The Curricular Choices of Students Aged 14-16 at Three Secondary Schools in England

David Peter Johnson

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"The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others."

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David Johnson

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Abstract

The focus of this study is to identify the factors that influence young people's curricular decisions by taking a holistic, qualitative approach to explore the decisions students, aged 14-16, make in relation to chosen curriculum pathways over a period of time within the context of three case study secondary schools in England.

The research suggests that the curricular decisions of students aged 14-16 are influenced by a variety of factors, including the views and experiences of parents, siblings, teachers and their own aspirations for the future. A major influencing factor on these curricular decisions is that of government policy, including factors such as: curriculum, qualifications, school performance, reporting of achievement and parental choice and the impact these factors have on school policy. Within this context, the research indicates that schools, and in particular, the schools' head teachers interpret and enact the curriculum requirements and expectations of government policy and how they are influenced by the school context as well as the parental expectations and the socio-cultural context of the school.

The overall results of this study indicate that the most significant factor influencing the curricular decisions that students make relates to the context of the school that the students attend and the policy that the schools set and how they approach and implement this in response to government expectations including the extent to which they constrain the choices of young people and involve the students and their parents in the decision-making process.

The recommendations include an improvement in the quality and consistency of curricular information that secondary school students are provided with and better access to independent advice and guidance, together with greater transparency to ensure that students and their parents are aware of the government's expectations concerning secondary education and how this influences each school's curriculum policy.

<u>Contents</u>

<u>Abbreviations</u>

AQA – Assessment and Qualifications Alliance

BTEC – Business and Technology Education Council

DCSF – Department for Children, Schools and Families

DFE – Department for Education

DFEE – Department for Education and Employment

EBacc – English Baccalaureate

FE – Further Education

GCSE – General Certificate of Secondary Education

GNVQ – General National Vocational Qualification

HE – Higher Education

HMI – Her Majesty's Inspectors

IAG – Information, Advice and Guidance

MFL – Modern Foreign Languages

NEET – Not in Education, Employment or Training

NVQ – National Vocational Qualification

OFSTED – Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

OCR – Oxford, Cambridge and Royal Society of Arts Examinations

SES – Socio-economic status

VRQ – Vocational Related Qualifications

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1.0 <u>Chapter One</u>

1.1 <u>Introduction</u>

This research study focuses on the factors that influence the curricular choices that young people aged 14-16 make during their time in secondary education.

The processes involved in student curricular decision making have been of interest to me throughout my teaching career. In my role as Head of 6th Form at a secondary school in West Yorkshire I was heavily involved in the curricular selection process that students experienced during Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. Having a better understanding of what factors influenced the curricular choices that students made was essential so that I could advise and guide students more successfully.

It was important for me to have a better understanding of the factors that can influence the curricular choices that students were making. Was it influence from their parents? Their siblings? Their peers? Their teachers? Their school? Their social standing? Their wider social and economic position? Were their decisions based on the success rates certain subjects had? Or did they have a keen interest in a particular subject area and clear goals for the future that studying a certain subject would help to achieve?

Few previous studies have taken a qualitative, holistic approach, to investigate the factors that influence the curricular decisions that students make over a period of time. Therefore the main aim of this study was to learn more about the factors that influence young people's curricular decisions to bring a new perspective to the field of students' decision making. I aimed to achieve this by considering a variety of factors that I identified from previous research and from my own professional experience as potentially influential in a student's curricular decisions, over a period of 3 years. A further unique aspect of this project was that I examined students' decision making over a prolonged period of time. This allowed me to see a wider view of the factors

influencing curricular decisions than is possible with studies that are capturing decision making at only one point in time.

In order to achieve these research aims several research questions were identified.

The overarching research question that I aimed to address was:

1.0   How do a sample of students in England, aged 14-16, select curriculum pathways?

To answer this question I also considered three additional sub questions and using primary interview methods with a sample of 45 students from 3 different schools I addressed these specific questions:

1.1   To what extent are the curricular decisions of the students influenced by family and friends?

1.2   To what extent are the curricular decisions of the students influenced by their socio-economic status?

1.3   To what extent the curricular decisions of the students influenced by the culture and context of their schools?

A significant amount of the literature that I read referred to the influence that a young person's social standing has on the choices and curricular decisions that they make. However, to suggest that the process is so simple as students from a higher social standing aspire to achieve more and that this is reflected in the curricular choices that they make would significantly over simplify the matter. The reality is that social standing is just one factor that can influence the decisions that young people make. Other factors can include influence, or coercion, by parents, siblings or teachers to make certain curricular choices. There is of course also the issue of students making their own decisions and enforcing their own influence to make their curricular decisions based on personal motivation or prior experiences. I approached the complexities of this topic by

considering theories of structure and agency. From this perspective there are different operational structures that can affect curricular choice of the student's involved in this study in terms of curriculum policy and school policy as well as social norms and family norms and expectations.

Having a better understanding of the factors that influence young people's curricular choices can help those in positions of responsibility to provide better quality advice and guidance and better support the students' decision making process. I believe that an extensive number of school students across England are not being given the necessary support and guidance to make the most appropriate and best curricular decisions. Therefore my goal was to conduct research that would offer a unique perspective on the field of young people's decision making in education and could enable those involved within education to have a better collective understanding of the factors that can influence a young person's curricular decisions.

Prior to starting this research study, I reflected on my own values and beliefs with regard to the existing curricular choices process and was able to identify two key factors, which I deemed worthy of investigation.

Firstly that, even though some available advice which students may draw upon may be from less informed and therefore less reliable sources, such as friendship groups, my view was that all students should collect as much advice as possible, from as many different sources as possible. Further, that students should have access to a variety of different guidance sources and that this would allow them to consider each piece of advice they are provided with, thereby better informing their curricular choice decisions.

Secondly, although it would be easy to be critical of the government's school league tables, it should be recognised that the decisions made by the government concerning curricular development, and the measuring of school performance, are policies which are guided by

specialist knowledge, vast amounts of experience and endeavour developed over many decades, to provide the best educational outcome for the young people of England.

Despite my own values and beliefs I approach this research study as objectively as possible, with an open mind, prepared to interpret the data I collected as an impartial researcher.

2.0 Chapter Two

2.1 Literature Review Introduction

Key areas of interest in the research of England's schools sampled in this thesis include the following specific topics:

- Curriculum Policy

  Curricular decisions have a significant impact on young peoples' future educational development, and therefore make a significant contribution to their career selection options and therefore their adult lives. It is necessary therefore to understand the role that curriculum policy can play in influencing and affecting and indeed raising their awareness of the importance of the curricular decision making process that young people must make. This literature review covers the recent history of curriculum policy and the role that central government plays in determining what, why and how subjects should be taught in secondary schools in England.

- Young People and Decision Making

  Young people are at the heart of this study, therefore it is important to gain a better understanding of how young people make decisions. Therefore this literature review covers different decision making models and how this process has been characterised and described in the literature.

- Curricular and Careers Guidance

  As this study considers the different factors that can influence the curricular decisions that young people make this literature review considers the formal curricular and careers guidance available to secondary school students.

- Wider Social and Economic Context

Having considered the official curricular and careers guidance that can influence students' curricular decisions it was also necessary to review the literature on how young people can be influenced by the home environment, including factors such as wider social and economic context.

2.2 Curriculum Policy

"A curriculum is a blueprint for what we want children to become" – (Newby in Johnson et al, 2007: 42)

Another way to summarise the curriculum is to consider the question "what should children learn?" One way to answer this question is to consider "what should a child know, understand and be able to do?" as a result of their learning experiences. Another question we could ask is "who decides what a child should know, understand and be able to do?"

There is a perceived gap in the literature concerning student choice and the impact that curriculum policy, at both school level and national level, can have on the curricular decisions that students make. It is, however, clear that the UK national government has a long history of defining the curriculum and directing how schools must work.

The Education Act 1944 established that publicly funded primary and secondary education would be available to all children in England and Wales and set out a broad aim for educational provision and stated that it should be the duty of each local education authority to contribute towards the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community (The National Archives, 2015).

The only specific requirement of the provision was that all schools should teach Religious Education. This meant that the actual curriculum for school pupils was largely determined by individual schools and any attempts to introduce greater central control of the curriculum were

suppressed by the influence of the teaching profession and its representative bodies. In the 1950s, activity in schools was shaped and guided by the 1944 Education Act, however with exception of mandatory Religious Education, the Act made limited references to school curriculum.

In 1960, the Minister for Education David Eccles, established the Curriculum Study Group (CSG), which in 1964 became the Schools Council for Curriculum and Examinations (Gillard, 2011). The Council was based on a partnership between central and local government and the teachers. The most significant contribution of the Schools Council was the introduction of standardised examination certification in the form of O-levels and later the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE). This indirectly meant that curricular content written into these exams had to be taught and available for all students.

A framework for the content of the curriculum, however, continued to be discussed by educationalists. In the 1960s, Schwab (1962) suggested that the school curriculum should be based around three core disciplines: investigative, appreciative and decisive, while Peterson (in Lawton, 2012) suggested a model based on logical, empirical, moral and aesthetic modes of thinking and experience. In 1970, Hirst and Peters (1970) suggested a model divided in to areas of learning such as: human studies, philosophy, moral judgement and awareness, religious understanding, formal logic and mathematics, physical sciences and aesthetic experience. It is possible to see how the focus suggested by Hirst and Peters (1970) begins to resemble a curriculum design with which we are more familiar with today.

In 1976, Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan introduced major reforms involving removing responsibility for school curriculum from schools and making it the responsibility of central government. Callaghan's proposal came during the economic downturn of the mid 1970s and at the heart of Callaghan's proposal was growing public concern that the future of the UK was not being well served by the UK education system (Education in England, 2015).

Callaghan described the education system in the UK as being like a 'secret garden' and said:

> *"The goals of our education, from nursery school through to adult education, are clear enough.*
>
> *They are to equip children to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive, place in society,*
>
> *and also to fit them to do a job of work. Not one or the other but both" (Callaghan, 1976 –*
>
> *Education England, 1976, paragraph 17).*

It was at this time that Callaghan first used the term 'core curriculum' and the need for a national curriculum, for students of all ages, was first described.

A series of papers published by the Department of Education in 1976 criticised the existing curriculum in both primary and secondary schools for lacking balance and for a lack of consideration of the ever changing needs of industry and society. An investigation in to local education authorities also revealed a significant variation in curriculum policy across England. The need for a core curriculum as described by Callaghan was intended to provide both continuity between primary and secondary school and breadth and balance of learning and experience.

In 1979 the Conservative Secretary of State for Education, Mark Carlisle, was instrumental in replacing the Schools Council with the School Curriculum and Development Committee and the Secondary Examinations Council (Gillard, 2011).

During the 1980s the debate concerning the curriculum continued to focus on how to ensure that pupils received a broad and balanced education and in 1985 Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) published the results of further consultations concerning the curriculum for 5 to 16 year-olds. The HMI report described how a balance of learning and experience, combined with knowledge and skills should be delivered within different subject areas (Gillard, 2011).

A key feature of the curriculum debate during the 1980s focused on addressing the issue of underachievement and the government identified that further breadth and balance in the

school curriculum would support all learners to be successful. The UK government has a responsibility to provide equal opportunities for all to succeed at school, most recently outlined in the Equal Opportunities Policy in 1990, but additionally individual schools must provide appropriate provision for young people to achieve economic wellbeing and to make a positive contribution to the UK economy. Such factors are at the heart of curriculum policy and any curriculum developments.

2.2.1 <u>The National Curriculum for England's Schools</u>

In 1985, Secretary of State for Education, Sir Keith Joseph's *Better Schools* White Paper first recommended moving towards a nationally agreed curriculum following which, in 1987 the Department of Education and Science, produced a document that first laid out a plan for a national curriculum (Gillard, 2011). The original plan listed four key purposes:

- Introducing an entitlement for pupils to a broad and balanced curriculum

- Setting standards for pupil attainment and to support school accountability

- Improving continuity and coherence within the curriculum

- Aiding public understanding of the work of schools

It was declared that the National Curriculum would be structured around 'Key Stages' and be subject based, covering what would be known as the 'core' subjects of English, Mathematics and Science, and the 'foundation' subjects of Art, Geography, History, Music, Physical Education and Technology. All subjects would be studied from the age of 5 to 16, with Modern Foreign Languages being introduced at age 11. Each subject area would follow a common 'Programme of Study', which would include common scales of attainment and assessment methods.

The government's desire for a common standard, concerned with fairness and equality, paved the way for the introduction of school league tables and from then onward the influence which

performance tables would have on the curriculum offered by secondary schools became evident.

The Education Reform Act 1988 dictated that students of all English state schools should be taught a curriculum made up of Religious Education and the new 'National Curriculum'. The National Curriculum constituted an agreed body of knowledge, skills and understanding that was introduced in response to the Education Reform Act 1988 (Gillard, 2011). Although the curriculum does not apply to independent schools, it does ensure that all English state, or Local Authority, schools have a common curriculum. One of the key purposes of the National Curriculum was to standardise the content taught in schools, which would then allow for standardised methods of assessment. This in turn would enable the compilation of school league tables that could be used to create a 'schools free market', as identified in the Education Reform Act 1998, and providing students' parents with data which could be used to choose a school, based on its performance and ability to successfully teach the National Curriculum. The development of the National Curriculum was overseen by two newly established advisory bodies, the National Curriculum Council and the School Examination and Assessment Council.

The National Curriculum has two principal aims and four main purposes (DfES, 2004: 10-11), these are:

> **Aim 1:** The school curriculum should aim to provide opportunities for all pupils to learn and to achieve

> **Aim 2:** The school curriculum will aim to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and prepare all pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life

   – **Purpose 1:** To establish an entitlement

   – **Purpose 2:** To establish standards

   – **Purpose 3:** To promote continuity and coherence

– **Purpose 4:** To promote public understanding

The first round of Key Stage testing of the National Curriculum was completed in 1991 and then in 1993 the responsibility for school inspections was transferred from Her Majesty's Inspectors and Local Authority inspection teams to independent inspection teams co-ordinated by the newly formed Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2015).

Since the mid-1990s statutory programmes of study in sex education and careers guidance have been added as subjects to be taught in schools in England. The Education Act 1996 required that all schools provided students with a programme of Sex Education, although this does not form part of the National Curriculum, but is effectively an addendum to it. The Education Act 1997 required that all students in Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 were provided with a programme of Careers Education (Gillard, 2011). Such developments, although not linked directly to new learning or subject knowledge, are in fact further evidence of the government's objectives to design a curriculum that will support young people in all areas of their lives. Elements of the curriculum such as sex education and careers education are now embedded within the curriculum to provide young people with support to help them to develop into effective and responsible adults.

In 1997 the then Labour government continued to determine and develop the content of the curriculum and introduced a focus, on what Secretary of State for Education David Blunkett described as, 'the basics' with particular focus on literacy and numeracy and a new subject area called Citizenship, developed to enable students to make effective decisions and to take responsibility for their own lives and their communities.

The National Curriculum for Key Stage 3 and 4 in 2015 is made up of the following subject areas:

Figure 1 – The Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 National Curriculum

Subject	Key Stage 3 (age 11–14)	Key Stage 4 (age 14–16)
English	✔	✔
Mathematics	✔	✔
Science	✔	✔
Computing	✔	✔
Physical Education	✔	✔
Geography	✔	
History	✔	
Music	✔	
Art & Design	✔	
Design & Technology	✔	
MFL	✔	
Citizenship	✔	✔
Work-related Learning		✔
Welsh (Wales only)	✔	✔

Source: (The National Archives, 2015)

In 1997 the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority and the National Council for Vocational Qualifications merged to form the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). The QCA made significant changes to the National Curriculum in response to concerns from school teachers (Gillard, 2011). The statement of purpose established in 1999 is still the same today (DfES, 2004: 12-13):

__To establish an entitlement__ – The National Curriculum secures for all pupils, irrespective of social background, culture, race, gender, differences in ability and disabilities, an entitlement to a number of areas of learning and to develop knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes necessary for their self-fulfilment and development as active and responsible citizens.

__To establish standards__ – The National Curriculum makes expectations for learning and attainment explicit to pupils, parents, teachers, governors, employers and the public and establishes national standards for the performance of all pupils in the subjects it includes.

__To promote continuity and coherence__ – The National Curriculum contributes to a coherent national framework that promotes curriculum continuity and is sufficiently flexible to ensure progression in pupils' learning. It facilitates the transition of pupils between schools and phases of education and provides a foundation for lifelong learning.

__To promote public understanding__ – The National Curriculum increases public understanding of, and confidence in, the work of schools and in the learning and achievements resulting from compulsory education. It provides a common basis for discussion of education issues among lay and professional groups, including pupils, parents, teachers, governors and employers.

As previously identified, one of the key objectives of the National Curriculum was to provide performance league tables that parents could use to inform a choice of school for their children. However, despite this information many parents still fail to secure a place at the school of their choice. With schools electing to offer specialisms in subjects such as Science, Mathematics, Sports or IT, there are perhaps less choices and some pupils might be led down a learning path which may not be their first choice of subject. In addition, some consider that the introduction

of league tables has had a negative effect on pupils as the pressure from schools to secure high grades led many students to select subjects that are seen as being easier to achieve highly in, such as Art and Drama. However, others see the use of school performance league tables as being driven by the necessity to improve education through market-based processes and re-assign accountability and responsibility to the schools and teachers (Chubb and Moe, 1986).

2.2.2 Recent Curriculum Developments for England's Schools

One of the most recent changes to the education system in England came in 2012 when the then Conservative government began to introduce changes to the way that students in Key Stage 4 were assessed and how a school's performance was measured. Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education at the time, described a need to *'stop the dumbing down'* of the Key Stage 4 curriculum. To achieve this he proposed an end to module assessment, a significant cutting back of classroom based assessment and coursework, and a return to more traditional end of year examinations.

In addition Mr. Gove proposed ending the use of GCSEs and replacing the traditional A*-G grades with numeric marks from 10 to 1 in order to create a more specific grading system. It was suggested that such a system would enable the most able students (those achieving 10 marks) to be acknowledged for their achievement and that universities would be able to use this information to distinguish between top candidates. It is necessary for universities to ensure a level of 'distinction' as not all students can access university and elite groups of universities are expected to maintain their status in relation to groups that do not access university (Trowler, 2003). In addition the university bachelor's degree needs to remain valued over other forms of first stage higher education qualification, such as certificates and diplomas. Therefore providing a system that will allow universities to identify, and then select the highest performing students to ensure that HE establishments can sustain the standards of qualifications being bestowed is essential.

Central to the UK government's educational reforms was a new performance indicator called the English Baccalaureate. The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) is a performance indicator that identifies where pupils have secured a C grade or above across a core of academic subjects at Key Stage 4. Specifically the EBacc is made up of English, Mathematics, History or Geography, the Sciences and a Modern Foreign Language.

Although the EBacc is not compulsory, Ofsted will take it into account when inspecting a school and the school's percentage of students achieving the EBacc will be made public as part of the process of reporting on the school's examination performance. The impact of this new initiative is that all English schools must now consider that their 'EBacc percentage' is going to be made public, and it is therefore, plausible to understand that schools may be motivated to re-consider the curricular options they will offer to students aged 14-16, so as to ensure that a suitable number of students have the opportunity to achieve the EBacc (Gov UK: English Baccalaureate, 2015, paragraph 1).

The introduction of the EBacc saw the return to a debate for further Baccalaureate styled learning (Hodgson and Spours, 2015). Following the EBacc there have been discussions regarding the introduction of a Technical Baccalaureate performance measure to be made up of an approved technical level qualification, a Level 3 mathematics qualification and an extended project. In addition, the UK government's opposition Labour Party's Independent Skills Taskforce have made calls for a National Baccalaureate. The National Baccalaureate they propose would be a curriculum model design for school leavers made up of either a Technical Baccalaureate or a General Baccalaureate, with students being able to choose which Baccalaureate pathway they choose to follow.

The latest change that the UK government made to English schools' curriculum was introduced in 2014 when the government announced a new performance indicator to be known as 'Progress 8' that would be introduced to all schools in 2016. The Secretary for Education at the

time, Michael Gove, suggested that measuring the progress of a school based on the percentage of students who achieve 5 A*-C GCSE grades was no longer adequate. Mr Gove therefore proposed a move to focus on what he called the 'best 8' measure which involves recording the 'average point score' of students from their 'best performing 8 GCSEs'. This data would then be used to form a new headline school performance figure for all Local Authority schools, Free Schools and Academies.

The development of the EBacc, and the most recent curriculum development of Progress 8 has particular relevance to this research study. The implications of these recent curriculum developments have, to some degree, impacted upon each of the schools involved in this study. Such curriculum policy developments provide the most relevant and current examples of how government policy shapes and impacts on the curricular decisions that schools make in reference to provision for students and, therefore, the curricular decisions that students make.

Although the government describes the Progress 8 measure as being designed to encourage schools to offer a broad and balanced curriculum at Key Stage 4, there are only certain subjects that students can study that will contribute towards their 'best 8' average score. The subject areas that can contribute towards the Progress 8 measure include: English, Mathematics and three other EBacc subjects, such as Science subjects, Computer Science, Geography, History and Modern Foreign Languages. Students make up the 8 with three additional subjects, which can be EBacc subjects, or any other approved, academic, or vocational qualification. Such policy detail has led to many schools preferring students to study subject options that will contribute to the Progress 8 measure and has therefore largely removed a significant element of 'free choice' for students during the curricular options process.

In addition to the average GCSE point score that will be used to measure a school's performance, the following measure of performance will be in place under the government's latest proposal:

- **Attainment 8** – showing pupils' average achievement in the same suite of subjects as the Progress 8 measure.

- **English and Mathematics** – the percentage of pupils achieving a C grade or better in both English (either Language or Literature) and Mathematics.

- **The EBacc** – showing the percentage of pupils achieving good grades across a range of academic subjects

Despite a move to Progress 8 and Secretary of State for Education Mr. Gove's concerns about measuring school performance based on the percentage of students from a school achieving grade C or above in 5 subject areas at GCSE, the EBacc is to remain an integral performance measure.

