don't think. Because it was a lot of reading, and I know that you don't remember things when you just look at it. It needs to have some meaning to you, it needs to have some sort of rehearsal. And learn in chunks. Like efficient chunks that are small enough that you get a grasp on the subject you are trying to revise. And I should have known – I thought Biology was going to be easy. I slept through Biology at GCSE and got a really good grade. I came here kind of expecting the same thing.

**Interviewer: Where are you at with your understanding of this: you're someone who has said that Biology is a subject that you love but you are terrible at.**

Mabel: Yeah, I do say that. I'm not good at it, but it's so good for me because it keeps me grounded. If I ever think I'm great, Biology is like 'you're not great, you're just everyone else!'

**Interviewer: How do you reconcile this? You wouldn't go back and change it?**

Mabel: No, I don't think I would

**Interviewer: You would still do Biology – despite that you've said that lots of this is about people saying 'good job', despite all your aspirations for the future, despite the fact that you would always do more work if you could go back – you would still go back to a subject like Biology. For why?**

Mabel: It does contradict. But I respect anyone who does Biology. There's only 6 people left in a class of 30. And I respect anyone who is still there, who has achieved at least a C to still be there. So that's brilliant. I always think doing something you're good at is easy, but doing something that you're not so good at and love is going to

be much harder. Something that's difficult, it's good for you. You definitely need it. My brother always tells me, 'difficult takes a day, and impossible take a week.' He always says that to me, and I'm like 'why not?' But I do like it. And at the end of the day it pushes me.

**Interviewer: You like it because you like the topic, the subject content. Or like having this thing that keeps you grounded, having this almost insurmountable task that is almost impossible to work on, like a puzzle. What is it that you would relive: the topics, or the challenge?**

Mabel: I think I love the challenge more than the content. Even though the content is brilliant sometimes, you're like 'oh my God, wow' It's just a struggle. No, it's amazing because sometimes I would be really down in the dumps about Biology, and when you do get something right, you get the most brilliant sense of pride within yourself. I don't know.

**Interviewer: You've mentioned a couple of times that you like challenge and being pushed, or pushing yourself. That means – if you follow the idea through – that there are moments when things are very difficult. That are not easy or necessarily enjoyable at the time, but you can sit here and say 'at the time it was for the best, and there is something that has come of it'. So – does that sound right?**

Mabel: Of course. The thing about sixth form, and education, certain things that I think are really worrying have become normalised. Like, I never used to cry. I cry so much now. I'm like 'oh my God, what is wrong with me.' Even Nina, she'll come from a lesson and be in tears. We're all in tears. It just seems like a really sad...

**Interviewer: Is that because crying is now easier, or because everything is now that bad?**

Mabel: Everything is now that bad. I think, the thing is that holding your emotions in is not good. I've definitely learnt that, because Year 12 – when I got my results – I was so hard on myself. I hated what I got. Or my C in Biology anyway. I really hated that. And, I held that in a lot. And that definitely wasn't good. I was diagnosed with having depression and anxiety afterwards. And that really didn't help me. I'm a really weird person anyway, I can't have those features being added to my personality. It didn't help. And there's no other option, you can't hold it in. It's ridiculous to think that you can hold it in. So we just scream. Sometimes I'll actually scream in the study room and it's just so normalised and it's easy to be around people who understand what you're feeling, I guess.

**Interviewer: This is something that's new to me, and I wouldn't necessarily recognise it. That makes me think that the school is probably not that sympathetic or that aware or that understanding of psychologically what it can be like.**

Mabel: Oh yeah, definitely. Yeah. That's one thing I do think. Even Lucy, we're always so emotional. And I remember they told her not to apply for Oxbridge because they were like 'it's going to be hard on you, you're going to be sad all the time, and crying'. And I was like, if you want to do it, then do it, it is for you.' And at the end of the day, I think, they don't really understand that we're all in education but we all have different views on what our achievements should be. And what we should be achieving. So, they tell us to work so hard. Which, honestly, we need to get the grades that we want, but they're also telling us that we should maintain a healthy lifestyle, we should eat well, we should come to school depressed like actual people. I've given up a couple of times.

**Interviewer: What do you mean you've given up?**

Mabel: I've given up. I've literally come to school in a jumper and tights and boots. To get up in the morning is such a struggle for me. I literally have to get myself pumped up every morning to come to school. I'll listen to 'Firestarter' at 6 in the morning just to come here. I think we expect so much of young people. And, when I hear education policies and they want to make stuff harder, I'm like 'you can't possibly make it harder.' Sometimes I don't feel like I'm learning, I feel like I'm just memorising things. I'm like, if I was actually learning and taking things in it would be so easy, because then you actually have sympathy for certain views you're learning and you can easily splurge them out onto a page or something.

**Interviewer: There's a thought here that you need resilience in post-16 just to get through it. It sounds like psychologically it has been really tough, and it seems like this happens more towards the end of Year 12 for you – getting the results. And then beginning Year 13, there's this added burden of pressure of university education and people talking about what you are going on to do. Do you feel like the**

**school is good at helping you maintain this resilience, or nurture this resilience, to deal with this stress?**

Mabel: I think they can definitely help deal with stress. My teachers can anyway. When I came back into Year 13, and I had a few Biology lessons, I just thought 'oh my god'. I actually thought my life was over. I went to Miss and was like 'I'm dropping it'. And she was like, 'no you're not, you have 3 A-levels, you can't.' I was so emotional. And they were really good at helping me, both my teachers. And they just spoke to me, and were like, 'so what don't you understand?' At the end of the day you just need someone to speak to about how you're feeling. And if you feel confident enough and you trust your teachers enough, to speak to them, that's brilliant for you and for other students as well. Because once you have someone to speak to and confide in, then I guess all is well, in a sense.

**Interviewer: So in part, having that confidence, which you already had, was quite key. Because I could speak to someone else, who was much less confident than you. Do you think their experience of school would be different if they didn't have the confidence to speak to teacher.**

Mabel: Oh Yeah. Yeah, definitely. If I wasn't the person I am, I guess I will talk about some things if I don't understand it because – some people will never ask if they don't understand something – but if I don't even understand what a word mean I will ask someone. And I definitely feel like life would be so much harder if I was someone who was more passive to life, just go along with everything and not really say 'oh I need help', or 'I'm feeling this way'. I don't know.

**Interviewer: I'm sure there are people in your class – but even just around – who are quiet people who don't have much confidence. Do you think this sixth form – do you think they would experience it different, would it be a difficult place to be for them?**

Mabel: No. Not really, in the sense that teachers will come over to you personally and speak to you. If I say I'm okay and my teachers don't believe me, they won't stop asking me. So, they definitely – they are aware that it is difficult, especially the ones that teach you personally. So they do see if you're not eating well, or something like that. Maybe it would be different in the sense that the person – it may take a lot longer for the process to happen\*\* for them to be able to speak to someone, but once they are willing to speak to someone\*\* I think it will happen.