Figure 2 identifies the different subjects that students can study that will contribute towards their 'best 8' subjects and also highlights the emphasis that is placed on English and Maths, with both subject areas having 'double weighting' compared to all other subject areas of the 'Progress 8 measure' (Gov UK, 2014, paragraph 18)

Figure 2 – Progress 8 measure
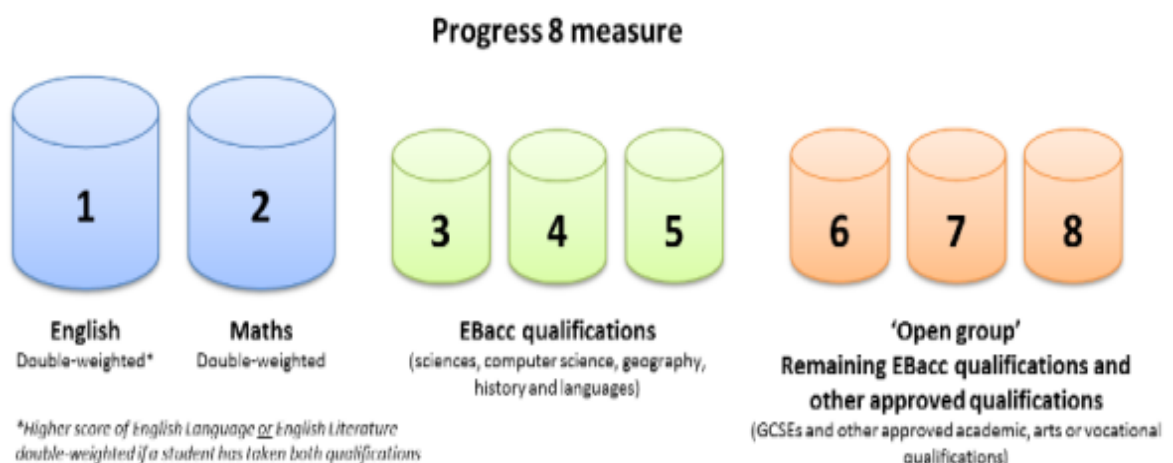
Source: (Gov UK, 2014: 3)

As previously identified one of the most recent curriculum developments by the Department for Education, was the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) in 2012. The introduction of the EBacc was one of the key developments following the publication of the Wolf Report (2011). The Wolf Report was an independent review of vocational education within the secondary curriculum completed by Professor Alison Wolf of King's College London, commissioned by the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove. The Wolf Report found that vocational education in England needed to be improved and suggested that in some instances, the disproportionate weighting of some vocational qualifications was making existing school performance indicators unreliable.

In response to the Wolf Report (2011), Department of Education decided that subject options in support of the EBacc should be made available in all Local Authority schools in England and that a 're-focusing' of more traditional subjects, such as English, Mathematics, Sciences, Humanities and Languages was necessary. In addition to the introduction of the EBacc, the findings of the Wolf Report (2011) prompted the government to reinforce the necessity for all school children to leave education with a targeted and appropriate level of numeracy and literacy skills. Such a target is intended to make all school leavers more employable and therefore be in a position to make a more positive contribution to the economy, whilst also lowering youth unemployment levels.

The principle being adopted is that a stronger focus on traditional subjects may be beneficial to the education system in England to provide better educated school leavers who are better able to contribute to the economic success of the country and in so doing, support the country in becoming more competitive with other countries in the world.

Such implicit theory behind the curricular decisions that the UK government has made illustrate the rationale behind such decisions. However there may be other motivational, and possibly political imperatives, behind the actions that a national government might take. Government

actions to address a weakness in the competencies of its present school leavers might be motivated by the importance of its own re-election. The national media is quick to present statistics concerning school exam performance and if the government can generate an improvement in this area it might and should support their efforts to be re-elected in the future.

2.2.2.1 The 'Missing Middle'

Hodgson and Spours (2015) suggest that current government policy appears to focus on the two extremes of the Key Stage 4 cohort. The recent curriculum developments of the EBacc and Progress 8 place a significant emphasis on academic attainment of the top 25% of learners aged 14-16. Whereas the other priority for government policy focuses on reducing the number of young people classified as NEET (not in employment, education or training).

Whilst the EBacc has been designed to raise standards in education it has also led to a significant reduction in the number of students pursuing vocational programmes of study. Research undertaken by Hodgson and Spours in 2013 suggested that learning programmes prior to the introduction of the EBacc made up of a mix of general and vocational learning had a highly motivating effect on students in Key Stage 4 and saw the aspirations of these students to study at Post 16 increase. However, the introduction of the EBacc has seen a dramatic reverse in this mixed learning approach and instead a focus on facilitating students to study the necessary subjects in order to secure the EBacc. As a result participation in EBacc subjects has almost doubled, whilst the number of students following mixed academic and vocational learning pathways has declined significantly. Hodgson and Spours (2015) refer to those students in the 'missing middle', who previously took advantage of being able to follow a learning pathway made up of a mix of learning styles.

Hodgson and Spours (2015) identify that far less policy attention has been given to the participation, progression and transition of students classified as middle attainers despite these students accounting for more than 50 percent of leaners. They conclude by suggesting that

students in the 'missing middle' in the more selective GCSE era of the EBacc will have altered attitudes to progression to Further Education from 'I think I can' to 'I think I can't'.

2.2.3 <u>The Curriculum and Subject Choices</u>

When students are 14 years old in England, they are given more control over the direction of their education, as they are presented with the opportunity to select from a wide variety of subjects and qualification types to select from to study in addition to their GCSE core subjects. The decisions that students make at the age of 14 can have a significant impact on both their immediate education experiences and their futures beyond their time in school. These subject choices will go on to influence the decisions that they make at 16 years old, just like the choices they make for after they have completed their Post 16 studies will affect their options regarding further study at higher or further education and future employment opportunities.

The subject choices that young people make and the reasons why they make the decisions that they make are areas that are little studied by academic researchers and poorly understood outside of the education profession. One thing we do know is that students have a wide range of options. The following is a brief summary of the different qualification options that are available to students today (Jin *et al*, 2010: 10):

> ***General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs)** – The main academic qualifications, currently GCSEs in English, Maths and Science, taken by 15 to 16 year olds, form the 'core' components of the National Curriculum. GCSE subjects are offered in more than 50 different subjects.*

> ***Vocationally Related Qualifications (VRQs)** – Professional qualifications that are focused on specific areas of employment.*

> ***Basic Skills and Functional Skills courses** – Programmes designed to improve fundamental literacy, numeracy and computer skills.*

***Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) courses** – Alternative work-related qualifications, available in subject areas such as, Sport, Media, Business and Hospitality.*

***Key Skills courses** – Designed to improve transferable skills, such as communication, problem solving and teamwork.*

***Vocational GCSEs** – Work-focused programmes that provide an alternative to academic GCSEs, focusing on specific industries, such as Health and Social Care and Leisure and Tourism.*

***OCR Nationals** – Portfolio based vocational qualifications available in similar areas to BTECs and VRQs.*

***Diplomas** – introduced in September 2008 with the intention of combining theoretical study with practical experience. Since 2013 Diplomas are no longer offered to students.*

Figure 3 (Jin *et al*, 2010), on the next page, highlights the percentage of schools that offer the different qualifications identified in this. As might be expected the chart shows that traditional academic GCSEs are offered to practically all students in England. However the chart also underlines the difficulty that those outside the education world may have in having a sound understanding of all the different options available to students today. From the information in the chart we can see that almost half of all schools in England offer as many as five different types of qualification (Jin *et al*, 2010).

Figure 3 – Qualifications offered in English secondary schools

Different qualifications offered at secondary schools in England
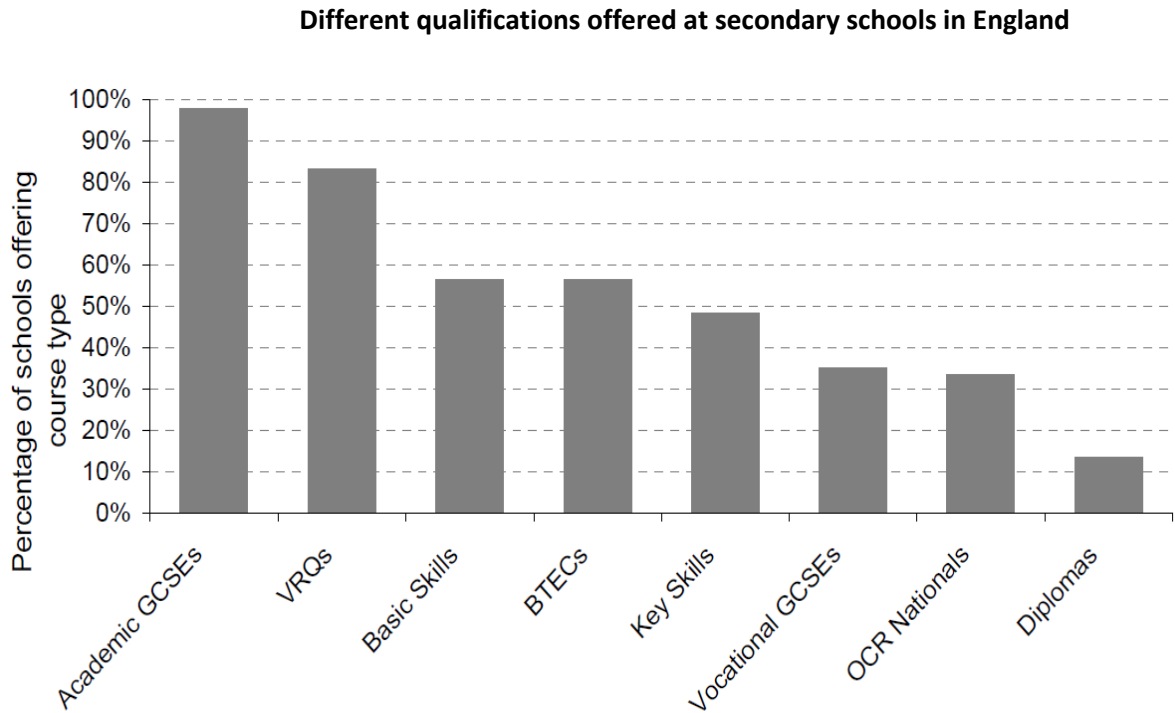
VRQ – Vocational Related Qualification

OCR – Oxford, Cambridge and Royal Society of Arts

Source: (Jin *et al*, 2010: 11)

Figure 4 (Jin *et al*, 2010), on the next page, identifies the percentage of students in Key Stage 4 studying different subjects. As might be expected large numbers of students study the core subjects of Maths, English and Science, significantly more than the number of students studying traditional subjects, such as History and Geography and the number of students studying vocational subjects, such as Health and Social Care and Business (Jin *et al*, 2010).

Figure 4 – Popularity of different Key Stage 4 curricular options

Popularity of different Key Stage 4 curricular options
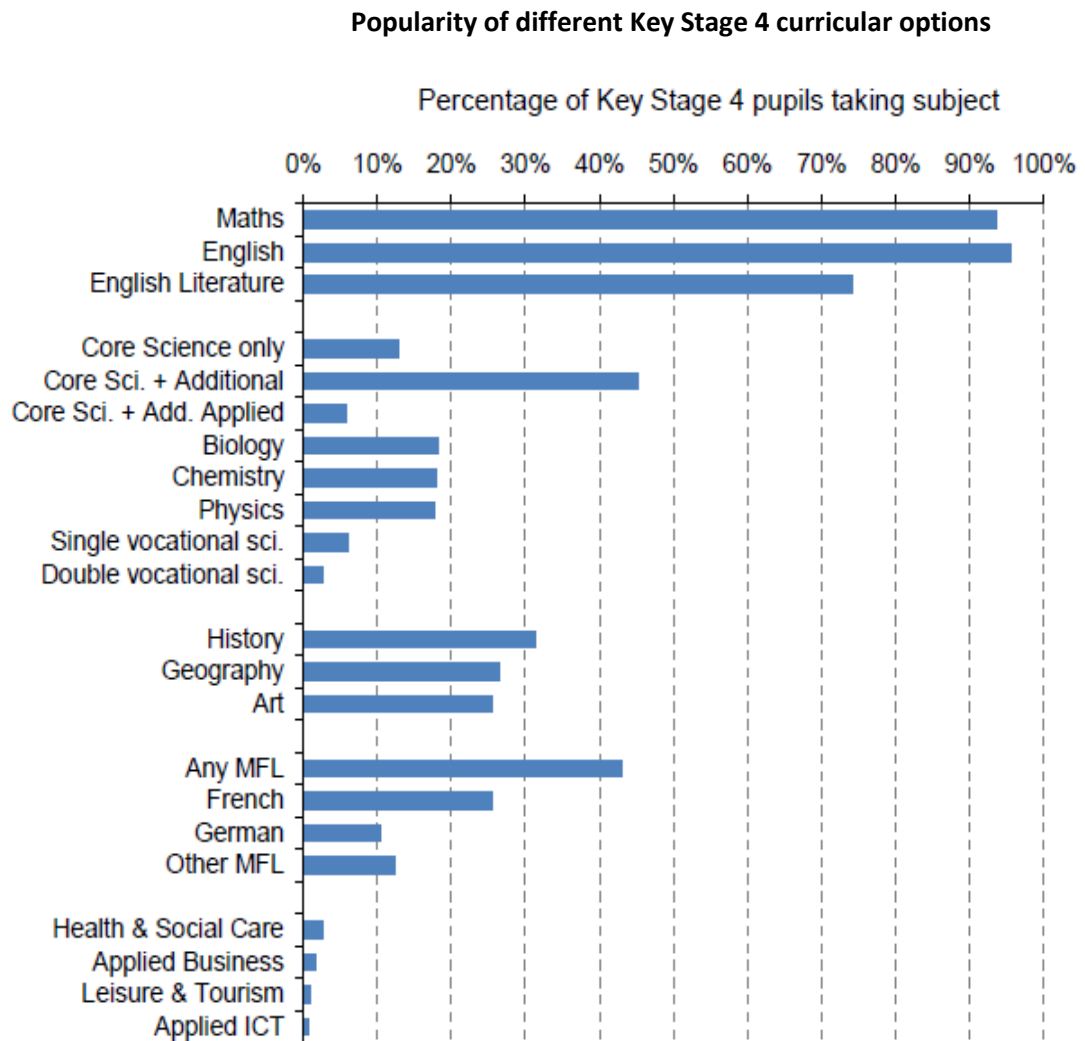
Source: (Jin *et al*, 2010: 14)

Figure 5 (Jin *et al*, 2010), on the next page, identifies the percentage of students who are in full time education, part time education, a job with training, a job without training or not in education, employment or training. As might be expected the category that accounts for by far the highest percentage of young people is full time education, however the information in this chart may be surprising for many who could expect the percentage of those in full time education to be higher than it is (Jin *et al*, 2010).

Figure 5 – Destinations of students aged 16+

Destination of students at 16+
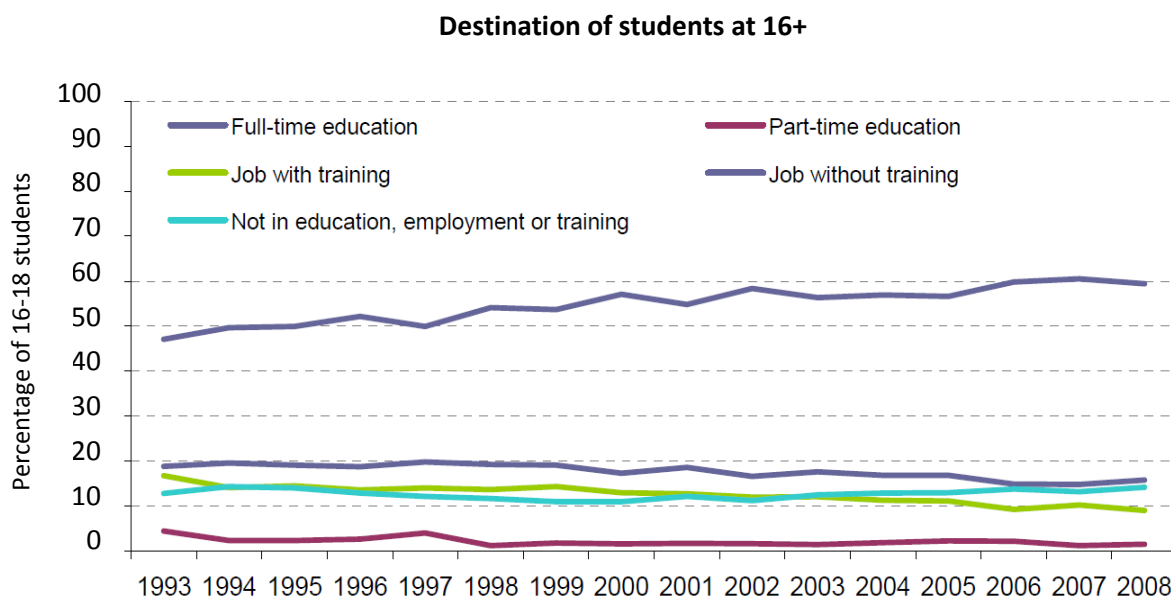
Source: (Jin *et al*, 2010: 17)

The features of this chapter identify that for over 100 years the curriculum that is taught in schools in England has been changing and developing. An on-going process of reflection and evaluation leading to a philosophy of continuous improvement has seen the curriculum develop over the years. This can be expected to continue to help the curriculum evolve to meet the changing and developing needs of UK society.

Since the 1960's a core of the curriculum, the focus has been on key learning in subjects of Mathematics, English and Science, which has remained largely unchanged. The status of other subjects has altered over the years, but at the heart of all curriculum development has been an emphasis and a focus on the core subjects.

A recurring influencing factor impacting on English school curriculum during the 20th and 21st century has been the impetus of the UK central government in setting policy and designing the curriculum and implementing curriculum changes. Central government and the Department for Education are rightly at the heart of curriculum development and take responsibility for

producing a curriculum framework that will provide young people with the opportunities to succeed in an ever changing, challenging and evolving society.

2.3 Young People and Decision Making

Argyris and Schon (1974) describe human beings as the agents and designers of action and suggest that all action is constructed by the meanings and intentions of such agents. Effective agents take particular designed actions to achieve intended consequences and outcomes and then monitor their own progress to better understand if their actions are appropriate and effective.

Wright (2005) outlines three different models of decision making and highlights, within these models, two key issues: the relative importance of structure and agency in an individual's decision making and the importance of rationality in an individual's decision making.

2.3.1 Rational Choice Model

The first model described by Wright (2005) identifies students' decision making as being a rational process of evidence gathering and careful consideration of the costs and benefits of the different options and courses of action available. This process can be referred to as the 'rational choice' model. For those who make such rational choices it is possible to identify the reasons why rational decision makers come to make decisions. Such decisions can also be validated by the individual. Often students who make their choices in a rational manner do so as they are aware of the potential opportunities in the future that such decisions could support.

Students making such decisions as described by Wright (2005) have often considered information, advice and guidance from a wide range of sources and then made considered subject selections that are most likely to provide them with opportunities in the future to fulfil their ambitions and aspirations. However, in my professional observation, students making such

decisions often surrender the opportunity to study new subjects or make curricular choices that will see them studying alongside friends or being taught by favoured teachers.

The theory of rational choice as described above is also expressed by Becker and Tomes (1975) as the 'human capital theory'. As education is viewed as being the primary tool to further economic progress it has played a key role in setting the framework of UK central government policy since the 1960s. In England, education is seen as key to successful economic performance. It is clear that encouraging the rational choices model with Becker and Tomes' (1975) human capital theory may help this agenda. For example, those students which seek out and consume all available information, advice and guidance concerning their curricular options are often the students who make such decisions with careful consideration of the different routes for the future route (i.e. GCSEs, A-levels, degree, career) very much at the forefront of their minds. This then supports the rational choice theory identified by Wright (2005).

Jin *et al* (2010) commented on the rational choice model by considering the thought processes, or cognitive mechanisms, that students experience when deciding which subjects and courses to study. Jin *et al* (2010) acknowledge that the choices students make ultimately represent a series of decisions about the life they would like to lead in the future. The decisions that such students make will be made considering immediate concerns such as which teachers will teach them and which friends they will study with, whilst also considering whether they will pursue higher education and what career options they will have in the future.

Jin *et al* (2010) describe such subject and course choices that students make as being 'intertemporal choices' as the students make rational decisions involving the costs and benefits of different choices. Samuelson (1937) described such a process as the 'discounted utility' model that expects students being 'perfectly informed and perfectly rational agents' who evaluate all the options available to them and then choose the option that will maximise their future well-being. In this simplistic model individuals are assumed to have perfect information and foresight.

The only factors that can influence their choices are therefore the set of options available to them and their interests and preferences. Samuelson (1937) however did acknowledge that such a model could never provide a truly accurate representation of decision making.

This model has evolved over time, with one of the main differences being the acknowledgement of risk in the process. Any individual's choices depend, in part, on their attitude to risk. Unlike the 'perfect' decisions described by Samuelson (1937), it is acknowledged that students must calculate the possible outcomes against the probability that such desired outcomes will occur and then, based on this knowledge, choose courses of action that will maximise their desired outcomes.

2.3.2 <u>Social Choice Model</u>

Wright (2005)'s second choice model considers decision making as a result of different external forces beyond the control of the individual. There are several different external forces that can impact on the choices a student makes, including the following:

- An individual's background, including their class, ethnicity, gender, etc.

- Influence of other individuals over the decision-making process (parents, teachers, etc.)

- Nature of education and training provision

- Economic conditions

The social model downplays agency and suggests that students experience little 'genuine choice' regarding their education. The social model also suggests that rather than decisions being made rationally there is a greater emphasis on emotional and psychological factors and preconceptions and assumptions that are grounded in the different external factors listed above.

Ryrie (1981) suggested that students made decisions regarding their education options through 'tacit acceptance' of what is appropriate for them based on expectations and assumptions

developed from the way in which their time at school is organised and structured. Ryrie (1981) goes on to argue that decisions students make are often made, about particular courses or paths to be followed, without conscious choice on the part of individuals or deliberate allocation on the part of schools.

Bynner, Ferri and Shepherd (1997) completed a research study in to student destinations and referred to students being affected by 'vicious and virtuous' circles. By referring to 'vicious and virtuous' circles Bynner *et al* (1997) commented on those students with supportive families, who had positive experiences of education, and how such experiences are built upon by successfully gaining access to good jobs with high investment from their employers. Whereas for those students lacking such support and educational experiences such opportunities tended to deteriorate over time, as they left the benefits of the common curriculum.

2.3.3 <u>Affective Choice Model</u>

Another model of decision making is known as the affective choice model. Bracha and Brown (2009) described the affective choice model as being a strategic model of choice that combines elements of rational and emotional decision making processes. This model suggests that students making decisions regarding their education or future careers are most likely to make decisions based on their emotions and experiences. For example, a student may make an emotional decision, such as making certain curricular decisions to study alongside a friend that is likely to lead towards a positive emotional outcome. Alternatively a student may make a decision based on previous experiences, such as making particular subject selections because the student has experienced previous success studying in the subject area earlier in their academic career.

2.3.4 <u>Hybrid Choice Models</u>

Other forms of decision making model can be referred to as 'hybrid' models that accommodate features of more than one choice model. In a hybrid choice model students' decision making is influenced by the external factors that impact on a student's decisions, as described in the social choice model, and the agency and identity of the individual, as described in the rational choice model.

Banks *et al* (1992) suggest that decision making, although a rational process is actually constrained and influenced by perceptions of opportunity that are formed by an individual's family background, class and gender, all combined with the features of an individual's personality and character.

Banks *et al* (1992) summarise that there are three key elements that affect a student's decision making process, these are:

1. Opportunity structure

2. Credentials

3. Identity

According to Banks (1992), students' decisions are formed as a result of a combination of processes involving social and institutional selection and an individual's self-selection.

Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson (1996) developed the theory of 'pragmatic rationality' to explain how students make decisions. Hodkinson *et al* (1996) described how the decisions that students make are determined by external career and educational opportunities combined with personal perceptions of what is possible to achieve, a theory they called 'horizons for action'.

Helmsley-Brown and Foskett (1999) identified two different stages in effective students' decision making: the preliminary stage and the refined search stage. During the preliminary

stage preconceptions of different career and education pathways are considered with the support of secure family and peer approval. Whilst during the refined search stage students experience a more rational process of evidence collection, filtration and assessment.

Foskett *et al* (2004) supports the theory of a hybrid choice model of decision making that incorporates both individual agency and the influence of external factors. They identified choice as being an outcome of interactions between three different factors:

1. Context (i.e. home environment, social environment, institutional environment and lived environment)

2. Choice influencers (i.e. institutional, social, family and lived)

3. Choosers (i.e. those who act according to factors specific to the individual (i.e. lifestyle and ambitions)

Hodkinson (2008) later also described three key elements of pragmatic decision making:

1. Decision-making process is part of a wider choice of lifestyle (influenced by social context and culture)

2. Decision making is part of an ongoing life course (of which the immediate decisions young people face are only one stage)

3. Decision making evolves through interactions with others and are, therefore, actually negotiations between young people and others, e.g. employers, parents etc.

The literature concerning decision making and decision making models suggests that hybrid models are more appropriate when considering the different factors that influence student decision making concerning their education or future careers.

There also appears to be a consensus within the research that decision making for students is an on-going process, and for many, not necessarily linear in nature. Whilst careers education and guidance programmes focus on particular decisions for students at particular periods of

time during their education, the reality is that such decisions are actually part of an on-going process of the students evolving maturity, identity and forming of attitudes. A timely reminder offered by Ball *et al* (2000) suggests that due to the on-going nature of the decision making process for students it is important to be aware that for many decisions can sometimes only be temporary and will often be reversed.

2.3.5 <u>Segmenting Decision Makers</u>

An influential report by SHM Productions Ltd (SHM), a provider of specialist business services based in London, produced a study in 2005 that considered how decision makers aged 14-16 could be segmented by such factors as attitude, personality, optimism and aspirations. The project focused on the decisions that young people make at the end of Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 and assigned students to three distinct clusters of segmentation based on their decision making profile (SHM 2005). The choice models can be translated into practical models to inform practice, as identified in this report.

The first stage of the project focused on students' decision making orientation and involved a profiling activity where students considered the focus of their decision making. The students were asked to consider the question 'where is the focus of my decision making?' The results were then categorised in to the following simple areas:

- Past

- Present

- Future

The second stage involved students being asked to consider their outlook for the future by considering how clear they were about what they wanted to do in the future and how optimistic they were about achieving their goals. The students' responses were then grouped in to corresponding categories, either 'clear' or 'unclear' and 'pessimistic' or 'optimistic'.

The third stage of the project focused on the element of risk in decision making and asked students to consider how safe they wanted the decisions they made about the future to be. The students were asked questions about how critical they believed the decisions they were making would be for their futures, how important new challenges were when making decisions and how important new experiences and new environments were when decision making for the future. The students' responses were categorised depending on whether students considered the decisions they were making to be 'critical' or 'not critical', based on developing existing skills or searching for new challenges and staying with the 'familiar' or seeking out 'new experiences'.

The final stage of the project involved students considering what actions they thought lead to success and involved questions considering the following theories. Whether success was based on 'intuition' or an 'organised plan', whether it was necessary to be flexible in your decision making or to methodically follow a pre-determined 'route for success' and, finally, whether success was based more on 'luck' or 'hard work'.

Through a series of questions based around the themes identified above it was possible to segment the learners involved in the project in to one of the following eight 'mind-set profiles' (SHM, 2005: 13-20):

Profile One

The Confident Aspirational: "My ambition will get me there"

Orientation: Future (long term)

Outlook: No clear picture, optimistic

Risk tolerance: This decision is not critical, look for new challenges, new places, new people

Theory of success: You need intuition, change course as needed, success = hard work

Profile Two

The Determined Realist: "I know what I want to do, let me focus on that"

Orientation: Future (long term)

Outlook: Clear picture, optimistic

Risk tolerance: This decision is critical, build on what I'm good at, new places, new people

Theory of success: You need a clear picture, climb the ladder, success = hard work

Profile Three

Long-Term Preparers: "School, degree, masters, get rich (I'm not sure what I'll be doing)"

Orientation: Future (long term)

Outlook: No clear picture, optimistic

Risk tolerance: This decision is not critical, look for new challenges, new places, new people

Theory of success: You need a clear picture, climb the ladder, success = hard work

Profile Four

Indecisive Worriers: "How can I decide? It's all too much"

Orientation: Future (short-term)

Outlook: No clear picture, anxious

Risk tolerance: This decision is critical

Theory of success: You need a clear picture, success = hard work

Profile Five

Short-Term Conformists: "What's the next step in the (educational) system?

Orientation: Future (short-term)

Outlook: No clear picture, optimistic

Risk tolerance: This decision is not critical, build on what I'm good at, new places, new people

Theory of success: Climb the ladder, success = hard work

Profile Six

Unrealistic Dreamers: "Yeah, I'm going to be a surgeon. Or a deep sea diver"

Orientation: Present

Outlook: Clear picture, optimistic

Risk tolerance: This decision isn't critical, look for new challenges

Theory of success: Change course as needed, success = luck

Profile Seven

Comfort Seekers: "I'd like a nice life"

Orientation: Present

Outlook: No clear picture, optimistic

Risk tolerance: Stay with the familiar

Theory of success: No theory

Profile Eight

Defeated Copers: "I'll make do with what I can do"

Orientation: Past

Outlook: Clear picture, pessimistic

Risk tolerance: This decision is critical, build on what I'm good at, stay with the familiar

Theory of success: Climb the ladder, success = hard work

The SHM report suggests that such profile modelling could be used as a diagnostic tool to support the delivery of careers education and guidance. Such a model could be used by the students themselves to learn about and better understand their own decision making. However, the report of this study suggests that the best use of such data could be as part of a learning framework to support both students and teachers alike. The SHM report advises that such a learning framework could be used:

- To form classroom activities, in the run up to key decision making periods, to help students better understand their decision making processes
- To support teachers in challenging their own assumptions about how young people make decisions

2.3.6 Student Choice

Foskett (2001) states that society is shaped by the process of choice and that choice is a fundamental process of human existence. In our daily lives and in the course of our lifetime the choices we make, and the choices of others, influence the way we live. Foskett goes on to say that every choice a person makes impacts on another person and that the choices of any individual, group or organisation create changes to the 'environment of choice' for every other

party. Therefore the social, economic and cultural environment in which we all operate is actually the result of choices that others have made previously. Although any individual is the product of their own choices it is unavoidable that these choices will be highly influenced by the external environment which has defined the environment of choice in which they live.

For young people the 'subjects selection process' during secondary school is a time of genuine interest and excitement that students look forward to with anticipation (Foskett, 2001). For many it is likely to be the first time that they are given a real opportunity to experience their own influence as young adults and witness their personal wants and interests being listened to and acted upon by those in positions of responsibility. It is a process which deserves be taken seriously and given the necessary time and attention by all those involved.

To better understand the process which young people have experienced, it is important to know more about the range of influences that impact on young people, aged 14-16, when they are making their curricular choices in secondary school. We can reasonably expect that they will be influenced by their teachers and other staff members at school, as we can also reasonably expect that they will be influenced by their parents or other people outside of school. Such others might be their peers and friendship groups, older siblings and it is important to consider the influence that these parties might have on a young person's curricular decisions.

There may also be more subtle influences, such as the leadership of the school and even the Local Authority or central government which could indirectly influence their environment of choice. Some research has already been completed in to what factors influence the curricular choices that students make. Payne (2003) referred to the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), sometimes referred to as 'Next Steps', and summarised that the impact of student attainment, background characteristics (such as gender and ethnicity), home circumstances and the quality of guidance on the choices available are all factors that are likely to impact in some way on the choices that students make and should therefore also be taken in

to consideration. It is also essential not to dismiss or ignore the level of individual agency, as described below, that students have to make their own choices without being influenced by other parties.

The theory of structure and agency can be regarded as essential to helping better understand why people make the decisions that they do. Simmel (1955) pioneered studies on the concepts of social structure and agency to explain a person's actions and decision making processes. Simmel (1995) defined social structure as being the factors that influence a person's actions and behaviours and considered how people can be influenced by the social, economic and political environment around them and considered how this environment influences or limits their opportunities. Simmel (1995) further described agency as being a person's capacity to act freely, without constraints created by a larger social network, and to make their own, independent, choices.

Giddens (1979) described how the social structure that influences people's behaviour and decision making processes are in fact created by the outcome of 'social actions'. Social actions are any actions that are altered or practiced due to the behaviour of others. Giddens (1979) refers to a person's ability to alter their place in the social structure as a person's 'reflexivity'.

This concept can be used to help understand why students make the curricular decisions that they make when selecting the subjects that they want to study. In theory students have freedom to choose any subject options that they would like to learn. However, in practice, despite the wide variety of different options available to students, a significant number select similar combinations of subject options, this could be as a result of social structure impacting on the students. For instance, a student may choose a subject on account of others such as their parents, but also the school if there is, for example, a prioritisation of the EBacc.

Bourdieu's (1986) theories of habitus, field and capital develop the structure and agency debate further. Bourdieu refers to 'habitus' as being the tastes, dispositions and ways of thinking and

interacting that are embodied by individuals. He also describes how a research participant exists within their 'field' which is an evolving set of roles and relationships within a social domain. In the educational context, within which this research study is based, this could refer to the power structures that exist in a school between a teacher and a student. Within the 'field' there are various forms of 'capital' such as economic capital, symbolic capital, social capital and cultural capital. Economic capital refers to money and is the most common form of capital. Social capital refers to connections that a person may have within and between social networks, which provide individuals with support. In schools some students have more social capital than others depending on their social networks. Symbolic capital refers to resources that a person may have which incur honour and prestige. Finally, cultural capital refers to forms of knowledge, skills and education that a person has which are valued by society, and that these different capitals can be resources which help individuals advance in status in a given field.

In educational research, cultural capital is the form of capital that is most often referred to. Parents' behaviour and attitude to life, both consciously and subconsciously, provide their children with cultural capital, which gives them better opportunities to succeed in the educational system (Reay, 2004). It has been argued that the field of formal education is structured in such a way so as to place greater value on certain forms of knowledge, skills and education which are associated with a middle class habitus (Tzanakis, 2011). A consequence of this is that the lower and working classes therefore may have less cultural capital than is necessary to succeed in fields where cultural capital associated with middle class families is more highly valued such as higher education (ibid). Bourdieu's theory therefore plays a key role in this research project which considers what impact both a young person's family and their socio-economic status have on the curricular decisions that they make.

Hodkinson (2007) considers the theories of Bourdieu regarding agency and structure by suggesting that a successful theory of learning needs to address the division between the

individual and the social and therefore the split between structure and agency. Hodkinson clearly states that no one individual can be labelled as being influenced by agency or structure. Instead all are influenced by both their individual motivations (agency) and their social environment (structure) with conclusions as to which element is most influential being judged on a weighting towards agency or structure, rather than a clear 'black and white' labelling.

A person influenced by the structured environment around them could still have some agency to express their own wants and motivations. In fact, those people who make decisions and take action whilst acting with agency are often doing so within a structured environment. This could easily apply to school students who are making curricular decisions that will impact on their futures, but within a structured school environment that, ultimately, will only allow for certain agentic decisions to be made. For example, a 'less academic' student in a school may make a choice to study one programme over another, but if this less academic student is choosing to pursue a programme of study that is perceived to be of less academic rigour, then this is likely to reinforce the perception between more and less academic subjects. Hodkinson adds that any such actions or decisions made acting with agency are in fact likely to contribute to any on-going development or reinforce any existing structure.

Bourdieu's theory can also be linked to the theory that cultures are created within schools. If we consider 'culture' as being 'a particular way of life' then all schools in one form or another create a school culture that is likely to impact on and influence students' curricular choices. As might be attributed to Bourdieu, culture is created by the valuing of social, symbolic and cultural capital. For example, in England many secondary schools have a specialist status specific to a subject area within the school, such as languages, arts or sciences, for example. If a school were to have a specialist status in languages then it feasible that students could be influenced, by the culture created within that school, to pursue a language subject as one of their curricular choices. It is likely that such a culture would be created by a wide variety of factors including an

increased number of course places to study a language, an increased number of language specialist teachers and modern, well equipped and appealing specialist classrooms. Other factors, such as a school's historical exam success in languages and an emphasis from school leadership that studying a language will support applications for further and higher education in the future could influence students further. There are further additional factors that could also influence a student's curricular choices regarding choosing to study a language, such as the opportunity to be involved in a school trip abroad or a student exchange programme. Even more subtle factors, such as different 'national cuisine days' in the school canteen and extracurricular language clubs and competitions could influence the curricular choices of many students and impact on their decision to study a foreign language. These are ways in which schools can demonstrate the attributes and cultures that they value.

It is, however, interesting to note that this creation of school cultures is not in fact a one-way process and that just as individuals are produced, changed and reproduced by cultures, so are cultures produced, changed and reproduced by individuals (McCrone *et al*, 2005). Cultures therefore are both structured and structuring the actions of individuals, very much like the actions those of the students of this study, are neither totally pre-determined nor are they totally free. McCrone *et al*. (2005) reinforced this theory by conducting a research study and concluding that both individual factors and school provision and context play a part in the curricular decision making process of students during Key Stage 3.

Regardless of the culture of a school the choices of individuals will depend on how those individuals interpret that context. Research completed by White (2007) investigated some of the main reasons why students in Year 9 select the subjects that they choose. The core of his research is based on student interviews and the results suggest that the main reason why students make the choices they do are because of enjoyment in a particular subject area. This is followed by liking a particular teacher or teacher's methods and choosing a subject that they are

likely to achieve well in based on some previous success. Factors such as the enjoyment of a subject or the value given to particular subjects, appeared to have been subject to only a limited amount of research to date.

In an ideal situation students would make considered curricular choices based on their futures and what they want to do and what they want to achieve. It may be the case that students have different interpretations of the importance of the choices that they make when compared to their teachers or it could be that they are unable to see how the choices that they make at the end of Key Stage 3 link with any future plans. Young people unable to see the importance of the curricular choices that they are making could fit neatly in to the 'mind-set profiles' as identified by the SHM report (2005) referred to earlier within this chapter. Both the "indecisive worriers" and the "short term conformists" are 'mind-set profiles' that would fit with such student experiences. If either of these points is in fact the case then there must be serious questions asked about the quality and content of the information, advice and guidance that students are receiving.

2.4 Supports and Structures Related to Curricular Choices

2.4.1 Curricular and Careers Guidance Policy

Advising and guiding students is a key element of educational policy. Issue Paper Number 5 of the Nuffield Review (2008) describes guidance as being 'like the oil that makes the education and training system work effectively'. Appropriate and accurate guidance helps young people to ensure that they are making the correct curricular decisions and that they are on the 'right' courses that are most likely to engage them and help them to fulfil their potential.

Policy dictates that the approach to curricular decision making takes a predominately 'standard' form in secondary schools across England, particularly regarding the way that school students and their parents are informed about the different options that a student has available to them. The majority of schools start the choices process for their pupils during Year 9 by informing the

students of the subject choices available to them when they move in to Year 10. This information focuses on the content of the different subjects and the design of the different qualifications, but also includes information about the different pathways that the different subject choices can lead to in the future. This is generally communicated to students and their parents initially by means of printed literature. Later, in a more formal setting, such as an open evening or an assembly, students and parents will attend a presentation by a senior staff member of the school about the curricular options process.

Some schools start the decision making process when students are in Year 8. Other schools repeat the decision making process more than once, sometimes twice, and sometimes three times during a student's time in secondary school, as a student is allowed to change the direction of their studies throughout their time at school if their interests or motivation changes.

The majority of the responsibility to provide students with guidance lies with schools. To try and ensure that schools across England and Wales provide students with quality, consistent, responsible and impartial guidance the DCSF published national quality standards for young people's IAG (Information, Advice and Guidance) in 2010. These guidelines clearly set out the expectations for the services expected to be provided in all secondary schools across England.

Appendix (i) is an extract from the DCSFs guidance handbook on IAG entitled Quality, Choice and Aspiration – A Strategy for Young People's Information, Advice and Guidance, and it provides an example of the guidelines that school staff are provided with when working with students making curricular choices.

The policy exists to try and standardise the quality of the information, advice and guidance that is provided to students and their parents. In principle this is intended to ensure that all students across the country are receiving guidance of the same standard. However, a standardised approach to the decision making process is not necessarily suitable for all schools and could create problems. Problems could arise with a standardised approach to guidance due to the

differences that exist between different schools and the different communities that they serve. A 'one size fits all' approach that does not acknowledge the differences between schools in different communities across the country is unlikely to provide students with personalised advice and guidance.

The extract that I have included in Appendix (i) highlights what the DCSFs IAG policy should provide for students in England. However, this document informs the reader little of how to achieve this. The extract was taken from one page of what is a 52 page document with the majority of those 52 pages being a combination of anecdotal case studies highlighting the benefits of good IAG and directing young people where they can go to access different sources of information. However, for school staff, this advice is designed only to provide guidance as generally student's questions, concern and queries are individual and can be quite varied. Hence staff member's skills, training and experience are vital. It is possible to conclude that the issues concerning providing accurate and suitable information, advice and guidance may be much more complicated and complex than policy assumes.

Blenkinsop and Morris (2006: 2) summarised what actions a school should take in order to provide the best possible opportunities for students to make effective decisions at school, which are:

- Provide clear and detailed information about the different options available

- Provide impartial advice about subjects

- Provide informal support

- Provide sufficient time between presenting the offer and the deadline for decisions to enable them to make informed choices

- Provide taster sessions for both Key Stage 4 and post-16 courses

In order for the choices process to be successful it is essential that students are given quality guidance to support their decision making regarding their curricular choices. Marson-Smith *et al* (2006) conducted research in to the support that exists in secondary schools for young people making curricular decisions. This research emphasised strongly that each of the parties invited to be involved in the process, including guidance professionals/careers advisors, teachers and parents/carers, all have a significant role to play in the process of helping students to make informed decisions.

For this reason it is necessary to ensure that all parties involved in advising and guiding students do so using information that is accurate and unbiased. However, the speed and frequency of change in English secondary schools in current years means that the range of subject choices that are available to students very rarely remains the same year on year. Therefore, as the information that an IAG counsellor is providing to students will only be as accurate as they in turn are provided with, it is essential that they are kept fully up to date with all the different subject and policy changes that occur each year. A better understanding by guidance professionals, of the ways that students make their curricular choices, will assist those who support students to make the most appropriate selections.

2.4.2 <u>Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)</u>

Writing in the Nuffield Review of Education and Training, Foskett (2004: 1) confirmed the important role that providing appropriate Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) to young people is, describing it as 'unquestionable in its importance'.

In the White Paper, *Learning to Succeed* (1999), the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) identified that 'a lack of quality appropriate support concerning careers education and careers guidance may significantly contribute to their failure of young people to fulfil their potential' (Wilson *et al*, 2004: 4). Learning to Succeed (1999) described the quality of careers education and guidance in England as being 'patchy' and that the systems concerning funding,

planning and quality management were 'too complex, too inconsistent and too confusing' (Wilson *et al*, 2004: 5).

In 2000 careers education and guidance in England changed with the introduction of the government's Connexions service. When the Connexions service was established, funding that had previously been held by local authorities, was handed back to the UK central government to fund the national programme, aimed at providing young people with a 'one stop shop', for all their curricular and other advice needs. The Connexions service was established following changes to the Learning and Skills Act, to provide young people aged 13-19 with impartial information, advice and guidance regarding career options and learning pathways.

In addition to advice and guidance about careers and education routes, young people could also find sources of advice on other topics, such as housing, health, relationships, drugs and finance. Connexions centres were to be found in all major cities in England, with several centres within each Local Authority. The staff of the Connexions centres were known as Connexions Personal Advisers and were trained to offer impartial, and practical, advice. Many Connexions centres were located within large secondary schools and advisers from the centre would visit other secondary schools in the Local Authority. Due to logistics it was a challenge for students of the different secondary schools of an area to benefit from equal access to a Connexions Personal Adviser. Likewise, a school where a Connexions centre was based nearby could often obtain a disproportionate benefit from the ample amount of access available to an adviser.

One of the reasons why the Connexions service was introduced was to try and address the inconsistencies in practice and quality of guidance provided in secondary schools, whilst providing a service to support young people aged 13-19 through their time in education and beyond in to adulthood.