**Interviewer: Do you feel that outside of your lessons –do you feel like the post-16 team listen to you or have got to know you.**

Mabel: Ms Ickles, because she doesn't teach, she's definitely got to know me. I don't know. I'm always here in the morning, and she's always like 'oh you're the first person in'. And she'll always talk to me, and I'm always having to steal her supplies. And you do get to know them. And she'll ask me if I'm alright, or if I need help. And ask me how I'm doing in my lessons. And I had her for academic review day not too long ago. And she just told me that I'm doing really well, apart from the results, she just says that she sees that I'm doing really well and if there's anything I need to talk about I should talk to her about it.

**Interviewer: So, in an informal sense, you guys have a lot of informal moments where she can check if everything's alright.**

Mabel: Yeah

**Interviewer: Do you feel like there is much opportunity for the school to interact with you and review progress or find out if things are going well or going badly for you.**

Mabel: I guess they have their questionnaires. I always fill those in as honestly as I can. And I don't think I've seen that much of a difference in my lesson time or anything like that specifically. So I don't really know if it works like that.

**Interviewer: Do you think the questionnaires have any impact?**

Mabel: No, it's definitely more informal. Because, if something is going wrong, I'm not going to write to a teacher. I'm going to email them or just say, 'I don't know what's going wrong in this subject, can I see you in your office.' And they'll always say yes. It's occasional, only if I feel like something is going wrong or I don't feel supported, or in lessons anyway.

## Interview transcript: Arabella

Second interview

15/05/2015

**Interviewer:** There are a few points from the first interview that I'd like to pick up on. Firstly, when we spoke earlier in Year 12, you seemed frustrated that post-16 were too involved in your life...Am I being fair about how you were feeling back then or was this not so bad?

Arabella: Yeah, I think I was feeling like that.

**Interviewer:** There was some regret that you hadn't gone somewhere else, and you said you might have been better off in another post-16.

Arabella: I'm glad I didn't go anywhere else. I just...It was, I hated it at the time, during term-time that I was here. But no, I'm glad I'm here.

**Interviewer:** So looking back on it now, you feel like this was the right choice.

Arabella: Yeah, things would have been a lot harder if I had gone somewhere else and had to go through the same things. But, you know, you don't really know...

**Interviewer:** What do you mean?

Arabella: Because every school is still a school, and so it was more 'school' I didn't like and not actually Fulbright. So I think if I had gone somewhere else, it would have been...I think I would have been a lot more difficult because I wouldn't know any of the teachers, wouldn't have the same friends...

**Interviewer:** When you say 'a school's a school', do you mean the rules and routines?

Arabella: Yeah. And just the way it's run I guess. There are differences, but I talk to friends who go to different schools and we all have the same problems.

**Interviewer:** What are some of those problems?

Arabella: Having to come back for three weeks after we finished our exams! But Fulbright...I spoke to friends who are at Oak Green and they had to go back for like a month and they only finished a couple of days ago last week. And it's like 'oh my God', I'm so glad that they didn't make us do that.

**Interviewer:** What about the stuff happening earlier in the year?

Arabella: Like, study leave. The stress I had was all pre-exams and I kind of forgot most of it. I-space, attendance, lessons, yeah. All that stuff. It's all the same: they just treat people a little bit...it's just different.

**Interviewer:** And why do you feel differently about it now?

Arabella: I don't know whether it's because it's the holidays and I don't have to deal with it until September. No, it's important to have routine. I struggle without it sometimes. I wake up at 2pm, and it's like 'I should have been up way earlier, I've missed the whole day'. No, having some form of set guidelines that you have to follow is very important and I just refused to believe that when I was actually going through it.

**Interviewer:** Why do you think you refused to believe it?

Arabella: Because I just didn't...I don't know. Because it wasn't me in control of it, it was someone else deciding that you have to follow these rules like everyone else. And I was like 'no, I want to be my own person, doing my thing.

**Interviewer:** So is there a point then maybe, when your 16 year old self wanted to have the control but it wasn't in their best interests.

Arabella: Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Was it better for you to have other people making these decisions?

Arabella: Yeah, definitely and I have kind of begun to accept that and learnt to put my faith in other people's hands and let them do what they need to do in order for it to be better for me.

**Interviewer:** What are some of the things that might have contributed to that mind-set, that you see it slightly differently now?

Arabella: I'm not sure. I think that work experience has had such a big impact on me, and I didn't realise it would. I have just become more aware of the fact that actually everyone is putting in their part and everyone has to do their bit and it can't just be you on your own fighting against the team because that doesn't work.

**Interviewer:** Sure, can you give an example?

Arabella: Um, yeah, I kind of mean, I was everyone's assistant during the work. So everyone was coming to me to ask me to run about from A to B constantly, and so yeah, I was very happy to do that. And actually, I was thinking that's what I have to be doing in school. It's not that different. It's that school is compulsory. And that aspect where you don't have the choice to be there...it's just like...it's not like school is that bad, it's just the fact that you have to do it that put me off...I don't know.

**Interviewer:** You've said yourself that the school forced you to do these things. So, why is it a good thing if it's compulsory here but it's not in the work place? Why is it a good thing here?

Arabella: Because then you don't you don't have a choice of not experiencing having to do things you don't like. I don't know if that makes sense! Okay, start again, ask me again,

**Interviewer:** The question was that – you've said that there are things, particularly routines, and you mentioned that you've really learnt to appreciate them after your work experience. And so the question is that, if you're saying that it's a good thing that this happens in school when it's compulsory, which you used to resent but now quite like, why is it that when it's compulsory it's 'good', why have you learnt to accept or appreciate the compulsory aspect of school?

Arabella: I don't know. I think a lot of the negative attitude I had, I probably still have towards school...I don't know. I think there's some things that you have to do – that you don't get a choice in – because when you do get a choice in it, you realise that it's not that bad. And when you have the control to do it yourself and it feels like it's not compulsory that's when you can do it. It's like homework, when you procrastinate and put it off and don't want to do it...but when you do do it, you realise that actually it's not that bad. Or when, I don't know sometimes, I think I 'oh, I wish this was set as homework': something like watching a video and taking notes. Because it's so much more interesting than having to write an essay, but when it is set as homework you don't want to do it because it's homework. I think it's because you yourself think you have the choice to do it when actually...I don't know. Yeah. Something like that. When it's in your hands to do it rather than someone asking you to do it. It doesn't really matter what the task is.