By 2003 there were 5,780 Personal Advisers employed by the Connexions service, 80% of which were trained to NVQ Level 4 or equivalent and more than half a million young people were

identified as being in support of careers advice from an allocated Personal Adviser. This worked

out as an average case-load of 92 young people in need of such support for each advisor. In a

National Audit Office (NAO) report Bourne (2004) commented:

> *"If Connexions operated to the caseloads that were deemed to be manageable at the pilot*
>
> *stage, they would require in excess of 15,000 Personal Advisers…Connexions does not have*
>
> *the financial resources to employ this number of Personal Advisers" (Bourne, 2004: 8)*

The NAO report (Bourne, 2004) concluded:

> *"This places more pressure on schools and colleges to play their role in providing good quality*
>
> *advice to young people who are still in education" (Bourne, 2004: 8).*

> *"Many schools do not have the capacity to play their part in providing good quality, impartial*
>
> *careers advice that will enable young people to make learning and career choices" (Bourne,*
>
> *2004: 8).*

The findings of the NAO report (Bourne, 2004) were supported by Tomlinson in Morris (2004)

who commented:

> *"While the Connexions service has succeeded in meeting the objectives it was set, it is likely*
>
> *that the objectives themselves will need to be revisited if the demand for more and better*
>
> *guidance is to be met" (Tomlinson in Morris, 2004: 8).*

With so many different formal and informal parties involved in a student's curricular options

process it was of particular interest to this research study as to which mediator in this process is

having the most influence on a student's curricular choices. Hodkinson *et al* (1996) highlighted

how the work of staff members such as careers officers and Connexions advisers (now

discontinued, see sub-section 2.4.3) was seen as being central to the procedure of proving

effective information, advice and guidance to students in relation to their career opportunities.

Whilst, in circumstances regarding planning for the future and careers guidance subject teachers

were often alienated and marginalised. Hodkinson *et al* (1996) described how students were confident that careers guidance officers would provide neutral advice, unlike subject teachers more closely linked to the school who could be suspected of following a path required by the school. Foskett (2004) however, suggested that students experiencing the selection process, particularly for the first time, are now taking greater value in guidance provided by their friends and families, rather than that provided by trained professionals. The relevance of this is that it sets a precedent for the role of an advisor which is different from a subject teacher.

Foskett also found that existing studies that focus on the content and information provided to students to help them make informed decisions could in fact be guilty of neglecting other influencing details such as trends, lifestyle and 'fashionability' of certain curricular choices that course information and programme literature does not satisfy. In light of this, my research considered the various potential influences, such as 'fashionability'.

Despite the majority of responsibility lying with schools to provide students with appropriate guidance in making the best curricular choices, it is difficult to anticipate which people a student is likely to seek advice from. Marson-Smith *et al* (2009) believe that many young people differ in the choice of person from whom they seek guidance when they are making curricular decisions. For this reason the research I conducted considered how young people in different schools are influenced and therefore will provide those responsible for providing IAG with a better understanding of which factors they should be aware of that can influence the curricular choices that students make. By understanding such factors those working to advise young people in schools would be able to provide better, more relevant and more appropriate, information, advice and guidance.

2.4.3 <u>Careers Education</u>

Careers education plays an important role in helping young people make choices about their futures. Bates (1990) suggested that as educational policy is being dictated by existing social

structures in England and the emergence of new industries and work opportunities, commonly referred to as 'new vocationalism', it is necessary that careers education and guidance is designed and implemented alongside the development of any curriculum.

In 1993, following the Trades Union and Employment Reform Act, arrangements were made by the Department for Education and Employment (DfE) for students' careers services in England to be led by independent companies who would have a statutory obligation to provide careers guidance services to all young people, aged between 16 and 21 who are not in higher education.

In 1994 this age range was extended to include those from age 13. The age of 13 was chosen as this was the age that young people in England first began to consider their free subject choices for examination during secondary school (Morris *et al*, 2001). Also in 1994 the Careers Library Initiative was introduced to improve the provision of careers information, with a specific focus on the use of computers and careers software to support guidance in schools.

Although the careers service had a statutory obligation to provide careers guidance to 13-21 year olds it was not until the Education Act 1997 that Local Authority schools were required to provide a careers education programme and impartial careers information.

A government White Paper published in 1997 called *Excellence in Schools* identified careers education and guidance as being a key factor in the government strategy for promoting higher standards of education and improved schools (Wagg and Pilcher, 2014). However, despite the guidance of the Education Act 1997, and the findings of the *Excellence in Schools* White Paper, the majority of schools focused the attention of their careers education towards increasing pupils' attainment in the core and foundation subject areas of the National Curriculum. The reasoning for this may be linked to the necessity to achieve success in secondary school in order to maintain a variety of career options in the future. However, the reason for such advice may also be as a result of the strong emphasis on school performance league tables. In addition, the pressures and timetable constraints of the school experience, may outweigh the need for

improved careers education programmes and, in comparison to satisfying these practical needs, careers education could suffer.

Research in to the delivery of careers education, completed by Morris *et al* (2001), reported that 40% of schools involved in their study suggested that there had been a positive change in teachers' attitudes towards careers education over the last three years.

In the 1990s, despite being an entitlement of every student, careers education was highly variable in practice and quality (Morris *et al*, 2000). The universal entitlement and provision of careers education and impartial careers guidance for all school pupils was seen by many as being a strength of the education system. However, there was a lack of consistency concerning the standard and quality of careers education provision. In 1999, following the 'refocusing agenda' of the careers service, at the time the Connexions service was introduced as previously discussed, in response to a growing emphasis on social inclusion, the universal entitlement of careers education and guidance was brought in to question. Whilst the entitlement of careers education for all remained, those working in careers services were required to focus their work on young people who deemed to be 'most in need'. As a result careers education became targeted towards particular groups of students rather than whole cohorts (Morris *et al*, 2000).

During the late 1990s many schools held a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards careers education and guidance and, during a period of pressure led by the pursuit of performance league table position, the majority of schools did not have the specialist capacity to provide high quality careers education and guidance. In more than 400 schools, of the 580 involved in a study by the National Audit Office (NAO) declared that careers education and guidance was delivered by staff without any formal qualifications in the area (Bourne, 2004). Whilst more than half of the schools in the study indicated that they did not have sufficient time to incorporate careers education in to the school's curriculum.

The National Audit Office summarised their findings by stating that:

"Not all 13-19 year olds may have access to the good quality advice they need to make

informed decisions on career and further education options" (Bourne, 2004: 9).

Government spending cuts have resulted in significantly fewer schools being able to provide students with easy access to a careers guidance officer. Now that specialist careers guidance has been removed from many secondary schools across England, students are instead relying on advice from their teachers or on informal advice from friends and family to help them make curricular decisions.

These cuts occurred despite research showing the benefits of careers guidance. During a research study conducted by Morris *et al* (2000) a case study of a girls grammar school produced clear evidence that a comprehensive careers education and guidance programme contributed to an improvement in GCSE results. Another, much larger scale study, conducted by Morris and Rutt (2003) identified the important role that a quality careers education and guidance programme can have on student aspirations. The study involved more than 2000 students who participated first during Year 11 and then again after they had successfully began their studies at Post 16. The research study found that one particular key factor that saw students develop a positive attitude towards Higher Education was the extent and quality of the information, advice and guidance that students received whilst at school.

"The key factor that seemed to underpin successful transition at 16 was the level of young

people's career-exploration skills. Those who demonstrated such skills by the end of Year 11

were the least likely to have made significant changes to their courses, post-16, and were

more likely to have made a transition that indicated progression" (Morris et al., 2003: 8).

Morris (2004: 4) found that students with a high level of 'career-exploration' skills were:

- Less likely to drop out of their selected programmes of study at Post 16

- Most likely to be on a programme of study that would lead to a higher level qualification

- More likely to have an accurate self-awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses

- Most likely to feel that they made the right selection of programme of study

On the other hand students with lower levels of 'career exploration' skills were more likely to switch courses or even drop-out of Post 16 education or training altogether.

Wade *et al* (2011) reinforce the suggestion made by Morris (2004) that students need to develop their self-awareness, decision making skills and their broader awareness of the world of work. Wade *et al* (2011) advise that students develop these skills and levels of awareness before they receive careers education and guidance and goes on to make a series of recommendations as to how schools could support students in this way and develop a more generic skills set.

Morris (2004: 5) suggested that schools could:

- Help young people develop a clear and realistic self-image of their abilities

- Help young people to relate their strengths and skills realistically to the world beyond their time in school

- Develop students' research skills through structured exercises that actively engage young people in careers research

- Develop the process by which gain access to accurate and factual information about the different opportunities beyond their time in school, instead of simply providing them with access to the information

Morris (2004) also suggested that whilst activities such as 'individual research activities' will help students to develop their careers research, such activities in isolation were ineffective. Morris (2004) concluded by suggesting that different activities could be classified as 'important', 'very important' and 'essential' to developing effective career exploration skills. Morris (2004: 6) presented these results in the table on the following page:

Activities and contexts	Self-awareness	Careers exploration skills	Opportunity awareness	Factual knowledge	Transition skills	Decision making skills
Range of CEG activities		*	*		**	*
Individual discussions	**	**	**	**	*	**
Work with teachers	*	*	*		*	*
Work with careers advisers		*	*	*	*	
Individual research activities	*	***	*	*	*	*
Specialist input				*	*	

Figure 6 – The Importance of Different Activities in Careers Education

* 'important' ** 'very important' *** 'essential'

Source: (Morris, 2004: 6)

In order for students to gain a 'head start' over their peers, Morris (2004) recommended that students should have access to all the advice as prioritised in this table. Morris (2004: 6-7) suggested therefore that all students:

- Have individual discussions about their future

- Where possible have access to ICT guidance materials

- Participate in careers education and guidance activities provided by trained staff

- Begin careers education and guidance programmes earlier in to their secondary education

- Benefit from a two way sharing of information between schools and careers support professionals

In 2004, despite such detailed recommendations as those by Morris *et al*, UK central government policy remained unspecific although careers guidance is recognised as important. The UK central government commissioned Lord Leitch to undertake an independent review of the long term skill requirement in the UK. The review aimed to identify the optimal mix of skills required by 2020 to maximise economic growth, productivity and social justice in the UK. One of the main recommendations of the Leitch Review (2004) was to develop a new universal adult careers service.

A government White Paper published in 2005 called 'Skills: Getting on in Business, Getting on at Work' (2005: 5), put further emphasis on a universal entitlement to careers guidance for all young people in England. The core output of the review was summarised as being 'to support individuals in achieving their ambitions, through better information and guidance to identify the best options for them in terms of jobs, skills and training'.

Since the start of this research study the Connexions service is no longer a national service following changes implemented by the UK central government which was elected in 2010 as a

Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition. The Connexions service was intended to provide young people with a 'one stop shop' for all their advice needs, however Bennett (2012) noted that some young people were unclear about the role and function of the Connexions service. Bennett (2012) described how Connexions Personal Advisers were trained to offer confidential advice and practical help relating to a wide range of issues and that, as a result, Connexions staff felt that they were a 'jack of all trades, master of none'. Many ex-career guidance professionals in particular became concerned that the increased remit of their role was detrimental to their expertise and knowledge in matters of career guidance. Bennett (2012), however, does acknowledge that young people who did interact with the Connexions service were generally positive about their experiences.

Where in parts of the country the Connexions service is still in place this is as a result of a decision made by local councils to continue using the Connexions 'branding'. However, in many parts of the country the Connexions service no longer exists. In April 2012 a new initiative of the UK central government stated (Gov UK, 2012) that there would be no expectation that local authorities should provide a careers advice service for young people once the government's new careers service, the National Careers Service, is in place.

The National Careers Service that was launched in April 2012 has an informative website (http://www.nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk) and makes available a wide variety of interactive resources that provide young people with information, advice and guidance concerning their education options and will help those leaving education to find employment. In addition to the website there is a telephone helpline for students that schools can direct them towards. In the main, the website, and telephone helpline, has replaced a face to face service for young people in education that, perhaps due to the austerity measures put in place by the UK central government following the global economic crisis in 2009, was no longer an affordable option for the government to maintain.

Figure 7 – National Careers Service

Source: (National Careers Service, 2015)

Students in the age range considered here, 14-16, are perhaps more likely to benefit from a web based interface than previous generations and perhaps the move to a web-based facility is more beneficial.

However, during a study of the changes in IAG provision in the UK Hibbert (2010) identified significant scepticism concerning the new changes following the introduction of the National Careers Service:

> "I don't think anyone of that age (14-16) will try to use it particularly if they have to telephone".

> "...because you know them...you can give accurate information...it's that personal knowledge that you lose completely with a national system".

> "...most of the young people we spoke to said they would prefer to access IAG 'face-to-face' rather than over the internet or email".

In evaluating the newly formed National Careers Service Bowes *et al* (2013) identified that customer's rate the National Careers Service highly, however awareness of the service is low. Bowes *et al* (2013) also identified opportunities to improve the awareness and use of the online and telephone channels in particular. Perceptions of the cost of the telephone helpline and a lack of skills and confidence in using the internet were particular barriers that could be addressed.

2.4.3.1 <u>Recent Developments in Careers Education</u>

One of the recommendations that Morris (2004) made when considering how careers education and guidance could be improved was to introduce careers education programmes earlier in a student's secondary education. In a recent study published by the National Foundation for Educational Research, Wade (2010) agrees with the suggestion of Morris (2004) and recommends that an impartial careers education and guidance programme should begin when students are in Year 8. The report from the National Foundation for Educational Research argues that due to recent changes in the educational landscape engaging students, and their parents, with a programme of information, advice and guidance earlier will better enable learners to make informed decisions. With the introduction of Free Schools and Academies, together with new and alternative qualifications, school specialisms and different learning pathways, the need for a suitably in-depth careers education and guidance programme has perhaps never been more important. However, for schools to successfully implement a programme of information, advice and guidance with such detail it is suggested that the process should be more independent and begin earlier during a student's secondary education.

A study by Wade *et al* (2011) suggested that a failure to provide students with careers education and guidance early enough in their secondary education can lead to students making subject selection decisions based on incomplete or inaccurate information.

Although Wade *et al* (2011) suggested introducing careers education and guidance to students in Year 8 an interesting research study considered the benefits of introducing careers education even earlier to primary students during Key Stage 2 when they are in Year 6. The research study in question was a pilot programme called 'the career-related learning pathfinder' conducted in seven different Local Authorities in 2010 (Wade *et al*, 2011: 1).

The main aims of the project were to:

- Increase pupils' awareness of career opportunities

- Increase pupils' understanding of the link between education and career opportunities

- Reduce gender specific career stereotypes

- Engage parents in the careers education process

A further report by Wade *et al* (2011) on 14-19 Diplomas revealed that many students received 'back-to-front' information, advice and guidance. For example, students who expressed an interest in a particular subject area then received specific information about a suitable Diploma programme that matched the students' interests, instead of receiving information first about Diplomas and then considering which Diploma subject area appealed to them. A student in this position, despite their interest in a particular subject area, may find once their chosen programme of study has started that a 14-19 Diploma was not the most suitable course for them and this is a situation that could be avoided with appropriate information, advice and guidance.

One of the aims of the 'pathfinder' project was to reduce gender specific stereotypes and the evaluation of the project suggests that not only did students show a decrease in stereotypical thinking but that they also demonstrated improved perceptions of the effectiveness that careers education and guidance can provide. Students also showed an increased understanding of the different sources of advice that they could make use of when making choices about their education or careers in the future. In addition the students involved in the project demonstrated improved teamwork skills, self-independence and self-awareness. This final point, despite not

being directly linked to careers education and guidance, could help students significantly in the future. Morris (2004) stated that students with higher levels of self-awareness are much more likely to make successful education and career choices than those students with lower levels of self-awareness. This therefore reinforces the work of Wade *et al* (2011) regarding introducing careers education and guidance at a younger age.

Wade *et al* (2011) summarise that young people make decisions in different ways and at different paces and benefit when given time to digest information provided by careers education and guidance and better understand what this information can mean for them regarding their subject choices and the different pathways these choices can lead to.

Another recommendation came from the work of Tomlinson (2004) who compliments that of Morris (2004). Tomlinson (2004) recommended that all young people need access to personalised careers planning, individual reviews and informative guidance to inform their choices. Tomlinson (2004) suggested that all teachers, trainers, advisory services and others are provided with the knowledge and training necessary to help young people make the choices that are right for them.

However, Tomlinson (2004) also acknowledged that extending the availability of support, particularly from teachers would have significant workload and resource implications which would have to be adequately addressed before providing information, advice and guidance could approach the levels of quality needed as described by Tomlinson (2004).

2.5 Wider Social and Economic Context

Wider social and economic influences play a large role in a young person's life and are likely to influence their approach to everything, including the curricular choices that they make at school.

A dated, but interesting study completed by Floud *et al* (1956) compared the secondary education experiences of two case study groups, one from a school in South West Hertfordshire

and one from a school in Middlesbrough, North Yorkshire. This was one of the few examples available of a direct comparison of student experience during secondary school. The experiences of the students' parents are particularly interesting. The study identifies that the students at the school in the more privileged area in South West Hertfordshire experienced a greater number of opportunities with regard to successfully obtaining grammar school places in comparison with students from the school in Middlesbrough. However, what was most interesting was that the study found that the parents' aspirations for their children were similar in both regions, with both sets of parents equally as hopeful that their children would be offered a place at grammar school. The report goes on to say that many families from the lower classes made significant sacrifices on behalf of their children's education. From this we can see that the claim often made that poor children and their families lack aspiration is, at least, debatable. However, we are left without reasonable explanations for the lack of social mobility among the poor and reasons why we continue to see patterns of attainment and entry to Higher Education by social class (Ball *et al*, 2000).

Carter-Wall and Whitfield (2012) were able to bring this issue up to date when they conducted a research study to better understand whether levels of attainment were influenced by a household's income. They discovered that although generally the educational gap between the richest and poorest children has started to fall over the last decade, the gap at GCSE level remains large, with the latest DfE figures indicating that pupils eligible for free school meals are almost half as likely to achieve five or more A*–C grades at GCSE as those who were not eligible (30.9% compared with 58.5%). A report published by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) in 2001 reported that in the majority of OECD countries, the top 10% of household incomes grew faster than those of the poorest 10%. Across the different OECD countries the average income of the richest 10% of the population is approximately nine times greater than that of those who make up the poorest 10%. Such occurrences widen income inequality and further reinforce the gap between rich and poor.

Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) suggest that unequal societies almost always do worse than more equal societies in regard to just about every social problem measurement. Unequal societies produce more teenage pregnancies, higher imprisonment rates, more obesity and less trust. Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) also highlight children's educational performance as being a key area that suffers particularly in societies where inequality is evident.

There are a number of explanations for such disparities, for example the OECD (2011) suggests a number of theories and points towards how the rise in household incomes and the issues of income inequality became most evident during periods of sustained economic growth. This then begs the question as to why, during a period of sustained economic growth, from 1997 to 2008, not everybody benefited equally and instead why income inequality became more of an issue.

The report suggested that one possible theory is that changes in traditional family formation and household structures have had an impact on household earnings and income inequality. This is of particular interest to me as one of my research questions considers the impact that a young person's family has on their curricular choices. I was interested to know more about whether the formation and 'design' of a young person's family has an impact on the choices that they make. Therefore during my study, as part of the analysis of my research data, I considered the makeup of each young person's family. I considered whether each student lives within a traditional family unit with both parents or whether there is a different family formation as a result of a 'broken family', such as a single parent family or the introduction of 'step parents', as well as considering the role that older or younger siblings could have on the family formation and in turn the choices that the young people participating in my research study make.

In addition to the work completed by Carter-Wall and Whitfield, Reay (2007) conducted a research study that included the issue of parental influence on a child's education and used a comparison of privileged parents and less privileged parents, further reinforcing that those students from more privileged backgrounds were more likely to succeed at school. In a student

focused study based predominately on existing literature and quantitative research data, Barber and Eccles (1992) supported this further still by suggesting that family demographics are an influential factor in a young person's development and educational achievement.

Lareau (2003) reveals an interesting perspective, which pertains to the level of influence a child's parents believe they can have upon their children's education based upon their own class and social standing. Similar to the findings of Floud et al (1956) Lareau sees working class and lower class parents as no less eager than middle class parents with regard to wanting to see their children succeed in school, but instead states that parents from different classes take different approaches in helping their children to reach their goals. Parents from the lower classes are often much more fearful of doing 'the wrong thing' with regard to school related matters and tend to be much more respectful to educators than those parents from the middle classes. Those parents from lower classes are deferential and less demanding, whereas those from the middle classes are much more likely to try and advise educators. This issue of parental involvement can also be expected to be prevalent in discussions regarding a student's curricular decisions with different students experiencing different levels of parental involvement in the decision making process.

Although most researchers allow some scope for individual choice young people's social backgrounds are generally powerful predictors of their educational and employment futures. The work of Pierre Bourdieu is often referred to by the accounts of the role played by education in social reproduction, particularly in relation to choice of different education options. Bourdieu's theory is summarised by Sullivan (2001) as follows:

"Success in the education system is facilitated by the possession of cultural capital and of higher class habitus. Lower class pupils do not in general possess these traits, so the failure of the majority of these pupils is inevitable. This explains class inequalities in educational attainment" (Sullivan, 2001: 144).

Sullivan (2001) focused on the educational elements of this theory by identifying three key stages that influence the 'reproduction' of people's social structures. Firstly, there is a direct influence from parents to their children on their culture with regard to all manner of factors regarding how they live their lives. Secondly, one of the key factors that this influences will be the children's educational credentials, which will be supported, or hindered, depending upon the environment created by their parents. Finally, these educational credentials are in turn a major mechanism for further social reproduction, further reinforcing how important a child's parents are in their formative years and, therefore, throughout their education.

The research of Sullivan (2001) focuses on the role of student's parents and although I acknowledge that a young person's parents can influence the curricular decisions that a student makes, the parents are not the only influencing factor. Rather a student's parents are just part of the wider picture and one of several factors that could affect the decisions that a young person makes concerning their education.

Another area concerns levels of expectations and whether students from more privileged backgrounds expect more from their time in education. Hodkinson (2007) states that individuals always operate within a system of expectations built upon a combination of the expectations that they bring to any situation or environment and expectations that others have for their activities and practices.

This theory can be linked to the issue of self-efficacy and the level of self-efficacy that the young people involved in my research study have. Bandura (1997) refers to self-efficacy as the extent that a person judges their own capabilities to achieve. This therefore is interesting when considering the choices that students from different backgrounds make and the expectations that they have to succeed. Therefore, I am interested to better understand the link between the choices that young people make and the level of self-efficacy that the students in this research study have. This issue can be closely linked with the theory of agency (see sub-section 2.3.6) and

the extent that a person is able to influence the events in their life. It is reasonable to suggest that the greater amount of agency that a person has the greater their level of self-efficacy will be. Bandura (1997) however warns that the extent of an individual's personal agency varies depending on the nature and modifiability of their environment.