**Interviewer:** Do you think that by being obliged to do certain things or maintain certain routines that you might resist when you're young, that you develop certain habits that you are going to value later on? So, the ability to organise yourself of a morning. Or at work...

Arabella: Yup. No, I do. I think it's difficult to explain. I don't know. I feel like I've just my mind is become a little bit less narrow, and I've become less narrow minded. And I've begun to accept more of stuff that I don't understand. And I understand now that it is hard to tell 16/17 year olds why this will be necessary to their lives in 20/30 years, you can't tell someone why this is going to be important. I get that now.

**Interviewer:** But work experience was a kind of pivot for you, where that clicked and you thought 'I can see why this is a thing now.'

Arabella: yeah, I think it's because I chose to do it and it wasn't something I was asked to do. And I was using things that I learnt in school at work experience – quite a lot of normal human interaction, working with people who you've never met before, - those are things that you pick up from school.

**Interviewer: What kinds of things...**

Arabella: To go and meet people that expect a certain kind of treatment, they send riders with three bottles of £70 champagne, and you have to kind of follow a system of 'yes, these are very important people, and yes, you may not like them, but you have to have to treat them like they are the queen and take them to their dressing rooms'.

**Interviewer: Are there any other skills or qualities that you might have picked up in school that start clicking in place once you're in the work environment?**

Arabella: Being around adults. Yeah, I was the youngest person there, and everyone else was an adult. And there were times where I forgot I was 17, not 40 like the rest of them. So I think yeah, it is interesting getting used to – I was speaking to them like I was speaking to you, like a teacher – there's that level of respect, that level of actually I need to follow what these people are telling me what to do because they do know better, and it's not school where you can get away in amongst a whole ocean of other students, you're on your own and you are going to be caught out if you mess up. It felt a little bit – no it didn't feel like school – I think that's why.

### PART 3

**Interviewer: Are there any capabilities on the list that you feel definitely resonate in a way that 'I do experience this in my school life'**

Arabella: A capability of life worth living. That's definitely Fulbright. I don't know why. You just feel, they know each student on a personal level, and I feel like they do care that about everything that goes on in your life. Yeah, definitely. If you don't turn up, Ms Frankfurter calls you.

**Interviewer: So – thinking back to our discussion about routines earlier - is there a connection between how the school stays in regular contact with you and how that makes your life feel important**

Arabella: Yeah, I think so. They're good at that.

**Interviewer: Any others?**

Arabella: I think Fulbright is very good at upholding all of these. When you spoke about getting situations resolved, when I think about the situation that happened this year – and the fact that that wasn't deal with – but I mean I don't really, you can't even blame, I don't even blame sixth form for that because I don't know where they'd begin to deal with a five year problem. How would you deal with that when you can't separately teach students doing the same...you can't...yeah...no.

**Interviewer: It's interesting because as a school they are obliged to try and reconcile warring students because we need to teach you that in wider society that is simply, in some sense, not tolerable. You can't have ongoing feuds with people. Do you think the school should do more?**

Arabella: I think that they...I don't know what they would do. I mean, if they put us all in a room together we would all be screaming down each other's throats and it would be hell. And we've had so many parents come in, and everyone is saying different things and with any situation it is so difficult.

**Interviewer: And can I ask, on that list of capabilities. Do any take you by surprise, things that you might not have thought of in terms of your school life?**

Arabella: Play. That did take me by surprise...I didn't think...

**Interviewer: Is it important enough to be on a list like this?**

Arabella: I think it's so important. But, the fact that it surprised me because you wouldn't expect it to be as...because it's not valued enough. People don't take it as seriously as they should. And everyone is so serious all

the time and it's like, you get scared of having fun, and that shouldn't be the way it is.

**Interviewer: That's a good way of putting it: which is, 'a kind of non-seriousness'. An opportunity to live life in a non-serious way.**

Arabella: That's not to say that life shouldn't be serious, it's just that there does need to be some time where it isn't, and it's only at break and lunch time, and if you've got cool teachers then it happens, otherwise it's such a regimented kind of environment.

**Interviewer: Do you feel that that's something...what kind of opportunities are there to 'not be serious'?**

Arabella: They do like, I mean Fulbright is good at doing once in a while charity fun days. But, I think that there is something that is kind of, a lack of enthusiasm because they think that our students won't really care about it, therefore, we might not put that much effort into making it such a good day. Where I think that if people were actually serious about making these days really good fun, and organised different activities to do, and where like 'yeah, let's do it and let's get everyone involve' then it would be really good fun and people would enjoy it. And I think that at the end of term, there's, I just remember in Year 11 when Mr Hammersmith would have sponges thrown at him and stocks, and... Yeah, things like that... really good fun.

**Interviewer: What about...Ms Frankfurter organised a movie one afternoon.**

Arabella: Yeah, the Back to the Future screening. Yeah, that was brilliant. No one dressed up, but that was great.

**Interviewer: But how does that contribute to your wellbeing in school...how is that useful to you? You could have watched that film at home.**

Arabella: Yeah, but just the fact that you can watch that with people you wouldn't expect to watch that with. You're sitting in a space where normally you have to sit there in silence for half an hour listening to someone talk about things you're not really that interested in. When you get to sit wherever you want, and eat popcorn, which doesn't seem like that big of a deal, but actually the simplest of things, like being able to sit wherever you want in the assembly hall, shouldn't be that big of a deal but it is because there is such a lack of that kind of thing.

**Interviewer: That's nice, so taking a really structured environment and deconstructing it in a non-serious way is fun. And that's important...and could that connect a little bit to affiliation because that gives you...does it give you an opportunity to develop new friendships or strengthen existing ones?**

Arabella: Yeah. I think it does. Because you remember those moments that are different from the rest, like everyday school life. And lessons that we have outside, like I remember Science's lessons when we went outside and did things. They are just more memorable. And it's the days that are different that are the most fun and the most interesting. And yeah, they may not help you get the grades, but if it's done in a way that does, then yeah. Engagement with students, yeah, I think it does help.

**Interviewer: Is there anything that you think is missing on this list? It could be something really concrete like a school actually should achieving academic potential, or attendance, or work experience, or any different types of things.**

Arabella: Achieving best possible grades.

**Interviewer: So the academic side is important to you?**

Arabella: Yeah, it's a school. It can't not be important.

**Interviewer: Even though those grades aren't necessarily connected to anything that happens later in life. You know – apart from university – in terms of the quality of life, your actual grades don't necessarily matter. But is there another reasons, perhaps, why academic achievement can be important?**

Arabella: I think encouragement for the individual to do their best. And not just because you're going to reflect well on the school, but because you have the potential to get the top grade, and satisfaction.