The theory of agency can also be linked with the work of Boudon (1974) who raises the issue of inequality of educational opportunity. Inequality of educational opportunity refers to the differences in educational attainment that a young person may experience as a consequence of their social background. He then links the issue of inequality of educational opportunity with the issue of inequality of social mobility. Inequality of social mobility refers to the differences in social achievement that a young person may experience as a result of their social background. He summarises that the child of a doctor, solicitor or other professional is likely to have more educational and social success than the child of parents who work as manual labourers or who are unemployed, given their different environments and experiences of social achievements.

These theories can also be linked to social inequality and in particular the work of Dorling (2010) who researched the reasons why social inequality still exists. The work of Dorling (2010) suggests that injustice is more of a problem today than it ever has been before because the gap between those people in society who succeed and who hold power and those people in society who achieve less and who hold less power is increasing and has never been so wide. Dorling (2010) claims that the five principles of elitism are that elitism is efficient, that exclusion is necessary, that prejudice is natural, that greed is good and that despair is inevitable. He goes on to link this with children's educational experiences and says that although many of the powerful in society hold desires to make conditions of life less painful for others they do not believe that there is a remedy for such injustices. Instead they believe that a small few children who are sufficiently able to be fully and successfully educated and only these few will be able to govern in the future, whereas the rest of society will be required to be led. It is clear that such theories reinforce the

notion that some are destined to achieve and succeed in life whereas others are anticipated and expected to achieve less. However, in a society where a National Curriculum is designed to provide opportunities for all, such pre-ordained outcomes for school children are pertinent to my own research study. One of my research questions considers how the injustices associated with socio-economic status impact on a young person's curricular choices and is closely linked to the issue of expectation. I am also interested in how the wider context influences choices, even if indirectly through school policies such as the EBacc.

Dorling (2010) also makes a claim that the modern education system is responsible for the rise of a 'new elitism'. He says that due to the way that educational provision has been unequally distributed we now have more school children classified as 'elite' who are destined to achieve in life. As a consequence we therefore also have more school children recognised as belonging to a group that is likely not to achieve in life. Dorling (2010) points towards today's neat and orderly methods for ranking and placing people in order based on a number, a score, an exam result, a credit rating or an occupation to define an individual's social position. As a result Dorling states that one seventh of all school children in England could be classified as 'delinquents' and claims that such a label is no more stigmatising than today's more acceptable label of 'less able'. Linked with the issue of expectations I was keen to investigate further this issue of stigma and better understand what impact young people with certain stigmas, particularly relating to where they are from, where they go to school, what their parents do, are likely to have on their own educational achievements.

Hayward (2011) also completed a research study focusing on the aspirations of young people classified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). The 'NEET' young people in this study were often described as having 'low aspirations' to succeed or achieve, hence why upon leaving compulsory education they were 'choosing' not to study or to work. Hayward suggests that any lack of aspiration is more often a response to the realities of limited opportunities

rather than the cause of any disengagement. Hayward points towards the recession of the late 2010s and suggests that it is wrong to assume any young person has low aspirations. In my research of three different schools, this literature suggests that expectations and aspirations will differ based on the socio-economic statuses of each school, but a more individual level perspective is needed to understand the many impacting factors that can influence student's choices.

Another study indicates how these choices change over time and the need to look longitudinally at this issue of curricular choice. Kintrea *et al* (2011) completed a research study that examined the aspirations of students aged 13 and then re-visited the same students aged 15 to see how, and if, their aspirations had changed. The results of the research show that at age 13 more than 46% of the students researched wanted to go to university and more than 65% expected to continue their education to 6th form or a Further Education college. This demonstrates that at a relatively young age the students involved in the study had ambitions and aspirations. When Kintrea *et al* returned to interview the students again aged 15 they found that, on average, more than 75% of the students researched had ambitions to go to university. They also found that those who no longer wanted to go to university had revised more realistic, ambitions for their futures. This research was completed in a cross section of secondary schools across England so as to reinforce that neither social standing nor local economic opportunities alone cannot be responsible for a young person having low aspirations.

3.0 <u>Chapter 3</u>

3.1 <u>Research Aims</u>

In preparation for this research study, the reading that I completed suggested that few previous studies had taken a qualitative, holistic approach, to investigate the factors that influence the curricular decisions that students make over a period of time. Most existing studies focus on particular issues such as the socio-economic status of the student's family, the individual's reflexivity, their environment, or the influence that a young person's parents have on curricular decision making. Factors such as a student's enjoyment of a particular subject, or the different value given to particular subjects, appear to have been subject to only a limited amount of research to date.

For this reason the main aim of this study has been to learn more about the factors that influence young people's curricular decisions to bring a new perspective to the field of students' decision making. I sought to achieve this by considering the variety of factors that can influence a student's curricular decisions, over a period of 3 years.

3.2 <u>Research Questions</u>

The overarching research question that I will address is:

> 1.0   How do a sample of students in England, aged 14-16, select curriculum pathways?

To answer this question I will consider three additional sub questions:

> 1.1   To what extent are the curricular decisions of the students influenced by family and friends?

1.2 To what extent are the curricular decisions of the students influenced by their socio-economic status?

1.3 To what extent the curricular decisions of the students influenced by the culture and context of their schools?

I decided to use these research questions, and order them in this particular manner, for a variety of reasons. My first research question 1.0 was an overarching research question to which each of my later research questions will contribute. This question summarises what the research study is about.

Sub question 1.1 considered two of the most significant groups that I anticipated were likely to impact on the curricular decisions that young people make. During their time in secondary school the majority of young people are influenced by their parents, their friends or both. For example, a student whose parents both work in medicine could be influenced to pursue the same vocation. By researching 'to what extent' the students are influenced by these groups I was able to make conclusions as to how and why students are influenced.

Sub question 1.2 considered how both the social and financial position of a student's home environment impacted on the curricular decisions that young people make. The students' socio-economic status is in fact a reflection of the socio-economic status of their parents, therefore this question looked at the influence that such an environment had on a student's decision making and helped me to better understand the findings from sub question 1.1. The examination of socio-economic influence within this study was subtle, however the family environment was also considered so as to provide a more direct look at the possible influence of the students' parents. By investigating the family occupations of the students from each school I was able to make better estimations regarding the socio-economic of students of the different schools. As a result I had a better understanding of how the choices the students made were influenced by their socio-economic status.

Sub question 1.3 considered how the culture and context created by the schools impacted on the choices that students made. For example, in a school that has a science or arts specialism it is likely that students in that school would be influenced by the emphasis that the school puts on these subjects. By considering the different cultures of the schools involved in this research study I was able to consider how influential the environment created by the schools, and therefore the different school cultures, were on the curricular decisions made by the students. This question, along with 1.2 and 1.1 will help to provide a holistic view of the influences on students' curricular choices. The focused question on this topic will involve explicit comparison of school policies and IAG influences which is how school culture will be approximated.

3.3 Quantitative and Qualitative Research Paradigms

There are a number of methods for viewing and researching how society, and particularly education, works and operates and nearly all research within education can be categorised into one of two forms; these are referred to as the qualitative and the quantitative paradigms. The ethical and epistemological foci are somewhat different between the two paradigms.

Qualitative researchers aim to gather an in-depth understanding of human behaviour and the reasons for such human behaviours. They focus on the *why* and the *how* of human behaviour and the decision making processes of humans. It is because of this complexity that research sampling is often focused on smaller and more purposive samples rather large and random samples.

Quantitative researchers on the other hand aim to develop and test mathematical models and hypotheses of natural occurrences with the intention of identifying forms and patterns within their observations.

> *"A paradigm is a perspective based on a set of assumptions, concepts and values that are held by a community or researchers" (Creswell, 2003: 8).*

My research is however entirely qualitative and not quantitative and is therefore focused on human responses, not statistical analysis. It was therefore important that I was aware that the potential exists for qualitative research to be more intrusive than a survey because it may probe deeper in the lives of the students involved.

Although the nature of my research did not place any of the participants at risk, with regards to the potential for trauma or harm to the candidates, it was recognised that there was a possibility that the quality of my research data could have been jeopardised if students were concerned about needing to give the 'right' answers in order to satisfy the researcher, and this was considered at all times.

3.4 <u>Validity and Reliability vs. Trustworthiness</u>

The theory of trustworthiness in educational research refers to, what in the large part, are actually issues of common sense. If the research is honest and thorough and is being completed in an open and unbiased manner then it is likely to be trustworthy. However, the trustworthiness of findings gathered from flexible, qualitative educational research is the subject of much debate and controversy. Inflexible, quantitative educational research relies on two fundamental issues to demonstrate trustworthiness, these are commonly known as validity and reliability. Often researchers who use a fixed, quantitative approach criticise the absence of validity and reliability from flexible, qualitative research. Wainwright (1997) states that qualitative methods of inquiry have often been viewed with ambivalence and a degree of trepidation by researchers concerned with people based research studies.

Whilst the testing of validity and the possibility of direct replication is key to demonstrating trustworthiness within certain research fields, in reality this approach is not always feasible when a flexible, qualitative research design is used. In fact it could be argued that using such a research approach, reliant on demonstrating validity and the ability to repeat the research, would be highly questionable in any research field that involved the study of people, such as

within educational research. As people and educational contexts are dynamic and constantly changing the pursuit of research that could provide direct replication is unrealistic and unreasonable. This view of validity and reliability based on objective reality is not appropriate for my study because validity and reliability normally reflect an objective reality that is problematic and arguable and does not account for interpretations and explanations of students' opinions and reflections.

In contrast Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest that when using a qualitative research design there is little importance of the roles of traditional key fundamentals such as validity and reliability. Wolcott (1994) goes so far as to suggest that some flexible, qualitative researchers reject entirely the theories of validity and reliability within qualitative educational research. Altheide and Johnson (1994) suggest that whilst validity and reliability are underpinning fundamentals of inflexible, quantitative research of natural sciences, criteria such as coherence and consistency are more appropriate standards of flexible, qualitative research studies.

Robson (2002) suggests a series of skills that flexible, qualitative researchers should exercise in order to achieve high quality, coherent and consistent research data. Firstly he suggests researchers must only investigate any topic with a clear and deep understanding of the key issues in a chosen field of interest. Throughout my research I was required to interpret a wide variety of information and by having a firm grasp of the key issues within my research area I was able to ensure that I do not overlook any important details or miss any significant and interesting contradictions whilst also being aware of issues which appear to justify further probing and future research. I am confident in my ability to do this as my employment as an experienced secondary school teacher requires me to be fully up to date with all secondary education developments. Furthermore my involvement in the curricular decision making process of students in the school where I work means that I am familiar with the issues that both schools and students alike need to consider during this process.

The second suggestion that Robson (2002) makes is to ensure that researchers approach a study with a sense of adaptiveness and flexibility. As my research study involves input from many different individuals from three different schools, including the thoughts, reflections and opinions of children, it is essential that I approach my study prepared to be flexible and willing to adapt. This is very important because educational research studies rarely end up developing exactly as planned. For this reason it is required that any researcher is willing to change their plans if something unanticipated occurs. When large changes occur the researcher must be prepared to adapt their research plan significantly. For example, a researcher may identify a topic that they had not considered and should be willing to follow it up, even if it was not in the original plan.

The third suggestion that Robson (2002) makes is to approach all research without bias. Throughout my research preparations I have worked hard to ensure that I will be open to any findings that my research produces. The benefits of coherence and consistency, as well as having a firm grasp of the key issues and being adaptive and flexible will be lost if a research project is approached with any preconceived outcomes. This 'researching with an agenda' involves pursuing a preconceived outcome is likely only to act in producing narrow and short-sighted research study that will be unlikely to benefit from any new and unexpected findings that could develop.

Despite the guidance offered by Robson (2002) it is important not to overlook both sides of the argument that validity and reliability are not important in flexible, qualitative educational research. The concepts of validity and reliability are cornerstones of successful research and for many to suggest that they are not pertinent to qualitative research could imply that qualitative research is neither valid not reliable. Many researchers believe that good research must be concerned with rigor and in order to conduct good rigorous research it must be both valid and reliable. This opinion is shared by Toma (2006) who wrote that for qualitative research to be

trustworthy it needs to be both internally and externally valid. If research is internally valid then the researcher can draw meaningful conclusions from the findings. If research is externally valid then the findings can be generalised and extended to individuals and settings beyond those immediately involved in the study. Toma (2006) suggests that the only way to achieve this is to ensure validity and reliability within your research. Morse (1999) goes so far as to suggest that any research that cannot explain how it is both valid and reliable should not be funded, published, implemented or taken seriously.

In contrast to Morse's (1999) stance, Lincoln and Guba (1985) avoid using the terms validity and reliability entirely by instead using the terms 'credibility', 'transferability', 'dependability' and 'confirmability'. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe 'credibility' as being achieved when the results are seen as believable to the participants. 'Transferability' as when the results can be applied to other contexts. 'Dependability' as when the research demonstrates stability of data over time and 'Confirmability' when the research is free from bias, values and prejudice. However, in attempts to rebrand the core criteria of flexible, qualitative research Lincoln and Guba (1985) may actually have provided support for those such as Morse (1999) who claims that any attempts to rename and disclaim the traditional terms are only drawing attention to the fact that qualitative research is both invalid and unreliable.

Yin (2003) suggests that there are two major trends in the debate about validity and reliability in qualitative research. First he offers the 'exclusive trend' for which the qualitative paradigm is radically different from quantitative paradigm and as a result new language is required to in order to successfully demonstrate validity and reliability. The second trend Yin (2003) suggests is the 'inclusive trend' which argues that the credibility of qualitative research can only be widely accepted if the language of mainstream quantitative research is maintained.

Creswell (2007) proposes how qualitative researchers can embrace the inclusive trend as described by Yin (2003) by satisfying what he describes as 'qualitative validity', 'qualitative

reliability' and 'qualitative generalisation'. Qualitative validity does not have the same meaning as validity in quantitative research but rather is an acknowledgement that the researcher regularly checks the accuracy of their findings by employing adequate risk procedures. Qualitative reliability indicates that the researchers approach is consistent throughout a project. Finally, qualitative generalisation is a term used in a limited manner since the aim of much qualitative research is not to generalise the results but rather to focus particular findings in the context where they occur. I took these issues in to account within my research and used the strategies described by Creswell (2007). The comments from Morse (1999) caused concern that some may question the findings of my research, however Cresswell (2007) satisfied me that replacing the terms of qualitative research successfully embraces them and positively re-interprets them.

Creswell (2007) summarises by suggesting that to achieve qualitative validity researchers should use a series of 8 strategies:

- Triangulation

- Member checking

- Rich, thick descriptions

- Avoidance of research bias

- Negative case analysis

- Prolonged engagement

- Peer debriefing

- External auditing

By following the majority of the points outlined by Creswell (2007) I was able to achieve the qualitative validity required for this research study.

To achieve qualitative reliability Yin (2003) suggests that researchers should carefully document the procedures that they use to complete their research, clearly recording each step in detail.

Gibbs (2007) suggests that to achieve qualitative reliability researchers should regularly check transcripts for mistakes, persistently check the meaning of the codes being used within their chosen coding system and carefully cross check other codes developed by different researchers.

3.5 <u>Methodology</u>

"The significance of the term 'methodology' is that it requires an argument to connect the choice and practice of particular methods to the way that the problem is conceived and the utility and limitations of the outcome. It is in this sense of the term, as requiring a critical justification for the adoption and practice of particular research methods, that we claim that our concern is with 'methodology' rather than with methods alone" (Murray and Lawrence, 2000: 124).

Relying on specific research questions and the literature review, this research study utilised the comparative case study methodology as the most appropriate research design for studying individuals and their choices.

Gillham (2000) introduces case studies as being an investigation of an individual, a group, an institution or a community. Case studies provide a unique example of real people in real situations that enable readers to understand more clearly than by simply presenting them with abstract theories (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Cohen *et al* goes on to explain how case studies can blend quantitative and qualitative and therefore compliment the use of mixed interdisciplinary research methods well. It is the accumulation of data collected via interdisciplinary approaches and then presented through case studies that can establish cause

and effect (how and why) a research subject responds as they do (ibid). It is a key principle underpinning case studies that the researcher sees actions as situated and this is why the case study method involves gathering data about the context, or taking context in to account. In this research I demonstrated this by taking account of the policy context and economic contexts of the schools involved in the study.

Wolcott (2001) makes the observation that, rather than being a strategy for conducting research, case studies are better regarded as being a form of research data reporting. There are number of key advantages to using case studies for this type of data collation. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) describe how case studies can provide a depth of understanding in what is being studied, and because such depth is possible, case studies can be used to engage with issues of complexity. An example of such a complexity could include examining the different interrelationships between the students and their peers, teachers, parents and siblings, etc. Therefore the depth of understanding that a case study creates could allow such interrelationships to be examined. By conducting three case studies, I was able to study the interrelationships that informed curricular choice within different contexts.

Educational research is often designed to simplify what is being investigated, however another strength of argument for using case studies is that they can allow a subject to be strongly related to the experience of the individuals being researched. Hodkinson *et al*. (2001) refers to this as retaining more of the noise of real life that other research methods could miss. This research 'noise' is that which is lost in using other research methods but could turn out to be a highly valuable and significant part of the research participants 'story'.

Case studies are quite unique in that they allow for the examination of the exceptional and unexpected as well as the typical and normal. Whereas other forms of research investigation tend to focus on common patterns and recurring themes, case studies do this whilst also providing a platform to acknowledge and examine the unusual. As a result case studies can

actually provide a wealth of information ripe for conceptual and theoretical development. Whilst existing theories can be compared to complex realities and the in depth quality of case study data can stimulate new thinking and new ideas. Therefore case studies can be fertile grounds for conceptual and theoretical development and when compared with existing theories the very richness of the data can help generate new thinking and new ideas.

Case studies allow for a large amount of detailed information to be collected and collated which would perhaps not be collected as successfully using other research methods. A good case study will also create a foundation for future research related to the original theme and focus as they usually involve a relatively small number of research participants.

One criticism of case studies however, is that the data that is collected cannot necessarily be generalised to the wider population. In response to this criticism, it could be argued that case studies actually allow the reader to contextualise the subject themselves in respect to their own knowledge or experiences. For this reason it can often be more useful for the reader to be presented with a case study that they can then generalise based on a contrast to their own context.

Another potential disadvantage in the use of case studies is that whilst they can generate large amounts of data, this can cause difficulties later due to the large amount of data that then needs to be analysed. Also, as the case studies that are created are based on raw research data that has been analysed using the researcher's expertise and intuition there can be doubts concerning issues of objectivity.

Finally, Bickman and Rog (2009) discuss the advantages of multiple case studies over single case studies as part of a research project. Although they identify that such research will require greater effort on the part of the researcher, they also highlight that this is likely to create a more strongly designed study where the different cases may replicate or complement each other's experiences (ibid). This is a reasonable assumption to make of multi case study research,

however I am aware there is a risk that unless the number of case studies is large enough and the studies collected varied enough then a pattern could form supporting a trend that appears accurate, but is in fact based on a coincidence of the findings. Therefore, in my analysis I focus on what is learned about the ways that curricular choices are influenced by family, school and social context.

The case study methodology that I chose requires a research sample to be taken from the population. The participants involved in this study provided only a sample of the wider population. However, the emphasis and focus of qualitative research is often on the uniqueness, the idiographic and distinctiveness of a particular individual or group. Cohen *et al* (2011) therefore suggest that sampling strategies are carefully considered when the objective of the qualitative research is to investigate thoroughly the particular group under study rather than making deliberate efforts to attempt to generalise the findings to a wider population. They conclude by stating that high quality, successful qualitative research should focus solely on the individuals and groups involved in the study and that attempting to identify opportunities for any generalisation should be seen only as a fortune bonus of the research process. This argument is supported by Denzin (1983) who stated that generalisation cannot be the goal of a qualitative research study.

Generalisation is one of the major challenges of any qualitative research. Generalisation refers to the extent to which the findings of the research can be generally applicable and replicated to other cases (Yin, 2009). There are some elements of educational research that can be generalised, whilst there are other elements that are very particular to certain settings and cannot be generalised. Due to the human nature of the majority of educational research studies the exact research circumstances can rarely be re-created identically. Students' choices in my research are context-dependent and time-specific, though this research will be underpinned by

analytical generalisation, which produces theoretical implications for the education studies and contributes to better understanding of some conceptual elements of this research (Yin, 2009).

Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) challenge this concept by suggesting that generalisability and inference of a wider population is a feature of good qualitative research, however they also warn that in order for qualitative research to be successfully generalised it requires data to be drawn from a large sample. Geertz (1973) supports this theory by suggesting that any qualitative research sample should be large enough to generate 'thick descriptions' and 'rich data', but not so large so as to prevent this from happening due to data overload and not too small so as to prevent theoretical saturation.

The case studies that I used within this project were institutional case studies based on three schools involved in the study, and nested within each school, I studied students who had made their curricular choices. In this study, my aim was to establish the reasons behind curricular choices and how these choices are a response to their context, where context refers to the curricular structures of the school, school culture, family and friends as well as socio-economic status.

The three schools involved in this study were:

- Armscliffe High

- Brimpton High

- Croyston High

It should be noted that these school names are in fact pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the responses researched. The rationale behind the specific choice of these case studies and their analysis is described within section 3.8.

3.6 <u>Research Design</u>

I undertook this research project in three different secondary schools as I decided that I needed more than one school in order to do the comparative analysis required of my research questions and considered that 3 schools would be a manageable number that would allow such comparisons. I wanted to consider a wide range of factors and thought that three different schools could provide a reasonable sample from which to observe a range that related to socio-economic status, family background and school context.

One section of my research study focused on the different groups of stakeholders that can influence students to make particular curricular choices. As the aims of my research were to be as encompassing as possible of all the different possible factors that can influence the curricular choices that a young person makes, the use of interviews allowed me to examine the individual participants more closely and in more depth. For example, a gap in knowledge in the literature that I identified concerning how students may be influenced by their own beliefs, experiences and/or motivations for the future than by any individual or group. Gaining a better understanding of these factors was much more likely to be successful through the use of interviews.

The students that I decided to research were students in Year 9, aged 14-16. They were therefore at the end of Key Stage 3. I chose this age range of students because as they were preparing for Key Stage 4 they had been provided with the opportunity to make decisions about which subject areas they would like to study as part of their GCSE programme. This stage of a student's secondary education is one of high importance in structuring and directing the student's remaining time in formal education. In addition, starting my research project with students who were currently in Year 9 enabled me to follow their progress throughout their time in Key Stage 4, re-visiting the students during Year 10 and then again for a final time during Year 11.