**Interviewer. Is there something about success in itself? Whatever it is, is there something good about**

that?

Arabella: Yeah.

**Interviewer: Not necessarily for the future, but there and then. What's good about it?**

Arabella: It's just satisfaction. It's just like. You showing yourself that you can do that. And it's something that you probably never thought you could do. And it just shows that all the work that you've been putting in has paid off. I mean, my argument is 'why do I have to come to school, I'm not getting paid to come to school, and money is something that everyone is striving to get. It's something that you are going to try and get later in life. And it's something that school is trying to help set you up. In order for that, I feel like, why do I have to come to school if you're not going to pay me. But it's like, if you're going to get the grades that are going to help you to get the money. To get on with your life. So yeah, I think, yeah.

**Interviewer: I thought you were about to go in a direction in talking about self-esteem? And self-respect and feeling. And saying that academic achievement should be on the list because it can make students feel a sense of pride or achievement which is necessary because it's what build confidence and esteem.**

Arabella: Yeah. If you were constantly just passing, or barely passing. Or no, okay, if you were always getting really really top grades and no one made you feel special about it, you wouldn't see the value in it. You wouldn't see the point in trying.

**Interviewer: Do you think it's important for young people, or for institutions to help them develop self-esteem?**

Arabella: Yeah

**Interviewer: Because in your adult life you find that it's much less common, not all workplaces will tell you you've done a good job, you don't have exams at the end of a work year where you get shown how good or bad you are at your job. SO, you do you think that for 16 – 18 year old it's important.**

Arabella: Yeah, it is. Because, what I'll see in you, it's quite hard to see in the long-run why you are coming to school if it's not to feel good about the things you have done. And I think praise is important. And I think that it is lacked.

**Interviewer: Is there a lack of self-esteem in people your age?**

Arabella: Yeah, yeah, hugely. Because you feel like you do so much work, and then you get told that 'this is wrong, that's wrong, you haven't quite done this, but you could be getting that'. And it's like, what about the stuff that I have actually done. This is a huge thing for me to have actually done that much work. And you're not even saying that that is a good thing. It's kind of...I kind of felt like what was the point in trying again if I am just going to be told the same thing, I'm never going to quite get to the point.

**Interviewer: Is there something more to it than making sure your achievement is high but...it sounds like there is an aspect where you are sort of talking about recognition.**

Arabella: Yeah

**Interviewer: So, it's kind of recognising achievement and progress. Because achievement is the main focus of school activity.**

Arabella: I think that the individual of the pupil is kind of forgotten and the focus of the school is shifted towards the appearance of the school and the students getting the grades to make the departments look good. And it is hurtful to see friends of mine being kicked off courses because they aren't getting the grades that – yeah they'll still pass with those grades – but it will drag the overall grade of the department down – and it's heart-breaking because they've worked their arses off for two year to get nothing, really. And they can't even go to uni because now they've got 2 A-levels. And yeah, I think that it shouldn't...I mean that this school has got so many hundreds of people applying, how much does it really matter if one department's grades go down by one grade and they get 2 people through that have passed. I mean, it should be more important that the students pass not that the school looks better. Because the school can be, I think, I don't know if it's true to say that people were

happier when the school was a failing school. But it kind of seems that way, I don't know. I could be completely wrong.

**Interviewer: Yeah, well part of this ties together with what we've spoken about previously. It seems that something that can be drawn from what you are saying is that the sixth form is very good at knowing individuals and very good at making sure they understand each individual pupil's needs and wants, but that's not necessarily tied together in terms of departments and your broader experience. So there are aspects of your school life that are still quite impersonal. And, your teachers in the broader school community don't know you in the same way, but if the sixth form would sit there they could have a sense of what kind of progress you've been making and what's important to you and they could recognise your achievement. But lots of your activity, almost everything you do, is done somewhere else in the school: the English department, the Social Science department, and so on. And these aren't places where you are going to be recognised in the same way. And it seems like something you are saying is that there is a need for schools to take that kind of individual level understanding and...**

Arabella: And spread it...yeah. It's hard to separate everything that...we're all seen as students, and so I see everything as school. You forget that actually, no, it's very... Yeah, I think so. I think that there should be more opportunities for me to just speak about how my day is going at school. Because it's like you can just swim through it quite easily, and be struggling and you can seem fine on the outside but there would be no way of them recognising that. And it can be quite daunting to have to go through that by yourself and then go and say, 'I've got a problem' and whether it's recognisable as a problem, or whether they've got time to deal with it.

**Interviewer: It's interesting. A recurring theme so far is that students feel overwhelmed with work, crying a lot, overwhelmed by school life, and things going under the radar a lot and not wanting to talk about things that have gone wrong.**

Arabella: Yeah, I cried a lot this year...

**Interviewer: Why have you cried a lot?**

Arabella: Stress. Yup. I've never been that stressed in my life. Philosophy exam, like.

**Interviewer: Did Philosophy make you cry?**

Arabella: Yeah, it did, a lot, and I just didn't know, I didn't realise why. I just woke up kind of 'urghh'.

**Interviewer: Is that normal, do other students...**

Arabella: Yeah, I think so. I don't know how much – it's a bit kind of. It was scary for few months. I think between our last meeting and the exams I didn't feel like myself. And the exam's done, and it's like 'hold on'. Actually the exam wasn't so bad. But the amount of pressure. I've spoken to so many people, and they are like, 'yeah, no, university is not as pressured as A level work, nothing else is'. It's unbelievable.

**Interviewer: Did you feel...not to focussing on the crying as such, but it's important because it is a very specific emotional reaction to a psychological situation. Crying at home or school?**

Arabella: Home. Always home. No, I did actually cry at school, but I walked around the block and down to the river.

**Interviewer: Is that normal for students?**

Arabella: I don't know, I just didn't know how to deal with that. How do you deal with that? How do you tell yourself that it's going to be alright when you have no idea until you sit down in that exam. I just think it's because you have so many people telling you that you have to do well. It comes from every direction. And you think 'okay, if I don't do well, what the hell happens; that's a dark curtain that you just don't open because you are just too scared. But no, it was a really weird time. Everyone was just fucking stressed. Everyone was really on edge, fights would start over nothing. Everyone was so highly strung.

**Interviewer: You know, the number of interviews I've done where people have said they cry and 'yeah, that's normal': it wasn't normal and then they started A-levels and it became normal.**

Arabella: Yeah, it's really weird.

**Interviewer: And the role of a post-16 mentor, someone who can check in with you? Has that helped at all this year?**

Arabella: It helps so much. You don't realise.

**Interviewer: I was about to say I don't think it does help!**

Arabella: Oh no, the number of people who – just having one person, it means so much. Because it's just one less person on your case. It helps a lot.