In addition to these student interviews I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with key staff members involved in the curricular decision making process in each of the three schools. Initially the objective for completing interviews with key staff members in each of the schools was to better understand the structure and design of each school's curricular choices process. This provided me with an opportunity to compare, contrast, and confirm the processes described by the staff members of the school with the descriptions provided by the students. In addition, interviews with key staff members in the schools also provided me with an opportunity to better analyse the extent that the school (tutors, leadership and teachers) influences the decisions that students made.

3.6.1 <u>Research Methods</u>

The methods I used to collect my research data were questionnaires and individual interviews with the results for each school being presented in case studies. These were the most appropriate research methods to address the aims and research questions of my study as they allowed me examine the students participating in my study in depth in their particular context.

3.6.1.1 <u>Questionnaires</u>

My use of questionnaires played a key role in my research. Questionnaires are a popular way of gathering information. They can be used to gather large amounts of information from large groups of people, which can then be quantified to show trends and patterns (Munn and Drever, 2004). I did not however use statistical analyses to show trends and patterns as this is essentially and by design, a qualitative research project. I used the questionnaire that I designed to gather some basic initial data on each of the students. I was then able to refer to their responses in the interviews to help move the discussion forward on the different topics I wanted to address.

A questionnaire must be designed properly and appropriately if it is to be an effective research tool. Peterson (2000) suggest that there are three steps that a researcher should take when developing a questionnaire, these steps are:

1. Review what information it is that you are trying to collect

2. Develop appropriate questions

3. Evaluate the questions to determine if they are fit for purpose

By following these three simple steps a researcher should be able to design a questionnaire that is fit for purpose. By being clear about exactly what information the research is intending to collect is an essential starting point and will dictate the quality of the rest of the questionnaire design process. If this stage is clear then the researcher can devise some clear questions that will guide the research and reoccur throughout the whole process. The final stage in designing an effective questionnaire involves an evaluation of the questions to determine if the research study participants *can* understand the questions, if the participants *can* actually answer the question and if the participant *will* answer the question. By following these stages I consider that I was able to design an effective and fit for purpose questionnaire.

I decided that a paper based questionnaire, distributed in person, that would enable me to receive immediate responses was my preferred methodology as such a process would be most direct and effective.

By distributing the questionnaires in person during one of my first visits to the schools provided me with an opportunity to introduce myself to the students participating in the study. At this time I was also able to answer any questions that the students had concerning any of the content of the questionnaire. Although there are benefits to using web based questionnaires, particularly concerning the ease and convenience that research data can be collected, I believe that using paper based questionnaires was more suitable for this project.

3.6.1.2 <u>Interviews</u>

Interviews are a very useful way of collecting data during a research study. One of the main strengths of interviews as a form of data collection is that interviews allow for two-way communication in which the meaning of a response can be clarified or expanded upon (Clemens Johnson, 1977). Clemens Johnson (1977) does however warn of the need for skill and judgement on the part of the researcher when conducting interviews as part of a research study. As the situation within an interview is far less structured than a questionnaire it is these skills and judgement that help an interviewer to be able to ask the right question at the right time and to build a rapport with the interviewee that might elicit more honest and interesting responses. Drever (1995) reinforces this view by suggesting that an interviewer should aspire for a 'naturalistic' approach to interviewing in order to produce the best responses. Such an approach however is difficult to achieve and requires skill on the part of the interviewer (ibid). By conducting three interviews with each research participant I hoped to use my interview skills to build a rapport with the students over time that would help the interviewee to feel comfortable to contribute openly and confidently.

Tomlinson (1989) describes what he calls the 'Openness-Closedness Interview Procedure', which refers to the extent to which the interview process is formed by the interviewees' responses as opposed to being formed by the interviewer's questions. To achieve this Tomlinson (1989) encourages interviewers to research with a specific topic and agenda in mind, whilst attempting to remain open in the forming of the interview procedure.

Tomlinson (1989) also describes a research interview strategy called Hierarchical Focusing that is based around the following steps (adapted from Tomlinson, 1989):

1. Identify the key content and hierarchical structure of the issues of this stage of the research

2. Decide on the focus of the interview and identify those aspects and elements of that you wish to elicit from the interviewee

3. Visually portray a hierarchical agenda of questions to tap in to these key aspects and elements in a way that allows gradual progression from open to closed framing of the interview

4. Carry out the interview as open-endedly as possible, using the above strategies within a non-directive style of interaction so as to minimise researcher framing and influence

5. Produce a transcript of the interview and analyse the content

Interviews were my primary research method and I used a hierarchical focusing approach to interviewing as described by Tomlinson (1989) when conducting all of the different interviews throughout this study.

3.7 <u>Documentary Analysis</u>

In each of the schools involved in this study I was provided with key curriculum policy documents, including a copy of the curricular options booklet provided to students and their parents and a copy of the timetable 'blockings' in use at each of the schools that shows how different subject choices can be combined. I was able to use these documents to better understand how the curriculum was designed in each of the three schools and to help me interpret the staff and student interviews which I transcribed and analysed in depth. These policy documents were linked and compared with related key national policy documents that are likely to have influenced those documents in the different schools. I believe that this was key to help situate my research study in a national context so that my research is not only relevant for the three schools involved in my project but can also be relevant more widely.

3.8 <u>Sampling</u>

It was important to select an appropriate sampling method to ensure that my chosen research sample is made up of a suitable cross section of the wider population. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) provide useful guidance regarding selecting a suitable sampling method by suggesting that any sampling strategy should:

- Be clearly linked to the research questions

- Be true to any assumptions upon which the sampling strategies are based

- Enable clear conclusions to be drawn

- Abide by any ethical principles identified

- Be practical and efficient

- Enable generalisability of the results

- Produce sufficient detail so as to enable other researchers to both understand it and use it in the future

With this in mind I identified three suitable sampling methods that could be suitable when selecting an appropriate sample for my research study. The first method as described by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) is called 'stratified purposive sampling'. This sampling method involves the researcher identifying the different strata or subgroups of interest within the wider population and then selecting participants for the sample by ensuring that an appropriate representative of each subgroup is included in the sample. This was used to select the sample who took the survey.

The second suitable method as described by Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) is called the 'nested sampling design' and enables comparisons to be made between two or more members of a sample group and the wider population. As the members of the sample are representative of the wider population they can provide a comparison between the research participants and the

wider population. This was used to select the students from the survey for interviews and further analysis.

The third suitable sampling method for my research study would be 'purposeful random sampling' as described by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009). This sampling method involves the researcher taking a random sample from a subgroup of the wider population that has already been identified as being representative of the wider population. As the wider population has already been identified as suitable for study and the sub-group has been confirmed as a suitably representative sample of the wider population the sample is being drawn from a purposive sample and is referred to as a sample of probability.

Each of these three sampling methods could have been used to suitably identify the research sample for my study, however I found that the most appropriate of the three was the 'stratified purposive sampling' method as described by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009). Using this method ensured that my sample was made up of a cross section of the wider Year 9 population in each of the three schools. Using this sampling method illustrated diversity and enabled me to ensure that within my sample I included research participants from different socio-economic statuses, students with different backgrounds and home lives, students with different ambitions for the future, students with different personal interests and a mix of male and female students.

3.8.1 Sampling of Schools

I considered the range of existing theories regarding curricular choice and the factors that can impact on the choices that young people make when selecting my research sample. With these in mind I approached three schools and requested access to students in Year 9 that would enable me to complete the research I needed for my project. All three schools that I approached agreed to take part in the research project. As a matter of transparency, it should be noted that I am a teacher at one of these schools.

When considering which schools I wanted to be included in this research study it was necessary for me to consider a variety of factors. I needed to consider the types of schools that I wanted to be included. It was important to me that each of the schools involved were similar in structure and accountability to government policy. For that reason I ensured that each of the three schools selected were state schools with accountability to a Local Authority. The final factor that I considered was based on my own experiences from visiting each school and discussing my project with each Principal. The three schools that I selected to participate in this study were the three that were most interested and most receptive to my proposal and most accommodating of my requests for time with students and staff members. I gave each school an alternative name to provide anonymity, and help to encourage openness at all times. The three schools are outlined below.

Armscliffe High: This is a secondary school for children aged 11-16. The school's catchment area is comprised of one small town and a series of surrounding villages and students are drawn from generally economically advantaged families and it serves an aspiring middle class community made up of a significant number of university educated parents who work in a range of professional industries. Almost all the students are white British. The school is surrounded by beautiful countryside and is within 30-45 minutes of the centres of Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield. The school has an excellent record in public examinations with the vast majority of students successfully pursuing further education or training beyond the age of sixteen. Over the past three years the school has been the best performing comprehensive school in the Local Authority in terms of the percentage of children achieving 5 A*- C grade GCSEs. Very few students received free school meals and the number of children identified as Pupil Premium is the lowest in the Local Authority.

Brimpton High: This is a secondary school for children aged 11-16. The school's catchment area is comprised of one medium sized town and a series of surrounding villages and students are

drawn from generally working class families. The school is close to a large town and is within 30-45 minutes of the centres of Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield. Brimpton High served a predominately working class community made up of a significant number of parents working in manual labour jobs, with an above national average of single parent families and with an above national average number of students claiming free school meals. The number of children identified as Pupil Premium is in line with the average within the Local Authority. Over the past three years the school has seen a slight drop in the number of students obtaining 5 A*- C grade GCSEs.

Croyston High: This is a secondary school for children aged 11-19. The school is in a semi-rural area and serves a predominately lower class, former mining community and students are drawn from generally disadvantaged families. The school's catchment area is comprised of one medium sized town and a series of surrounding villages and is within 30-45 minutes of the centres of Leeds and Sheffield. There are significant unemployment issues with one of the lowest socio-economic statuses in the UK. Over the past three years the school has seen a slight increase in the number of students obtaining 5 A*- C grade GCSEs. The number of children receiving free school meals is significantly higher than the national average and the number of children identified as Pupil Premium is one of the highest in the Local Authority. This third school is the school where I am employed as a Faculty Head.

Using these three different schools provided me with a broad variety of research data and therefore better equipped me to address my research questions.

3.8.2 Sampling of Students

Having considered the characteristics of the population and in turn the sample that I would work with, the next issue for me to consider was the size of the sample that I would need to complete my research effectively.

Qualitative researchers might summarise 'the rules' regarding sample sizes as 'quality rather than quantity' meaning that it would be more conducive to producing high quality educational research if the research sample was made up of a small number of the correct participants rather than a large number of the wrong participants. However, if a qualitative researcher hopes to work with a sample made up of a realistic cross section of the wider population than pursuing a larger group of research participants may not contribute to any improved reliability if the sample does not accurately represent the wider population. For example, in a mixed comprehensive school if a researcher works with a large number of participants, but this large number is only made up of participants of one gender then the size of the research sample will be irrelevant as the sample will not be a true cross section of the wider population. Likewise a group of research participants made up of unbalanced proportions based on age for example will also provide an inaccurate cross section of the wider population (Cohen *et al*, 2011).

Cohen *et al* (2011) describe how the quality, effectiveness and success of any educational research relies not only on the researcher's chosen methodology or the skills of the researcher, but also on the suitability of the sampling strategy that has been chosen. They also suggest that there are a wide variety of issues that need to be considered when making a decision about the size of a sample. These include the purpose of the study, the nature of the population involved in the study, the level of accuracy required, the anticipated response rate, the anticipated number of variables and whether the research is quantitative or qualitative.

Bailey (1994) explains how experienced researchers will start designing their sampling rationale by considering the whole population that they are interested in and then 'working down' to find an appropriate sample of the larger population to research. However, less experienced researchers often make the mistake of considering the minimum number of respondents required to conduct their research and then 'working from the bottom up' to try and apply the findings of their sample to the larger population. The key issue here is that unless the researcher

first identifies the features of the total population in advance it will be extremely difficult, and most likely impossible, for them to assess how their chosen minimum sample is representative of the wider population. In a case study methodology such as the one I have chosen, the sample of students needs to represent diverse contexts and provide a diverse sample for comparisons to be made. If a sample size is too large then the sample can become unwieldy and difficult to manage, whereas if a sample size is too small then it can be unrepresentative of the wider population.

For this project even researching the entire population of a single year group in one school would involve researching more than 100 students, which in itself would be practically impossible due to the same reasons of expense, time and accessibility. For that reason it was necessary for this research study that data was collected from a smaller, sample, group of the total population.

After recruiting the three schools, I considered carefully, and took appropriate advice on, the wider population regarding the makeup of the students who make up the Year 9 populations. I then used this information to make selections for my sample that I could be assured had included a suitable cross section of the Year 9 population.

For the sample size for my own research, I worked to the guidelines presented by Borg and Gail (1979) who suggested that in a population of approximately 100 a sample size of approximately 15 would be required to successfully be considered a realistic and sufficient cross section of the population.

I decided that a group of 15 pupils was an appropriate size sample to work with for two reasons. Firstly, 15 students from each school was sufficient to provide me with a cross section of the students of a year group in each school where the different Year 9 cohorts range from 100 to 130 students approximately. Secondly, I believed that working with a group of 15 students would provide me with sufficient research data in the event that I experienced participant drop

out as my project developed. 45 also seemed to be a manageable number of student respondents.

To help me implement the 'stratified purposive sampling' method I required the support of senior staff members in each of the three schools where I completed my research. I clearly outlined the different subgroups that I needed to be included within my sample. Senior management in each of the schools then helped me select a group of 15 students, both male and female, of mixed ability, mixed academic interests, mixed academic ambitions and with mixed background demographics to participate in the interviews. Such a cross reference of research participants is important because existing theory, as Payne (2003) suggests, student attainment can be impacted upon by background characteristics (such as gender and ethnicity), home circumstances as well as the information, advice and guidance given to students based on the choices that are available to them.

In each school I initially met with this group of 15 students. During this initial meeting I outlined the aims of my research and made the respondents aware of their role in the project. I then used questionnaires to learn more about my research participants. These questionnaires provided a focus on the students' individual curricular choices and the factors that influence them specifically. The questionnaires also began the process of forming an understanding of each student's home life, including the socio-economic status of their parents and the features of each student's family environment. I was able to make subjective estimations of the socio-economic status of the students' parents based on the responses that my questionnaires generated with reference to whom the student lived with, the educational experiences of their parents and their parents professions, trades or employment status. These questionnaires were then used to form the questions necessary for the one on one interviews that I held subsequently with each of the participants.

3.9 <u>Conducting the Interviews</u>

I conducted the series of interviews with the students as follows.

1.0   The first interview that I conducted with each student focused on the student's background in an attempt to better understand the social influences that affect them. I also used this first interview to try and investigate each student's ambitions and aspirations for the future. This interview took place when the student was in Year 9 and had already been made aware of the processes they can anticipate as part of the curricular options process. The students had already been encouraged to start thinking about what areas of learning they are interested in studying and thinking about any potential career routes that may appeal to them.

2.0   The second interview that I conducted with each student focused on the subject choices process that the respondent had experienced. This interview was used to investigate the subject choices that each student had selected and what information, advice and guidance they received to help them make their curricular choices. This interview took place when the student was in Year 10 and was already studying their different selected curricular options. At this stage the students were able to offer some early reflections concerning the curricular choices that they made. Additionally the subject choices that the students made provided an opportunity to discuss their motivation for particular choices and how the options they selected may link to their future learning, and potentially, career ambitions.

3.0   The third, and final, interview that I conducted with each student focused on the student's transition from GCSEs to beyond their time at secondary school and in to employment, training or Further Education. This interview investigated the student's progress and the satisfaction that each student had taken from the subject choices

that they chose and considered whether, on reflection, they felt that they had received sufficient support in making their choices. This interview also provided an opportunity to investigate the information, advice and guidance that each student received to help them make appropriate decisions about what they will do beyond their time at secondary school. This interview took place when the student was in Year 11 and was working towards final examinations in their chosen curricular options. At this stage of the research project the students were able to discuss their destination of choice upon completion of their curricular options and explain how this linked to their aspirations for the future.

3.10 **Presentation of Findings**

I decided that presenting individual student case studies would not be appropriate. By selecting only those students who offered the most detailed responses during their interviews there was a risk that I would neglect the contributions of other students who engaged in the interviews to a lesser extent. Although some students may have contributed less during the interview process, to ignore their comments or to dismiss their contributions as less important than any other student, would not be appropriate. It is possible that a student who makes only one significant contribution may actually offer something different from any other student. Therefore, I report on responses from all the students involved in the study, regardless of the extent to which they contributed during their interviews. It became clear as I conducted my interviews that all the student participants were important when considering my research questions and that their collective interviews provided rich data for each school. I therefore decided not to report on particular students as separate cases but instead to focus on case studies of the schools.

3.11 <u>Coding</u>

Having considered the different ways I could analyse my research data I believe that the use of coding was most appropriate. Coding involves organising large amounts of data in to different categories, which then enables you to identify patterns that would otherwise be difficult to detect. Bogdan and Biklin (1998) suggest creating 'initial category codes' that label certain pieces of research data without worrying too much about the variety of categories. Later, the use of 'focused category codes' help to eliminate, combine or subdivide coding categories and identify repeating patterns that connect codes together.

Berkowitz (1997: 5) suggests considering these questions when coding qualitative data:

- What common themes emerge in responses about specific topics? How do these patterns help to highlight the key questions?

- Are there any deviations from these patterns? If so, are there any factors that might explain these deviations?

- How are participants' environments or past experiences related to their behaviour and attitudes?

- What interesting stories emerge from the responses? How do they help highlight the key questions?

- Do any of these patterns suggest that additional data may be needed? Do any of the key questions need to be revised?

- Are the patterns that emerge similar to the findings of other studies on the same topic? If not, what might explain these discrepancies?

3.11.1 <u>Coding in Practice Following Initial Analysis</u>

There are a number of common themes that emerged during the initial analysis of my interview transcripts, which enabled me to analyse my data effectively. Following the guidance steps highlighted by Bogdan and Bilkin (1998), I recorded a commentary based on my initial thoughts and interpretations as I read each transcript from the interviews. This commentary highlighted any points of interest that the transcripts contained as well as any evidence of emphasis or repetition that the students being interviewed used. Using a combination of what was recorded in the interview transcript and the areas of interest that I identified, within my commentary of the transcripts, I was able to create a series of initial codes. These codes identify different groups or parties that could influence the curricular decisions that the students participating in my study could make. In addition, these initial codes provide my analysis with a framework that I could put in place to help me interpret and analyse my other interview transcripts.

At this stage I was able to do two things:

1.0   I was able to group the different initial codes, which I did by considering where the 'influences', that I had originally identified and labelled with initial codes, developed from. For example, were they influences that I could identify as being generated by the student's ability to influence their own environment or were they influences that were acting upon the student from third parties or the environment that they found themselves in.

2.0   Having grouped the different initial code influences I was able to label each of these groups and in doing so I created overarching categories that I could use to group the responses from my the interview transcripts, first by use of my initial coding and then secondly into the appropriate category for that code.

I created 4 different categories in total which I used to group the responses from my interviews, these categories are:

      1.0 Personal Interest and Motivation

      2.0 Context

      3.0 Influence

      4.0 Choice

From the interviews that I completed and the transcripts that I analysed I was able to see that the responses from the participants that could be categorised in each of the 4 categories I have identified above. This suggested that the students participating in this study are being influenced by a variety of different factors.

To ensure that the initial codes, category labels for grouping responses and the methods that I use to analyse my interview transcripts are reliable I tested my chosen system and method by analysing a series of early transcripts. For each I used the same method of highlighting points of interest, repetition or emphasis, assigning initial codes and then going over the interviews again to group the initial codes under categories. This test, combined with the literature that I have read regarding the use of coding as a method for analysing interview transcripts gave me confidence that the system I used to analyse all my interview transcripts would be reliable.

After attempting to analyse some of my interview transcripts using the 4 different categories that I had identified I found that it was necessary to introduce a series of sub-categories that would help me to add further focus and direction to the commentaries I was making based on the participants responses. I have therefore called the initial 4 categories that I identified primary categories and the sub-categories that 'belong' to the primary categories as secondary categories.

For example, the primary category:

1.0   Personal Interests and Motivation

Contains the following secondary categories:

1.1   Motivation

1.2   Interests

1.3   Skills and Subjects

These secondary categories are based on the initial analysis identified during an interview, when I was discussing with a young person their personal interests and motivation for selecting particular curricular options I found that their responses often applied to one of these areas as identified in these secondary category examples.

For example, a student might speak openly when discussing their reasons for selecting certain subjects to study and explain that they were motivated to do so by ambitions to pursue a desired future career path and that studying such a subject would enable them to pursue such a pathway more successfully. One student involved in my study who has ambitions to be a doctor, spoke frankly about how much she enjoyed learning about science, particularly biology and chemistry, but did not enjoy learning about physics. She admitted to holding a pragmatic stance on the issue knowing that if she wanted to follow her academic route of choice to study sciences at a good Further Education college and then also at university it was necessary for her to select her curricular choices for Key Stage 4 based on her motivations for the future.

Another example, for which I have included an extract on the following page from the transcript analysis of their interview, comes from an interview where the student spoke about their motivation for selecting certain curricular choices due to their having a particular Further Education destination in mind.

Personal interest and motivation – motivation	**DJ**: It might be too early to ask you what you want to do there, but can I ask you why Thorpe College and not Gladstone College or Langton College? **Student**: Because I think **I would prefer Thorpe College's style of learning**. **DJ**: More pressured like you said? To push you? **Student**: Yeah, because I think, it's like **if I'm not pushed them I won't do as well as I can do** and sometimes I don't push myself because I think 'oh this is kind of easy, this is fine' **but at Thorpe College** because **they will push me** I will enjoy it **DJ**: So at Gladstone College you think that you would do OK and pass, but at Thorpe College they would get everything out of you? **Student**: Yeah **DJ**: ...and that would give you chance to go to university if you wanted to? **Student**: Yeah	Student recognises that going to Thorpe College would place her in a learning environment that she would benefit from as she would be pushed and motivated to achieve more.

A different student might refer to their reasons for selecting certain subjects to study and explain that they decided to do so because of a natural interest or curiosity in a particular subject area. For example, one student involved in my study who has ambitions to be a teacher of Physical Education and Sport, spoke to me about how he had selected curricular choices that would help him to pursue his chosen career path, but has also taken up the opportunity to study History as he found it interesting. This young man may be unlikely to pursue his interest in History beyond Key Stage 4 due to his aim for the future of becoming a teacher of PE and Sport, however he discussed how his interest in the subject had led to him selecting to study it. Another example, for which I have included an on the following page from the transcript analysis of their interview, comes from an interview where the student spoke about their interest levels in different subjects, for example in this extract the student describes why they are interested in graphics.

| Personal interest and motivation – interests | **DJ**: Well it's likely that your ideas will change again as you go through Years 10 and 11 and then through Thorpe College and then eventually you will find the idea that you want. Now, jumping ahead a bit again. This is the question that I was starting to guess your answer to. What are your favourite subjects in school

Student: **I do like Maths**, but I have a few favourites.

DJ: That's fine, just tell me what you enjoy and why.

Student: **I don't really like English** because **I find it hard to think of getting the structure whilst also being creative at the same time**. **I like graphics because you can do what you want with it**. You get the design brief and you can do what you want with it, so I like that. I like working with all the different colour schemes and trying to make it fit. **I like maths**. **I don't really like science**, but I prefer science over English. **I quite like IT** as well.

DJ: It's interesting what you say about graphics. You say that you like the creative side of it, but there are also the rules that you have to follow. It's not like art where you just get a blank sheet of paper. In graphics there are a certain set of rules. It's interesting. That's like marketing. You can be creative but you've also got to fit to the marketing brief. | Student lists a variety of subjects as being among her favourites, including maths, graphics and IT. However she 'really doesn't like English' because she struggles with the creative aspects of the subject. |

Many students that I have met, particularly in my own experience of working within secondary schools, often explain their reasons for selecting certain subjects to study and refer to doing so because they had certain skills and qualities that meant they were likely to be successful in this subject area. A popular response when asked why a student has made a certain curricular choice and selected specific subjects to study is 'because I'm good at it'. It is a common response as many students see the subject choices process as an opportunity to abandon some subject areas that they do not enjoy and are likely to have enjoyed limited success with in the past. Whilst embracing the opportunity to actively pursue a subject area that they do enjoy and perhaps

have succeeded at previously as a result of skills they have. Another example, for which I have included an extract below from the transcript analysis of their interview, comes from an interview where the student spoke about the reasons why they enjoy certain subjects, and therefore are more likely to select to study this subject further.

| Personal interest and motivation – skills | **DJ**: So she's clever as well. Now the next question focuses on your school subjects. What is your favourite subject in school?

Student: **I enjoy science because I do well in it**.

DJ: You enjoy it because you're good at it.

Student: Well**, I enjoy it because I don't struggle at it** really.

DJ: Do you struggle with other stuff?

Student: Yeah maths**, I don't get maths at all**. | Student's favourite subject at school is science because this is a subject area that he doesn't struggle with. Unlike maths which he does not like. |

Other students might refer to their reasons for selecting certain subjects to study because an opportunity appeared to study something that was new and different. The curricular choices process that students experience before they start Key Stage 4 presents students with a wide range of curricular options that they will not have studied before. Some of the students that I have met as part of this research study have admitted that they have made a certain curricular choice and subject selection based on an opportunity to study a subject area that they are unfamiliar with. The students who are most likely to offer such responses are often students who embrace the subject choices process as an opportunity to make a new start. Such fresh starts often involve learning from a teacher who is new to the student, sometimes even at a different location as many alternative curriculum options are delivered at sites away from the student's school. Another example, for which I have included an extract below from the transcript analysis of their interview, comes from an interview where the student spoke about

making subject selections based on their desire to study subjects that would ensure they had an opportunity to achieve EBacc status upon completion of their GCSEs, but also has made a curricular choice to learn about subject area that they have not studied before.

Personal interest and motivation – subjects	**DJ**: Would it matter if you changed your mind about what you want to do in the future? **Student**: Not really, for my GCSEs **I have chosen subjects that will give me the EBacc** and **I've chosen Business Studies because I think it will keep my options open**.	Student has chosen to study subjects that will award her the EBacc, plus Business Studies to provide additional range.

The examples above all refer to the secondary categories that I allocated to support the primary category of Personal Interests and Motivation. I allocated secondary categories to each of the other primary categories that I initially identified. For the primary category Context I assigned secondary categories of Family, Location and School. The secondary category of Location refers to the geographic location of each school and considers the demographics of the communities served by each school. For the primary category of Influence I assigned the secondary of categories of Family, which has its own sub-categories of Parents/Elders and Siblings, Friends. School, which has its own sub-categories of Tutor, Leadership and Teachers, and Peers. For my final category of Choice I assigned the secondary categories of Future aims, Range of choice and Pre-requisites. The secondary category of Future Aims refers to the students' progression beyond completion of their Key Stage 4 and GCSE programme and may include aspirations to continue their studies in to Further Education or secure a training Apprenticeship or position of full time employment.

3.12 <u>Ethical Issues</u>

Regardless of whether researching within the quantitative or qualitative paradigm research or researchers 'belong to' the subject of ethics is an area that is full of grey areas, meaning that at

times ethical dilemmas will present themselves to the researcher where it is difficult to clearly identify the border between what is right and what is wrong. This issue generates one of the most difficult problems for researchers to contend with whilst also creating some of the most delicate and controversial issues that the researcher needs to be aware of, before, during and after conducting their research.

Ethics is very important in all research, but particularly so within educational research where subjects are often young people. It is also important to recognise that ethics is not something that researchers just have to do or to tick off as being addressed. Good ethics can lead to better research and can produce an improved quality of data and should therefore be considered as a key element of the research at every stage of the process.

According to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research there are three core areas that educational researchers need to be aware of, these are:

- The relationship between research and society

- Professional issues

- The treatment of participants

These three core areas need to reflect the two research paradigms within educational research (qualitative and quantitative). The first core area, 'the relationship between research and society' is a good example of a consideration for quantitative research particularly. Whereas the third core area, 'the treatment of participants' is a good example of a consideration within qualitative research particularly.

Wellington (2000) believes that a research subject's wellbeing should always be foremost in a researcher's mind. The 'three core areas' above should reflect this, with 'the treatment of participants' at the top of the list to signify its importance.

There are also a number of professional issues and responsibilities that an educational researcher needs to be aware of when considering ethics within research. It is essential that any educational researcher can be relied upon to be honest and to report accurately what they are investigating. This means that all the data that is generated must be genuine and the data that they generate from participants is not altered, adjusted or tampered with in any way. Research is not supposed to be neat and unproblematic. It does not need to 'fit' into a pattern or predicted hypotheses. This is a problem that new researchers often encounter and it is something that new researchers need not be wary or fearful of, as it is normal. Often it is the things that are left out that are the most significant (Opie, C 2004).

The protection of any research subjects that participate in a study is another key factor that must be considered within any educational research. To ensure protection and to avoid 'harm' that may be caused to research participants, informed consent therefore is very important. Ensuring that all participants provide their consent before participating in any research project is essential. If research subjects are to give their informed consent before participating in any form of educational research study then they must be aware of and understand everything that they need to know about the research study. Such as, what is the purpose of the study, how the research data will be collected and what will the research data be used for.

It is important at this point to clarify and define what constitutes 'harm' as there are many different types and certainly different severities of harm, including emotional or psychological harm and physical harm. There is also the issue of short term harm and long term harm to consider. However, simply because participants of a research study are prepared for what the study will involve, and for what may lay before them as participants, this does not mean that

the research subject will be unharmed by participating in the research project or that part of the research process will not be difficult or even unpleasant. It is reasonable to hope that any risk of harm will be reduced by ensuring that participants have a full understanding that they can withdraw at any time if they are concerned about harm, or for any other reason, without needing to provide a reason. However, at no stage did I plan to collect any data that could be seen as harmful.

Participants within a research project need to understand, and be made clearly aware, that they have the 'right to withdraw' from the research project at any time and without reason. As difficult as this may make the process for the researcher it helps to ensure that participants are put at ease to reduce the risk of harm. In turn this ease and sense of comfort and control may actually contribute further to the generation of quality research data. The right to withdraw provides subjects with a feeling of being protected and cared for.

It is important at this stage to understand the difference between consent and informed consent. It is essential that the any researcher receives informed consent from a participant in a research project. The informed consent should be based on a decision from the participant to give their consent maturely and rationally and their decision must be one that has been made freely and voluntarily and without coercion or influence (McNamee and Bridges, 2002). This theory of 'informed consent' is highlighted clearly within the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines publications. The BERA guidelines also focus on the theory of responsibility of the researchers and practitioners. The BERA guidelines state that a researcher has a responsibility to the participants, to the teaching or lecturing profession, to the research community and to the sponsoring body or council (where necessary or appropriate) (Wellington, 2000). To ensure students were suitably informed to provide their consent each participant completed the Consent Form in Appendix iii.

Researchers also need to be aware of issues surrounding confidentiality. Confidentiality is a key issue and factor that all educational researchers must be aware of and plan for when undertaking any research project. As with a patient-doctor relationship confidentiality has come to be expected by all participants that take part in educational research, this however does not mean that anonymity of the research participants and confidentiality of the data generated is necessarily easy to achieve. Upon completion, and publication, of this research study I cannot be aware of how the data generated could be used by others in the future, therefore it is necessary to ensure that the data cannot be linked to any individuals. As laid out by BERA (2004) the fact remains however, that informants and participants have the *right* to remain anonymous (Elton-Chalcraft, Hansen and Twistelton, 2008).

The data that some researchers collect is often used as 'group data' rather than individual data, therefore information that is collected from an individual is pooled or grouped together with other data from other participants to form patterns and trends much as with the data that is generated from a census. This is key characteristic of quantitative data. The second method that researchers have used to help protect the anonymity of participants is to, wherever possible, refer to subjects by number rather than by name (Tuckman, 1978). However, the more modern approach is that rather than use numbers researchers are most likely to use false names. These methods all help to depersonalise data. It is also good practice to dispose of and destroy any research evidence once the study is complete and the data is no longer required in its raw form (ibid). All these factors help to ensure a research subject's anonymity.

To ensure that I addressed the different ethical issues identified I took the following action. I ensured that I secured parental consent from all students as it is necessary to involve students' parents when researching with young people under the age of 16. I provided all participants with clear information about the study's aims and the nature of their involvement and obtained and recorded their consent. To address the issue of confidentiality, I ensured that I respected

the possible desire of participants to remain anonymous, and sought their written consent before disclosing any information they provided. With regard to data protection, three issues are particularly important: the storage, protection and usage of the data. To address this issue I complied with the University of Leeds' Code of Practice on Data Protection and all data was securely stored in password-protected University network space. Where audio recordings of interviews were made, these were transferred to this space and deleted from the recording machine the same day and all written notes used codes for participant schools and people and were stored securely in a locked filing cabinet.

I also ensured that the location where the interviews took place was an environment where the participants felt comfortable. To help ensure that the students feel comfortable and safe I requested that a staff member known to the students was present throughout. This was not a member of staff who has any role in teaching or advising the student. I was able to arrange this by conducting my interviews in the schools' libraries where the school librarian was present throughout, but not in a position to overhear anything that was said during the interviews.

Before and during the interviews, I ensured that I was open to the participants with regards the purpose of the research and also ensured that they were aware (both orally and in writing) that they could opt out of the research at any time. I was aware that as the different interviews progressed I needed to be prepared if any line of questioning touched on a sensitive subject. In the event of any sensitive subject matter being discussed I was prepared to provide the participants with additional time to consider their contributions and, if necessary, I would also remind the students that they have the right to withdraw from the interview process at any time. It is my hope that the rapport that I build with the participants will help to avoid any feelings of discomfort and I also avoided topics of discussion that were of a highly personal or private nature.

I was aware that, as part of my research took place in the school where I worked and my research made use of interviews involving students that I teach and colleagues that I work with, it was necessary to be aware of the intricacies of the power relationships that exist between a researcher and a research participant when the two are known to one another. Powney and Watts (1987) refer to something called the 'interview bias' where the interviewer has their own perspectives and biases. It is important that these biases do not overtly influence the respondent and that the researcher tries to 'standardise' the interview. This was particularly pertinent during interviews with students from my own school.

It was important that I was aware that the students I interviewed from the school where I am employed, and to an extent my colleagues who were interview during the staff interviews, may have attempted to provide me with the responses that I wanted to hear. This would only have damaged the quality of my research data. Gillham (2005) refers to the need to disguise the personality of the researcher in order to generate the best possible research data. He suggests that taking a neutral approach and using detached language can help to present the researcher as 'curiously anonymous'. It is also necessary to take an approach that is balanced and sensitive to the individual and their emotions, if for example they should need to stop the interview. Clearly these are skills that need to be developed, but the human instrument is not a machine and only by developing these skills can the researcher achieve a degree of self-detachment and be aware of any preconceptions of the topics being researched.

It was very important therefore that I attempted to put into practice the skills that Drever (1995) refers to above. In order to tone these necessary qualities prior to conducting my interviews I discussed my plans and questions with some of my teaching colleagues to help judge if my interview style was relaxed and natural enough to put my subjects at ease. By putting in to practice the skills and techniques described by Drever (1995) I am confident that the answers provided by both students and teachers will not be affected by existing relationships.

3.13 <u>Potential Limitations of the Study</u>

Although my study is based around continuous research collected over a period of three years, in three different schools, I acknowledge that there are limitations to my project. Despite the holistic approach this study remains a small scale research study, limited to 45 students in three secondary schools. Other limits and limitations would include the age range of the students involved in the study and the restriction to schools in England. Although there are similarities between the three schools that I have selected for my research and others in England there are no guarantees that the trends and patterns that I identify will pertain in other areas of the country. Therefore, I acknowledge that the limitations of my data may not give me a full picture regarding factors affecting young people's curricular choices and that key information from a different age group may well support my research further.

4.0 <u>Chapter Four</u>

4.1 <u>Findings Introduction</u>

To introduce my research findings it is important to first comment on the number of students who contributed to this research study, from each of the three schools, throughout the three years duration of the project. As might be expected there was a degree of 'drop out' amongst the participants as students were no longer able to participate for a variety of reasons.

For the purpose of providing context, it is also important to understand information about all of the students that participated in this study, with regard to the Higher Education and work experience of their parents and the makeup of the students' families.

The three schools included in this study have been given fictitious names to ensure their anonymity. They are:

- Armscliffe High School

- Brimpton High School

- Croyston High School

At Armscliffe High School, of the fifteen students who began the project, two dropped out. Of the thirteen students that remained involved in this study, twelve live with both of their parents and eleven have at least one parent who was educated at a university. Nine of the thirteen students have at least one parent employed in a professional capacity.

By contrast, Brimpton High School, where unfortunately five students dropped out of the project, of the fifteen students involved at the start of this study, six live with both of their parents and only three have at least one parent who was educated at a university. Seven of the students involved in this study have a parent that is not currently employed. Only one of the ten students has a parent employed in a professional capacity.

At Croyston High School, where all fifteen of the students completed the study, five live with both of their parents and one has a parent who was educated at a university. Eleven of the fifteen students have a parent that is not currently employed. None of the fifteen students involved in this study have a parent employed in a professional capacity.

Armscliffe High has the highest number of students' parents educated to university level (11 out of 15), compared to the Croyston High which has the lowest number of students' parents educated at university (1 out of 15). Using students' parents' level of education as a measure of socio-economic status, these findings identify that Armscliffe High serves a community with a higher socio-economic status than the community served by Croyston High. At the third school involved in this study, Brimpton High, the number of students' parents who attended university was three, out of the 15 Brimpton High students involved in this study.

I will present the findings of this study by using a series of codes to identify significant themes as I analyse the different student and staff interviews. I will then use the findings of these interviews to form a case study for each school.

4.2 Findings: Influence of School Context

4.2.1 Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)

I observed a number of consistencies in the way each of the three schools involved in this study provide appropriate information, advice and guidance (IAG) to their students. In line with policy described within the literature review regarding IAG, each school claimed that it sought to ensure that students are provided with the necessary information to help make appropriate and informed curricular decisions.

In each of the schools, the students attend a series of assemblies with key staff members during which they are informed about the details of the curricular options process and made aware of key dates during the year when they are required to make their subject choices. In addition to

being advised on the curricular options process, students in each school are provided with literature that provides information about the options process, and which key personnel are available to support their decisions as necessary and specific details about each of the different subject options available to them.

Each school illustrated to me the way in which they provide students with literature at the start of the curricular options process in order to promote a sense of ownership in the process for the students. The principals from each school explained that they thought it was a vitally important and almost fundamental feature of the curricular options process that students felt empowered and that they felt a sense of ownership with regard to the decisions they were making. The theory that the students were provided with appropriate information, advice and guidance regarding the options process and the different subject options available and then encouraged to make an independent decision regarding the subject options that they would like to select was a common theme that each of the school was eager to promote.

Despite the claimed intentions of each school to provide students with the opportunity to make a purely independent but well advised decision regarding the different subject choices, the reality of the situation is somewhat different. By carefully considering and assessing the responses provided by the students interviewed in each school, a number of patterns appear which suggest that the intentions of the schools' policies to provide students with an entirely free, but well informed selection of subject, often fail to become a reality.

4.2.2 Influence of School Context (IAG): Armscliffe High

At Armscliffe High, policy dictated that all students in Year 11 had a short 'careers meeting' with a staff member in the role of Careers Guidance Officer, this point was underlined by the Principal. However, during my student interviews revealed that, despite the opportunity to take part in a careers meeting, the impression that students have is that the majority of students did not participate in these interviews.

Molly, a student at Armscliffe High, commented "the careers meetings are really only for those people that need them, they are basically for people who don't know what they want to do or who can't make their mind up". When I explored this issue further I asked Molly whether she had participated in a 'careers meeting', to which she replied "no, I didn't need to, because I already knew what I wanted to do". I explored this line of questioning further by asking Molly who she had spoken to about her subject choices and whether or not she had taken any advice from anyone at all during the options process. She replied "I really didn't need to, I already knew what I wanted to do after I had spoken to my teachers". When I asked if she had spoken with her parents about her curricular options she said "once I had made my subject choices I checked them with my parents, but they were my choices". Molly's comments were supported by other pupils who made similar observations about the role of careers meetings at Armscliffe High. Georgina commented "I didn't make a careers appointment because I had people at home that I could ask for advice. I think that my parents are better people to speak to about my future than someone at school who doesn't know me". Another student at Armscliffe High, Rebecca, commented "I don't know anyone who has had a careers meeting. I always thought they were for students who didn't know what they wanted to do in the future and didn't try very hard at school".

Interestingly Molly contradicts the school policy, which had been reinforced by the Principal, that all students in Year 11 participate in a 'careers meeting'. Molly clearly states that, in her understanding, meetings with the Careers Officer were by request or optional, or for those students who need additional support in making their curricular decisions, rather than mandatory as a key school policy.

Molly's responses were particularly interesting when she was questioned about who she had spoken with regarding her curricular choices and from whom she had sought advice regarding which subject options to select. Molly begins her response by stating that she did not need to

speak to anyone as she already knew what subject options she wanted to study. However, in the same reply she adds that she knew what subjects to study "after I had spoken to my teachers". It is clear from this exchange therefore that Molly's teachers were involved in her subject choices and it is therefore reasonable to assume that her teachers were likely to have had some influence over the subject choices that she made. If we re-visit the assertion by Hodkinson et al (1996) regarding the value of the advice and guidance provided by guidance councillors who are not 'loyal' to a particular subject areas in the school, then these findings suggest that Molly may have benefited from a careers meeting.

From this I conclude that the intentions of the school, as outlined by the policy regarding IAG and underlined by the Principal, for all students to participate in a meeting with the Careers Officer, are not being fulfilled. As a result students, like Molly, are not benefitting from impartial careers guidance.

4.2.3 <u>Influence of School Context (IAG): Brimpton High</u>

At Brimpton High there is a significant difference from Armscliffe High in policy regarding providing students with IAG and the role of careers guidance councillors. Whereas at Armscliffe High the policy is that all students should participate in a meeting with the Careers Officer, the policy at Brimpton High is that careers guidance meetings are only available for those students that want or need such a meeting. This can be student led, where the student recognises that they need additional support in making their curricular choices, or it can be teacher led, where a meeting is arranged on behalf of the student when staff members feel that the student would benefit from an opportunity to discuss their options at length in a one to one environment.

During my interviews with the Principal from Brimpton High, I noted two significant factors concerning the purpose of the careers guidance meeting in the curricular options process.

Firstly, following a significant reduction in the role of the Connexions service, which was provided by the Local Authority, schools struggle to justify providing a similar service internally due to budget restrictions. For this reason the role of Guidance Officer at Brimpton High is a role that is incorporated with other pastoral duties within the school and within the Year 11 pastoral group specifically. The staff member at Brimpton High responsible for careers guidance within the school has a primary role as a student mentor during the majority of the academic year, but fulfils a careers guidance role during the busy curricular options period of the spring term.

Secondly, the reason why the policy at Brimpton High differs from that at Armscliffe High is because in the past when guidance provision was mandatory for all students this service was, at times, abused by students who have used a careers guidance meeting as an opportunity to spend time out of lessons. When I explored this point further by enquiring as to how significant a role this issue played in changing the school's approach and policy towards guidance meetings. The Principal described it as being "the straw that broke the camel's back", she developed this point by saying "it was a very time consuming process for one person to meet with every student in the year group and when meetings were being missed, avoided or ignored, then students who genuinely needed to see the Guidance Officer too often went without a meeting". The Principal explained that although she felt that impartial advice from a careers specialist is very useful for the students the reality of being able to provide this for all has become too difficult to achieve.

A student called Tom from Brimpton High highlighted an interesting observation when he described the IAG provided at the school as "not being very useful really". He went on to explain that the teachers at the school advise students which curricular options they should pick and that any other sources of advice "just said the same thing as the teachers". Tom explained further that the careers meetings that each student can have are actually conducted by a teacher from the school, which would help to explain why Tom did not identify much value in

the impartial nature of the IAG provided by the school. Therefore, similar to Armscliffe, it seems that the national policy of a provision for independent careers advice is not being fulfilled.

4.2.4 Influence of School Context (IAG): Croyston High

The situation at Croyston High is somewhat different from that at Armscliffe High and Brimpton High. The Academy does not employ a staff member responsible for careers guidance and has no provision for one to one guidance meetings for those students who require additional support in making their curricular decisions. Instead students at Croyston High rely heavily on the advice of their teachers during the curricular choices process. During an interview the Principal of Croyston High explained how she believed the service offered by the Connexions service was a significant loss to the school. She also described how the cost of budgeting for an individual to offer a similar service as a 'Connexions Officer' could be similar to that of an experienced teacher. Given the choice between an additional experienced teacher and a dedicated careers guidance specialist the Principal at Croyston explained that the choice of an additional school teacher was the best use of such funding.