**Interviewer: Because my feeling was that one person, so my suspicion was that if you were to have a mentor in school would be ineffective because the problems are much bigger and no single person is going to counter a whole wave of pressure.**

Arabella: I don't think that's true. I mean, it's not true for me. I think if you have one person that has little bit of faith in you and is on your side, and isn't like everyone else telling you 'you need to do this you need to do that', it just kind of reassures you that you're not going crazy, you're not pinned up on a wall having everyone throw darts at you, that it's okay. It does mean a lot. It helps. And you need that. You need to be told that it's going to be okay.

**Interviewer: In school, not just at home?**

Arabella: Yeah.

**Interviewer: I imagine at home your mum is very supportive...**

Arabella: Well, because she's not part of the system you can't...you just don't believe her because how would she know, she went to school in the 1970s. This has been the most stressful year ever.

## Interview transcript: Aliyah

Second interview

20/06/2015

<b>Interviewer: Have you enjoyed post-16?</b>
Aliyah: Yeah. I didn't like it all the time, but yeah, I do like it.
<b>Interviewer: What have you liked about it?</b>
Aliyah: I guess at the beginning it was because I was familiar with the environment, I already knew lots of teachers, students, just the area was familiar to me so it was easier to just come in and study I guess.
<b>Interviewer: Were there any high points, in terms of your top things for your time at Pimlico?</b>
Aliyah: I don't know. I think different relationships in general, more than just friends. It does include changing friendships and just the way that you talk to different people, just the way you talk to old friends and stuff like that.
<b>Interviewer: Because you are more mature or because you have more space, or time?</b>
Aliyah: All of that, but even because – I saw the shift right at the end of Year 11. It was literally right at the end, the last couple of weeks, everybody just spoke to each other. It was less of 'I'm sticking to my friends'. Yeah, it's a lot more mature, and you just get along with people in different ways. There's none of that...weirdness, it's just nice.
<b>Interviewer: One of the things that came out of the first interview we did was the idea that, for you, at the end of Year 11, you felt like it was a real opportunity about who and what you were going to be after school and growing up.</b>
Aliyah: Yeah
<b>Interviewer: I suppose, I guess part of growing up is to get into a position where you recognise those things are arbitrary.</b>
Aliyah: Yeah.
<b>Interviewer: Did you feel like you were able to, academically, that there was a shift in the way you thought about school work?</b>
Aliyah: Yeah. I think in general I just enjoyed coming into school more. I keep telling M. – my younger brother – he missed school today, and I was like 'you are so going to regret that, just appreciate it for what it does'. And school work just felt like it was more for me than 'oh, I just have to do this because the teacher has asked me to'. And it was more challenging, it makes you think, it was more – I think this applied more for Year 13 – but it wasn't just, 'oh this is on the curriculum, so we have to learn it – there was more room for discussion. It felt more relevant.
<b>Interviewer: More relevant to you personally? Or to the world outside, or to what you want to do in the future?</b>
Aliyah: Yeah, in that respect – to what I wanted to do in the future because it was the subjects that I chose, and the subjects that I chose to continue with in Year 13. But also to myself, just relevant to myself.
<b>Interviewer: If you could go back to the beginning of Year 12, would you have done anything differently?</b>
Aliyah: I think just told myself that, just to get on with it and not think about, 'oh my God, I have to...' – even

then, I was trying to think of what I wanted to be, I felt like the person I wanted to be was still restricted to what other people, the way that other people, the way I wanted other people to see me – and I think that put a lot of pressure on myself, which is why I had such a sort of breakdown. So I think I would have told myself to just do things for myself, not worry about...

**Interviewer: Correct me if I'm wrong, but as a high achieving student, particularly in Year 12, the school identifies you and puts perhaps more pressure on you because they think you are capable of doing more, and did you feel like that was fair? Should the school have put that much pressure on you?**

Aliyah: I think, I don't know, maybe the breakdown – I can't say that it was completely school pressure. I'm not naïve enough to think that it wasn't home stuff as well. But I'm – maybe because it's just me – and I just worry about things a lot. And, I don't really know whether – I always think it is quite good to be under a certain amount of pressure, but it wasn't even – I didn't stop to think 'would I actually be happy studying in Cambridge?'. I just thought, even from when I was younger, I always thought Oxford and Cambridge is the top, the aim, without actually thinking about 'okay, is that the kind of environment I would actually want to spend the next 3, 4 years of my life. And that just made me, and that, the school didn't let...

**Interviewer: If you had realised that at the beginning of Year 13, you wouldn't have put yourself through it?**

Aliyah: Yeah, exactly. The school just made me go behind, I think you were the only person said 'hold on, maybe, you don't have to go down that route.' Everybody else was like, 'that's a great opportunity'. I felt like I didn't have the chance to say, 'you know what, I actually wouldn't be happy here, so I should just not do it.' And that's, like Steve did that. It was so funny the way that he had the meeting with Dr S, And I thought, even when he told me, I thought, 'you're crazy, just go for the interview at least.' And he was like, no, I just don't want to do it. He was so right to do that. But just for himself, as well.

**Interviewer: Do you think he gained something that perhaps you, a different kind of opportunity? I'm thinking of standing up for himself, and do you feel like that was something you missed?**

Aliyah: Yeah

**Interviewer: It sounds like in hindsight, you might have been better served by putting your foot down at one point and saying no.**

Aliyah: Yeah, I think he was more secure in knowing what he wanted, and just in general, knowing himself. Like, if I think, if I had just stopped to think for a bit, and thought, this is me we're talking about. Instead of 'oh, yeah, it's a great uni' – but 'is it actually suited to myself, I didn't think. I should have. It's a missed opportunity I think.

**Interviewer: If you could go back and change it, which was our initial question, would that have been something you would have...**

Aliyah: Yeah.

### PART 3

**Interviewer: Now, are these the kinds of things you think students should be able to do (referring to Nussbaum's Central Capabilities)?**

Aliyah: It does apply to school, but I think the list that you made (\* this refers to a list the interviewer made in notebook when discussing the research before the interview) is probably more relevant for school.

**Interviewer: Can you think of anything that might be missing?**

Aliyah: I thought of one yesterday, but I don't remember what it was...

**Interviewer: Let's see if it comes back. Let's pick one that stands out to you as being interesting to talk about, or important.**

Aliyah: If I'm thinking about this year, it would probably be this one – emotions.

**Interviewer: Does that stand out as being particularly important this year?**

Aliyah: Yeah

**Interviewer: This was about being able to develop attachments to things and people, to not have your emotional development blighted by anxiety or fear. And to be able to experience gratitude and justified anger. What resonates with you about that?**

Aliyah: Obviously the 'blighted by anxiety and fear'.

**Interviewer: This relates to our discussion earlier; can you explain what was your anxiety?**

Aliyah: Just, how I do. My academic ability was a source of anxiety.

**Interviewer: What were the kinds of doubts you were having before Christmas time when it got particularly bad? Were you someone...did you still have faith that you had the ability, or were you anxious that you had lost it?**

Aliyah: Yeah, that I had lost it. That I would just not be able to handle anything. I think, mostly, it's because I was so behind. A big part of that was the Cambridge application. And everything just seemed like a huge, everything was piling up like a huge mountain and I felt like I couldn't...

**Interviewer: Can you separate the reality of that situation from the way you felt about it? Was it a bad psychological period where you made things much worse, or do you think that it just was that bad.**

Aliyah: There's no doubt that it was that bad, there was lots of assignments and stuff that I just couldn't hand in. And I would sit in class and think 'oh my God, I have no idea what's going on'. And obviously in my head, I would compare that with how I was last year, and how it was just easier for me to participate in class and stuff. But I do realise, and it was one of the things that I would talk about in therapy – I'm quite a rational person, so I do think about things over and over again, and that kind of became the problem. I would think about things so much to the point where it would just get confused. So, it's a bit of both. So it was quite a bad situation, but also, I know that I can recognise that I made it into something that wasn't...

*Interview redacted.*

**Interviewer: Do you think if you were to talk to yourself one year ago, the one who had just finished Year 12 and was starting the extended project, is that the same person?**

Aliyah: No

**Interviewer: How has she changed?**

Aliyah: I just see things differently, there's more of a...there's more options.

**Interviewer: Back then?**

Aliyah: No, now

**Interviewer: How so?**

Aliyah: Because, even at the beginning of Year 13 I would never have thought I would take a gap year. That was not even an option for me.

**Interviewer: Are you someone who has gone from someone who wanted to control every aspect of your life...**

Aliyah: 'Every' aspect, yeah.

**Interviewer: ...to now being someone who kind of gets some pleasure form being out of control a little bit, opening yourself up and seeing where it goes.**

Aliyah: Yeah. Being out of control isn't ever taught to be a good thing. If that makes sense. Not at home, not at school. Because you are sort of taught...so in like Year 9 you have to pick subjects that you want to learn for the next whatever 2 years, and then after that you have to think and pick another to stick with for 2 years. You have to control it otherwise...

**Interviewer: Are you someone who is more open to that now?**

Aliyah: Yeah. I think I've always had that spontaneity in me a little bit, that sort of rebel side. But I've just never had the opportunity to express it.

**Interviewer: So what was the opportunity?**

Aliyah: This year – the summer just doing different things, this was the start of it – the nose piercing. Oh my God. My mum was like 'err...no, I don't think so.'

**Interviewer: How did that conversation play out?!**

Aliyah: I was kind of sneaky, my mum's best friend has a daughter my age and we're close families. And she is really open, she was like 'dye your hair stupid colours, do everything, just try it, if it doesn't harm you then try it out.' And then I sort of waited until she came around and had the conversation then so she could back me.

**Interviewer: How long have you had it?**

Aliyah: A month

**Interviewer: So that's a big thing. I'm also thinking about your ability to take life less seriously, do you feel like that was developed in any way coming out of that dark patch you've had this year?**

Aliyah: Yeah, that helped getting out of it because the whole problem was I felt like I didn't have any control. But I sort of found control in not controlling everything, if that makes sense?

**Interviewer: That makes sense. It's a bit of a paradox, but I think the one thing you knew you could control was your attitude towards it.**

Aliyah: Right

**Interviewer: Which was that this wasn't something you can control, and so to sort of embrace that idea that it's something that's just going to have to work it's way out. And that does give you a sense of control because you've decided that that's your position on it.**

Aliyah: Yeah.

**Interviewer: We've spoken a bit about number 8, control over your environment. But in two slightly contradictory sense – one that this year in particular has been a time where you haven't been able to participate in choices – your nodding your head, what am I referring to?**

Aliyah: The Cambridge thing

**Interviewer: Yeah. But also, it's a time when you have made some pretty significant choice about your own life and about who you are. But what do you think – do you think this has been a time when you've been able to make decisions for yourself?**

Aliyah: I think it just applies at the end of post-16

**Interviewer: What about subject choice, right at the beginning? Who enrolled you?**

Aliyah: Must have been Ms Mitchell, I think.

**Interviewer: Do you remember feeling like you – you said there was pressure to make these decisions -- do you feel like it was you who was making them?**

Aliyah: Yeah. I remember I was really excited about it. History, I think, looking at how much I struggled, probably wouldn't have been the best choice to do. But I think I've done it for myself, because I really really enjoy it. So I was like, 'you know what, I'll just work harder at it.'

**Interviewer: Do you feel like you know, looking at your 16 year old self, are pretty happy with the choices you made?**

Aliyah: Yeah. Like I really really enjoyed them.

**Interviewer: All your subjects?**

Aliyah: Yeah

**Interviewer: Do you think that's true of everyone's choices?**

Aliyah: No. Because I know people who have dropped subjects, picked up new subjects.

**Interviewer: Would you say you're in the minority or the majority as someone who would think they made good choices?**

Aliyah: I wish I talked to students more about it to be honest. I would hope the majority. But...

**Interviewer: How much do you feel like you've had control over that decision making?**

Aliyah: Not as much, definitely not as much.

**Interviewer: As what?**

Aliyah: As much as the subject choices and stuff like that. Because, I remember right at the beginning, I just looked at Russell Group unis, as those were like the only choices I had. And it's not like somebody, I mean the Cambridge choice might be a bit of an outlier in this, but it's not like somebody said 'this is what you have to do'. It wasn't like that. But it was just the way that people around me had always said for years, I felt like...yeah. SO I think I was under some false pretences that this was my choice and it really wasn't.

**Interviewer: As a school, we don't do an awful lot to dispel that. Even if we don't tell you to apply to Russell Group unis, we allow that to be the case that people think that. We don't challenge it much or enough.**

Aliyah: Yeah. And it's good, especially being in an area that is both an affluent and non-affluent area, I think it's good. Because there are some – and I know it's going to come out sounding arrogant – but it makes me feel uncomfortable when people say, 'oh, I don't think I could ever do that, so I'm just going to stick with...like it really does upset me. Because my brother does something similar, he just says 'I could never do that, so I won't even both'.

**Interviewer: How would you class yourself – affluent or not affluent.**

Aliyah: Oh, I'm not affluent. But, some people think that because I live in this area, or this is my family background, so this is sort of – I'm not going to even apply to that area or whatever. Because of those reasons.

**Interviewer: Part of decision making, which interests me, is that there is a record of girls, who come to Fulbright, and have really close families, and never – it's never even seen as a possibility, it's not a decision to make, it's decided – that they will not leave home. These girls, stay at home. Their brothers, of the same age, can go to Leeds and Edinburgh, and wherever they want, but the girls have to stay home. They have to go to a London university. Was that ever a case for you?**

Aliyah: I knew that my mum preferred that I stay in London, and that she is still getting used to the idea that I'm

not going to be that close to home. She gives me little reminders every now and again. But it was never, I don't know, she never said that, or gave the impression that, it's a complete no. She's like, 'wherever you're comfortable, and especially if that's a good uni and if you'll benefit it, go for it.'

**Interviewer: Is that unusual for girls from...your background is Kurdish...so...**

Aliyah: Kurdish people as just a thing aren't that religious. I mean, it's a majority Muslim when I go to Kurdistan, but it's not that religious.

**Interviewer: But even culturally conservative? Lots of girls will still wear hijabs, for instance, and part of that attitude of conserving culture and the way people live, is...**

Aliyah: I think it's just the way my mum...my dad has just learnt to let my mum and make the decisions. I'm not that close to my half-sisters any more, but I was speaking to one of the older sister, and I haven't seen her in like a year and a half, and she was like 'what are you going to do next year?' And I was like 'I'm going to take a gap year, and I've applied to Exeter and Loughborough. ' And she was like 'whoa, that's far'. And she was like 'you've made yourself completely separate and your taking it to a whole new level. And I didn't see it like that.

**Interviewer: What couldn't you do if you wanted to?**

Aliyah: See, I want to travel. For my gap year. But that's becoming like a 'no, no'. I'm finding it super difficult to persuade my dad.

**Interviewer: Where do you want to go?**

Aliyah: I'm not even asking for anywhere ridiculous. I'm just going to stay in Europe. But..

**Interviewer: And go with someone?**

Aliyah: Yeah, but there's no one to go with. So I'd have to go through a programme or something.

**Interviewer: Which would be fine?**

Aliyah: That's what I'm saying. But I feel like I have to battle it out.

**Interviewer: Do you enjoy that aspect, that you can? Or is your dad someone who shuts the door and say we don't talk about it**

Aliyah: He did shut me down pretty badly, but when I speak to my mum she was like 'you know him, you have to open the subject quite a lot.

**Interviewer: Is your mum on your side?**

Aliyah: Yeah, quite a lot.

**Interviewer: Because she didn't put the idea in your head, she just supports whatever you want to do?**

Aliyah: She's not completely for it, she's like 'I feel kind of uncomfortable that you would go on your own, and stuff'. On my own. But she's more of a, she will listen, and she's like, she will listen to my situation, and my dad would just shut me down because he'd be like, 'oh you're a girl, you're Muslim'. And he actually told me that 'this isn't something that we do'. And I was like, 'who's we'? You know, my mum would be more lenient and actually listen to the situation.

**Interviewer: Was there ever a disconnect between, perhaps not for you, but a disconnect between your family and the decisions that they wanted to make, or wanted you to make, and the school and the decisions that the school want you to make? For instance, like getting involved in Envision. Things like that, which can be quite multicultural: did your school life and home life ever clash?**

Aliyah: They do, but not in that way. I've never really made the connection, or thought of it in that way, like against each other. It's always been about going to uni, working and stuff has always been – my dad, he's always

worked within Politics and stuff, and I remember he took me to the Houses of Parliament to see this discussion, and I was actually about burkhas and stuff, a discussion on that. So he'd always encourage working and stuff like that. SO in that way, it's not...

**Interviewer: You said that there are some ways in which you think they clash...**

Aliyah: Like, the level of involvement, I think. When there was a trip to France, I did go, but it took a bit of convincing.

*Interview redacted*

**Interviewer: Dp you feel like you've developed in other ways, that the school has helped you, other than academically?**

Aliyah: Yeah, I mean I think that by default they have. With just opportunities and stuff that they run, Mr James was really good at it. And Ms Harris, obviously continued his work. Was really good at being like, 'yo, there's this opportunity and why don't you do it.

## Interview transcript: Selena

First interview

20/01/2015

...excerpt...
<b>Interviewer: I can see how that would be difficult, it seems like most work experience and raising aspiration events are about professions like banking or being doctor. Is that what you mean?</b>
Selena: Yeah, that's true. Everything they always have doesn't really have to do with me. So, you can't really blame me for not really being a part of the school. And when I do get part of the school, it's never enough. Take after Future's week, I made the costumes for theatre play, the Tempest, and I kept getting shouted at.
<b>Interviewer: Really? Tell me about that. Was this work experience of just volunteering or what?</b>
Selena: Just me doing I for the greater good, you know.
<b>Interviewer: So what were you doing, making costumes for the school play?</b>
Selena: Yeah.
<b>Interviewer: Which is relevant to the kind of thing you might be doing</b>
Selena: Yeah, so I was like 'let me just do it.' Help the sixth form out. So I did it, and then because I had done my own work experience, I finished like last week I think it was, so I was about to do that, and I was like, to Ms Bankers 'I can't do the theatre stuff anymore, because I've got stuff to do.' Then, it's like, they put too much responsibility on me. They were like, she was like shouting at me going, 'well now, there's costumes that aren't done. What are we meant to do, and this.' And I'm like, 'I didn't organise any of this, I was just helping you lot out. I didn't expect me to be the whole, you know, costume designer thing. I'm like one person. Do you get what I mean? So, I'm like, putting too much – they try an make me learn like I'm doing a life lesson. Like, she said this one thing to me, 'what if this was your job, and then you said you can't do it.' And I was like, 'but it's not my job, because if it was I would have obviously nothing else to do but that.'
<b>Interviewer: Which is a fair point</b>
Selena: Yeah, it is. And she was like 'oh, you have to speak to the Textiles department, you have to speak to them, you have to find other people to do it.' And I was like, 'but I really don't.' I'm not organising it, I'm not the department. I was just helping you lot out. I think it really irritates me when people just hit me with stuff. Because I didn't ask for it. If I wanted to run the whole thing, I would have been like 'let me run the whole thing.' But, if I'm just doing stuff, just don't hit me with it. It's too much.
<b>Interviewer: That sounds like a situation where you were willing to invest a bit, but your expectations and their expectations were different.</b>
Selena: Yeah. I was like, 'wow, I didn't know this meant so much to you.'
<b>Interviewer: But in part, they were seeing it as, one, you probably being like a member of staff in charge of this when that wasn't...</b>
Selena: It was brought to me like that
<b>Interviewer: And two, they saw this as being some kind of formative thing to boost your profile in terms of like...</b>
Selena: Yeah, and I was just doing it because I was like 'I'll help you out' kind of thing.' And they made it out like they were doing me a favour.' And I was thinking, what if I just said I want everything I made to come back to me. How would you feel? It's just too much, especially when your calling me up.
<b>Interviewer: How does that make you feel when the school tries to present things to you in a way that</b>

**'this is how it's going to be after school so you need to do it right now?'**

Selena: I feel it's quite off-putting. Really off-putting.

**Interviewer: Can you think of any particular moments where you thought 'I don't like this'**

Selena: Say like in Future's week, and we had to do all that board stuff, and they said this is what you need to do this or do that. And I was like, but I don't want to do it. Sometimes you just don't want to do that kind of stuff.

**Interviewer: Do you think, is that because you – because some students get a lot out of that, there are always students who say 'I want to be a doctor or a lawyer.' Do you find that because you're not into that work culture, you don't appreciate...**

Selena: It's not that I don't appreciate it. It's just not for me.

**Interviewer: Yeah, I don't mean that as a criticism. Just that it's maybe not a thing you can appreciate because it's not in your world**

Selena: Yeah. I feel like in the sixth form they really push you to do stuff that you don't want to do necessarily. Like, no one really asks me what do you want to do Selena. It's like everyone already has this thing set up for me. And in Future's week, they actually got me excited because Ms Bankers came up to me and was like 'oh, we've got stuff for not only academic stuff, we've got things from all around. And I was looking at it, and I was like, oh great and everything. And she was like, we've got some, you know, apprenticeship things for other things other than academic. So I was like oh cool. So I came to it early every day. And then, it was like building works. And I was thinking, that's not appealing to me. Just because I don't want to go into academic stuff, it doesn't mean I want to go into construction. I don't know why everyone always has that.

**Interviewer: Have you thought about it seriously enough, you'd probably be a great builder!**

Selena: No, it's rudely irritating. It's like I felt so lied to. I done that whole entire Future's week and it did not benefit me one bit at all.

**Interviewer: In part, that's a lack of expertise in post-16 who can't see for students like you what the future might be**

Selena: Yeah. There is a lot of us.

...excerpt...

**Interviewer: So, with i-Space and lessons and everywhere around the sixth-form, do you feel during the school life you get much of an opportunity to express ideas of your own?**

Selena: Yeah.

**Interviewer: you do?**

Selena: Yeah, 100%. I'm quite an outspoken person. Like with really strong views. I'm a really – how can I say – straightforward person. So, it's like, if I'm in the study room and I hear something, and it's something that I really don't like. I will actually go up to that person and be like...

**Interviewer: You'll challenge them?**

Selena: Yeah, I will. Especially when - like I have this thing, although I'm a really social person, some people might call me hostile. But it's only the people who I don't like would call me hostile. Because, I think you are your views at the end of the day. The majority of yourself is what you think. So, if you're making like jokes that I don't find funny, or I find quite offensive, I'm not going to sit there and laugh with you. Just because everyone else is laughing with you. I wouldn't even crack a smile.

**Interviewer: You'll let them know?**

Selena: I'll let them know. Even if I just met you now. I don't really care.

**Interviewer: Usually there's supervisors, or it's staffed, but often the study room is a place where people express views and ideas that can be pretty controversial.**

Selena: Yeah

**Interviewer: Do you find this is a sixth form where people can freely meet without having that prejudice-is it a common thing or is it just a few specific people?**

Selena: I think, with things like racial, political, religious and cultural things, I think everyone is quite good with them. But I think when it does come to sexism, they are really sexist.

**Interviewer: Sexist to girls?**

Selena: The boys are sexist to girls. Like, it's really bad.

**Interviewer: Do you find that sexism is still quite a prevalent attitude?**

Selena: It's so big in school. It's such a big deal.

**Interviewer: You know I'm about to have a meeting with someone about running feminist workshops for Year 12s to educate boys.**

Selena: Great, good. Because they need it. Sometimes I feel like it's just me.

**Interviewer: What's your experience of that?**

Selena: It's just – I feel like I get into a lot of arguments because of it. I feel like a lot of...I'll deal with a lot of my friends, a lot of boys, and they have this crazy...

**Interviewer: Outspoken?**

Selena: yeah, it's crazy

**Interviewer: And for the boys, it's that their home life that shapes that, or is it an attitude from friends they pick up here do you think?**

Selena: Yeah, I think they pick it up from here.

**Interviewer: There are some people, I think, who would say that their cultural backgrounds can shape those attitudes...**

Selena: Oh yeah.

**Interviewer: Do you find that it is, quite a few boys, almost all the boys come from a particular background**

Selena: Yeah. I already know who I'm thinking about. .

**Interviewer: So, when together, it's an attitude that they can speak to women however they wish**

Selena: Yeah, I don't know what time they think we live in. Like, for them to be – there's certain stuff, like, I remember I went and...Take for example TJ. Very sexist guy. A nice guy, but very very sexist. And it's like, I always get in arguments with him because of it. And then, you've got...and it's really hard for me because, I think we should all back each other. All like stand for this. And then you get like certain girls, like not to say names but Ashi, who will be like, 'yeah, you know, I will...if my husband tells me to come home at 10, I'll come home at 10, but I'll let him go out the whole night.' I'm thinking how can you do that to yourself. And it's like you try to talk to them. And it's like, it's not getting through. And you're so frustrated because you think how are people like

this in the world.

**Interviewer: Do you think that the school has a role to play in educating students about those kinds of attitudes? Or do you think it should be kept to academic?**

Selena: Yeah I think they should. Because it's like we actually ever do anything about it. There's so much stuff on pointless needs, like sex education, like we don't already know this stuff. Come on, it's been talked about since Year 4. Do you get what I mean? We know all this stuff already. And it's like, really pointless stuff. Why don't we get out the proper stuff.

**Interviewer: What would you say is the proper stuff?**

Selena: You know, like, backing each other. World peace. Feminism. Rape culture. Just good things, stuff that people need to know in general. But a lot of people are blind to what's go inf on. I think like, school needs to be one of those things that help...because you know not everyone can get it. Not everyone knows about stuff. And I think, because school is such a big part in your life. You're here the majority of the year. So, it's like, you should get some...

**Interviewer: And you can't always rely on family...so school's a place where we should be communicating what's important right now?**

Selena: Yeah. And especially because, if family is going to be family, some of them are traditional, some of them are more cultural, but at the end of the day, school is modern. And school is what's happening now. So it's like, that's where you should get a viewpoint on life now. It's from school. Because you're not going to get it from anywhere else.