Hodkinson et al (1996) described the impartial advice offered by careers officers and Connexions advisers as being central to providing effective information, advice and guidance to students. However, the findings of this study highlight how central government spending cuts have resulted in significant budgetary constraints, resulting in a significant reduction in the number of schools being able to provide students with access to a specialist careers guidance officer. As a result students from many secondary schools are left to rely entirely on support from their teachers, or on informal sources of advice from friends and family, to help them make their curricular decisions.

4.3 <u>Influence of School Context:</u> <u>Range of Subject Choices</u>

A recurring theme which can be identified from the student interviews relates to the extent that the range of subject choices available to the students had on the curricular choices that they made. During the student interviews for this research study many students referred to the variety of different subject choices that were available to them. Each of the three schools were proud to offer a broad range of curricular choices to the students. However, when we consider how many students referred to the range of subject choices available as being an influencing factor on their decision making, the results suggest that having access to a wide variety of different subject options was not a significantly influencing factor on the curricular selections that the students made.

4.3.1 <u>Range of Subject Choices: Armscliffe High</u>

The student interviews completed at Armscliffe High suggest quite the opposite to those completed at Croyston High, as despite the free choice provided by the school and the wide range of different subject choices available to the students, this is not something that the students of Armscliffe High considered influential when they made their curricular choices. Many of the students interviewed at Armscliffe High spoke openly about their desire to pursue only subject choices that would help them to secure the EBacc in order to support an application for Further Education. Although this finding is drawn from just a small sample, my teacher interviews confirm that the vast majority of students at Armscliffe High (more than 90%) pursue the EBacc pathway. This suggests that a student from Armscliffe High places a significant amount of consideration on their aims for the future when making their subject choices rather than the opportunity to design their own education experience by selecting from the wide range of different and new subject options available. An alternative theory is that it is possible that students from Armscliffe High place great trust in the teachers and school and therefore follow their advice without having any clear aims for the future at all.

4.3.2 Range of Subject Choices: Brimpton High

The situation at Brimpton High is even more 'black and white' than that at Armscliffe High. Due to the school's motivation to improve exam performance, in relation to exam league tables and the government's priorities, the range of subject options available to students has reduced significantly. At the start of this research project the school had students enrolled on a wide range of applied and alternative programmes of study including hairdressing, motor vehicle repair and engineering. However, by the end of the research process at Brimpton High the curriculum being following by the majority of students was significantly different. Jack, a student interviewed at Brimpton High, commented that he was interested in studying engineering, which the school was offering as a 14-19 Diploma. Jack said "I always knew that not many people got it (a place on the engineering programme), but I wanted to do it because I knew somebody who was already doing it, but then when I got my choices back I didn't get it". When I explored this point further Jack revealed that none of the students that requested engineering as one of their subject options were successfully enrolled on the programme. I learnt from my interview with the Principal of the school that the engineering programme, along with the hairdressing and motor vehicle programmes, were dropped from the school's curriculum as a result of poor exam performance in the previous year's GCSE results. These programmes of study were replaced with additional groupings of Humanities and Modern Foreign Language subjects in an attempt to improve the school's performance in the EBacc performance tables. Therefore, although the students wanted to select particular subject choices ultimately these options were not available to them. This indicates that subject options within a given school are a factor in subject 'choice'.

4.3.3 Range of Subject Choices: Croyston High

Considering the differences in responses regarding the range of subject choices available to students at Armscliffe High and Croyston High a clear contrast can be identified. Only one of the

thirteen students interviewed at Armscliffe High stated that the range of subject choices available to them was an influencing factor when making their curricular decisions. If we compare the number of students that identified the range of subject choices as being a key influencing factor on their decision making with the results from the student interviews at Croyston High we see that from the fifteen student interviews, nine students commented that the range of subject choices available was a key influencing factor for them when making their subject choices. One of the students that I interviewed at Croyston High called Joe said "I just wanted to pick something different from the subjects that I've been doing for a long time". Another student I interviewed called Rachael told me "I knew I wanted to do all three sciences so I decided that my other subject choice should be something a bit different and fun, so I liked that I was able to pick something that I hadn't done before". This is contrasting to the findings from Armscliffe High where it appeared that students were both more decisive and more confident in knowing what they wanted from their curricular choices. Rebecca, a student from Armscliffe High, was one student who commented with remarkable pragmatism about her motivation to select the combination of curricular options that she chose to follow. Unlike students from Croyston High, who described making subject choices for "fun" or "an interest to learn about something new", Rebecca's description mirrors that of many students from Armscliffe High who described the curricular options process as a step in the process that will lead them to their FE college of choice and help them secure a place at university.

4.4 Influence of School Context: Future Aims

By comparing the students' responses to the questions concerning the range of subject choices available to them and another question concerning the students aims for the future, we can investigate further. Future aims can refer to a particular career pathway that a student may want to follow or entry in to specific college of Further Education. By considering the number of students from the different schools who identified their future aims as being a significantly

influencing factor on the subject choices they made, then the results are interesting and provide insight. The comparison across cases on the importance of a range of subject options indicates that something else can mediate choice and that is their future aims.

4.4.1 Future Aims: Armscliffe High

At Armscliffe High, twelve of the thirteen students who participated in this project identified their future aims and aspirations as being an influencing factor on their curricular decisions. In addition to the case of Rebecca, as described in the previous section concerning the range of subject choices at Armscliffe High, who made curricular selections with her aims for the future at the forefront of her thoughts. Other students from Armscliffe High, Georgina, Charlotte, Molly, Emma and Harry each clearly described how they had made a combination of curricular options that would provide them with an opportunity to achieve the EBacc and improve their chance to successfully securing a place to study at the best performing local Further Education college, Thorpe College.

However, Rhiona, another student interviewed from Armscliffe High, made it clear to me early in our interviews that she had a different plan in her mind regarding what she wanted to do in the future beyond her time in education. In contrast to the other students from Armscliffe High, Rhiona was making subject choices that not only went against what appeared to be 'the norm' at Armscliffe High, but were likely to lead her to a local college that many at the school did not consider to be their first choice FE destination. Unlike the majority of students at Armscliffe High Rhiona did not select subjects that would put her on the EBacc pathway. Instead of a Humanities subject she chose to study GCSE Media Studies because as Rhiona described "it was going to give me the chance to do something new". As this research study developed and I spoke with Rhiona again during later interviews she described how much she was enjoying studying Media Studies. She also said "I always wanted to go to Thorpe College, like everybody else, but now I

know I want to go to Gladstone College because that is the best place around here to study Media".

The findings from Rhiona's interview were interesting because, although her particular intentions for the future are contrary to other students from Armscliffe High, she does support the common theme of all students from the school who made their curricular decisions with clear regard for their aims for the future. I would conclude from this that a key facet of the school culture was a future oriented curricular choice framework.

4.4.2 Future Aims: Brimpton High

A similar pattern is evident when considering the interview responses from the students at Brimpton High, with eight of the ten students involved in the project stating that they recognise that their aims for the future play a significantly influencing role in the curricular choices process. When the students at Brimpton High are making GCSE subject choices they are doing so with their aspirations for the future, and specifically for their time immediately beyond school, in the forefront of their minds.

Katherine, a student interviewed at Brimpton High, commented that she only ever wanted to pursue an interest in science. She told me "I just like finding out stuff, investigating. Ever since I was little my parents have been teaching me about science and at a higher and more complex level then what I've been doing at school, which is really interesting. So when I go in to lessons it's always been more interesting because I feel I understand more about why things are the way they are". When I spoke with Katherine during interviews later in the study it became clear to me that Katherine's subject choices were not only based on her interest in the subject area, but also on her ambitions to study science subjects at a higher level. During a later interview Katherine said "all I want to do is study science at A-level at the Thorpe College, because I know it's the best place around".

Another student from Brimpton High, Matthew, described how he wanted to pursue a career in the sports industry, specifically as a personal trainer. During his interview he commented "I think being a personal trainer would be a really good job to have, helping people get fit and healthy. That's why I chose to study GCSE PE with my free choice. It's harder than I thought it was going to be and we don't do much practical, but if it helps me to do what I want to do in the future then it will be worth it".

4.4.3 Future Aims: Croyston High

Responses from the students who participated in this study from Croyston High contrast significantly from both Armscliffe High and Brimpton High. Of the 15 students at Croyston High interviewed as part of this project only 4 identified the aims they have for the future as being an influencing factor on the curricular decisions that they made. One of the students at Croyston High called Lucie said "I was looking forward to picking my own subjects for a long time and I've always thought that Business sounds interesting, so I liked that I could drop a subject I don't like and pick Business Studies instead". If we consider the findings from the student responses relating to the questions concerning the influence of future aims and the influence of the range of subject options available then it is clear that the opportunity to select a subject from a new range of subjects, that were previously unavailable to the students, was an influencing factor on the curricular choices that the students made.

This analysis concerning students from Croyston High's future aims is of particular interest because for the first time in this research project we are presented with evidence that a group of students made curricular options based on their interests, rather than based upon a specific aim for the future to gain access to a particular FE provider or to enter a specific profession. The students referred to specific curricular choices that they had made because they enjoyed learning about that subject area or they were interested to learn about something new. As identified within the literature review there is a significant gap in the literature of curricular

choice concerning students making decisions based on their interests, rather than their aims for the future, IAG or the influence of a family member.

4.5 <u>Findings: Influence of Family</u>

4.5.1 <u>Influence of Family: Parents</u>

If we consider the role that the student's parents have on the decision making process then a clear pattern becomes evident:

- At Armscliffe High ten, of the thirteen students interviewed, described how their parents influenced their decision making and played a significant role in their curriculum choices process.

- At Brimpton High four, of the ten students interviewed, identified their parents as being an influence on their curricular option decisions.

- At Croyston High we can see that only three, of the fifteen students interviewed, described their parents as being an influence on the subject decisions that they made.

The role of students' parents differs considerably in the different schools involved in this study, from minimal involvement at Croyston High to a very 'hands on' approach from the parents of students at Armscliffe High. The role of students' parents is inconsistent at Brimpton High with some parents heavily involved in the decisions their children make and others having little or no involvement, based on the views of the sample interviewed.

A key element of the interviews completed with students from each of the schools revolves around the sources of advice that students drew from when making their curricular decisions and family influences.

At Croyston High only one third of the students interviewed stated that their parents were an influencing factor on the curricular choices that they made. This factor can be linked with the

literature review in Chapter 2 (sub-section 2.5) of this report and the work of Barber and Eccles (1992) who identified that students' parents from more privileged backgrounds are more likely to influence the curricular choices of young people than parents from less privileged backgrounds. This is one way that I see socio-economic status making a difference in the way that curricular choices are made.

4.5.2 Parents: Armscliffe High

If we consider the responses of Charlotte, one of the students from Armscliffe High, we see evidence of the significant role her parents played in helping her to decide which subject options to pursue. When I asked Charlotte how she made her curricular decisions the first words she replied with were "I discussed it with my parents" (during the first interview that I held with Charlotte I learnt that both of her parents were university graduates and that her father was employed in a professional industry and that her mother was self-employed). When I asked Charlotte to expand on this she described how her parents and she "had a sort of family meeting to discuss the different options". I asked her if having a family meeting was a regular event at home and she told me that they did not have family meetings very often but that her Dad would organise a family meeting if there was something important to discuss. Charlotte and I discussed the content of the family meeting further and she described how, during the meeting, her parents advised her to select subject options that would help her to achieve the EBacc as this would give her the best chance of getting in to Thorpe College. Charlotte went on to describe how, after the family meeting with her parents, she discussed her options with her teachers at school and she described how her teachers gave a similar message to that in the family meeting, in Charlotte's words "the teachers at school agreed with my parents about the EBacc". I find this to be an interesting comment because it underlines just how important the student's parents were in the decision making process, in so far as the student describes the teachers agreeing with the advice given by her parents, rather than the reverse, where the student's parents agree

with the advice of the teachers, which might be a more typical and more expected outcome and would suggest a different prioritising of group influences.

4.5.3 <u>Parents</u>: <u>Brimpton High</u>

As stated above, the curriculum design at Brimpton High was structuring the students' curricular choices most strongly. Due to the nature of the curriculum design employed at Brimpton High the findings of this research study found little evidence that students' parents had an influence on the curricular selections that students made at Brimpton High. However, where there was evidence of parental influence, such as in the case of Katherine, the influence was significant. Kathrine commented "both of my parents are employed in the science industry, which has influenced by love of Science. My Dad is a senior scientist at a chemical plant and I guess my interest in Science has developed because of him". When I asked Katherine if her parents had influenced her to select separate Sciences at GCSE (sole GCSE qualifications in Chemistry, Biology and Physics) she said "no, I chose separate Sciences because I am interested in Science". It was clear to me that although Katherine's parents had not directly encouraged her to select to study the three Sciences separately at GCSE they had influenced her curricular choices by generating her interest and "love" in Science from a young age.

4.5.4 <u>Parents</u>: <u>Croyston High</u>

At Croyston High a number of the students actually expressed surprise at the question when they were asked if they had discussed their subject options their parents. These students described how the choices that they had to make were their choices and that they would not be influenced by anyone from home because there was nobody at home who would be involved in the process. A smaller number of students even dismissed any involvement from their parents.

At Croyston High, a student named Emily, made some particularly interesting comments that sum up some of the common themes shared by the students at the school. When asked what

role her parents played in her curricular decisions she explained that her parents did not play any role in the process and that "they were happy for me to pick whatever I wanted". When I pursued this line of questioning further with Emily and asked whether her parents would be more involved when she made decisions about her future beyond her time at school she offered a similar response by saying "it will still be my decision and I don't expect my parents to be involved at all". When I asked why her parents would not be involved in the process and why she would not turn for them for advice she replied "my parents don't get school stuff".

At this stage of the interview it was natural to ask Emily, as she had not discussed her curricular choice options with her parents, who she had spoken to about her different options, if indeed she had discussed her options with anyone. Emily replied "the only people I spoke to were my teachers" and when I asked why she had discussed her options with her teachers she told me "because I had to, the school made me". I asked her if she thought that discussing the process and her curricular options with her teachers was useful to which she replied "I guess so, because now I know that the subjects I want all fit together". By this remark Emily was referring to the different subject option blocks that schools use to ensure that they can adequately staff the different subject options that they offer to students. This might imply that schools are guiding students towards subjects that the school can be accommodated into the curriculum timetable, rather than what might be most appropriate for the student. It also suggests that, although Croyston High does not provide specific careers guidance meetings there is structured support in place for teachers to provide students with advice and guidance.

When I explored this topic further, by asking Emily for more details about the conversations she had with her teachers, she told me that during the discussions her teachers had asked her about what she wanted to do in the future and confirmed for her whether the subject choices that she was considering would provide her with an opportunity to pursue her interests in the future. I

concluded this part of the interview by asking Emily if this part of the process had been useful for her and she replied "yes, because now I know that I am making the right choices".

On reflection I found this exchange with Emily regarding the role that her teachers played in her curricular decision making particularly interesting. Early in this part of the interview she suggested that her teachers served a purely administrative role in the process as they double checked that the subject options that the student had selected could viably form a suitable timetable. However, when explored a little further more details became obvious about the role that the teacher had in the process. Most notably when Emily described how the teachers asked her questions about her interests and about her plans for the future, then offered advice about which subjects would provide her with the best opportunity to pursue her interests beyond her time at school. In pursuing this line of questioning I was able to learn that the staff at Croyston High had provided Emily with advice after she has clearly stated her own interests.

My research suggests that the role of the teachers at Croyston High is essential for the students during the curricular decision making process. As Emily described "my parents don't get school stuff", therefore the role of the teacher to effectively substitute a disengaged or uninformed parent is important for ensuring that the students receive as much support as necessary throughout the process.

This interview with Emily at Croyston High is in stark contrast to the majority of responses that I received from students at Armscliffe High. Unlike Emily who dismissed any role that her parents played in helping her to make her curricular decisions, many of the students from Armscliffe High described their parents as being the first people they turned to when seeking any advice regarding their curricular options.

4.6 <u>Influence of Family: Siblings</u>

In addition to focusing on the role that a student's parents can play in the subject options process another area explored was the influence that siblings have on the curricular choices that students make. The results of this study highlight relatively little influence from students' siblings, however there is some evidence that pressure caused by the success of older siblings or the experiences of older brothers and sisters has played a role in the curricular choices process for some students.

4.6.1 <u>Siblings: Armscliffe High</u>

At Armscliffe High only one student made a significant reference to how a sibling has influenced her curricular choices. A student I interviewed called Rebecca described how her relationship with her older brother put pressure on her to achieve. Rebecca made numerous references to her older brother and the pressure that she felt to compete with the success that her brother has experienced. Like the majority of students interviewed at Armscliffe High, Rebecca had ambitions to go to Thorpe College upon successful completion of her GCSEs, and then after completing her A-levels, she wants to go to university. The references that Rebecca made to her older brother became more pertinent when the age difference between the two siblings became apparent. Whilst Rebecca was making the curricular options for her GCSEs her brother had already successfully completed his GCSEs and had recently begun studying for his A-levels at Rebecca's further education destination of choice, Thorpe College. As I interviewed Rebecca over the duration of this research study it became clear that, due to the three year age gap between the two siblings that whichever stage of her educational Rebecca was just starting her brother had already successfully completed and moved on to the next stage.

When I interviewed Rebecca for the third time, when she was in Year 11 and preparing to sit her GCSE exams, her brother had successfully completed four A-levels at Thorpe College and has

started his undergraduate degree at a good university. Rebecca acknowledged a degree of pressure that she felt as a result of her brothers successes and told me "my parents are really proud of what he has done and so I need to make sure that I do as well as he has, or better". It is reasonable to conclude at this stage that in addition to the influence Rebecca felt from her parents to pursue the EBacc, to support her ambitions of studying at Thorpe College, she was also influenced by the pressure she felt from having an academically successful older brother.

Rebecca described an element of competition between her and her brother and I can see from the responses she gave during her interviews that the curricular choices that she has made were influenced in part by her brother and the success that he is experiencing.

4.6.2 Siblings: Brimpton High

Notably none of the fifteen students at Brimpton High who started this study, or the ten students who completed this study, identified their siblings as having had a significant influence on the curricular selections that students made at Brimpton High.

4.6.3 Siblings: Croyston High

At Croyston High only one student made a significant reference to how a sibling has influenced her curricular choices. A student named Lauren commented that the experiences of her older brother had influenced her to pursue a different academic route and choose different curricular options. Lauren described how her older brother had chosen to study 'separate sciences' (individual GCSE programmes in Chemistry, Physics and Biology), rather than the popular 'dual award' that carries the value of 2 GCSEs and allows students to select an additional 'free choice' subject selection. For a student to be considered to follow the separate sciences route they must first satisfy certain criteria regarding their Key Stage 3 level of performance in science subjects. This selection criteria was in place when Lauren's brother made his curricular choices and remained so when Lauren made her selections. During an interview Lauren explained how her

brother regretted the curricular choices that he made and how he believed that making the wrong choices for his GCSE subjects led him down an academic route that he would ultimately never break away from. Lauren told me "he hated his choices and never did very well, but by then it was too late because once you've made your choices you can't go back".

At the end of his GCSE programme Lauren's brother had underachieved significantly and when he expressed an interest in returning to the 6th form at Croyston High the only programme option available to him was a one year 'catch up' programme that would help him secure the entry requirements necessary to gain a place on an A-level programme. When I asked Lauren what this meant to her and what she had learnt from her brothers experiences she said "to make sure I get my choices right". She then added "looking back, he made the wrong choices and because he made the wrong choices he didn't do well and that had an effect on everything else". When I explored this further by asking Lauren to be more specific about how she is going to ensure she makes the right choices she said "I am basically going to make sure that I choose the subject that I'm good at and that I enjoy, I think that if I do that then I will do well". The findings from this interview suggest that Lauren was considering the prior experiences of her brother when making her curricular options and therefore she chose to make subject choices that would increase her chances of success. It is clear that the negative experience of her brother played a key role in Lauren's decision making process, potentially at the expense of pursuing subject options and a curricular pathway that was more interesting for her.

4.7 Influence of Family: Other Family Members

Another topic that arises from my research findings concerned the role that family members, other than a student's parents or siblings, play during the curricular options process.

4.7.1 <u>Other Family Members: Armscliffe High</u>

Georgina described to me how she felt influenced by her aunt during the curricular options process. She described how her aunt is a successful solicitor based in Cambridge and how she invited Georgina to go and stay with her to participate in a week of work experience in her company. Georgina explained to me that she knew she wanted to be a solicitor or an accountant "because the money is good and because it is a respectable profession". I asked her if having completed a week of work experience had reinforced her aspirations for the future, to which she replied "definitely, I am lucky to have an aunt who is a successful solicitor and can give me this experience, now I know for sure that this is what I want to do in the future". I pursued this line of questioning further by asking Georgina if she had enjoyed visiting the City of Cambridge, to which she replied "very much, it is a beautiful place…" I was going to add a question about whether she would like to be a student at the university in Cambridge but before I could ask she added "my aunt told me that I would need to go to university if I wanted to be a successful solicitor like her so I thought I might as well aim for the best and try and go to Cambridge, if I did I might be able to work with my aunt in the future". This exchange clearly identifies that Georgina had been influenced by her aunt to pursue a career as a solicitor.

Georgina's school was advising her to select EBacc subjects to improve her chances of getting in to Thorpe College, which in turn would help her secure a place at the university of her choice, it is feasible to conclude that a combination of influences including her parents, her aunt and her school led Georgina to the curricular decisions that she made.

Another example of family involvement in students' curricular decisions came from a different interview with a student from Armscliffe High called Emma. Emma described how her family had a successful business, which was founded by her grandfather and was now operated by her mother. Emma told me "I know that my grandfather and my mum both really want me to work in the family business in the future and that's why they were very keen for me to choose Business

Studies as one of my options". I explored this issue further by asking Emma if Business was what she wanted to do, both now at school, and in the future. To which she replied "I want to do it because they want me to do it and because it's a good business, it's successful". Emma's decision to choose GCSE Business Studies as one of her subject options in place of a Humanities subject means that she will not follow a programme of study that will satisfy the criteria for the EBacc. In this instance the influence of Emma's grandfather and mother may be leading her towards a route focused on a specific career rather than Further and Higher Education.

4.7.2 Other Family Members: Brimpton High

There is also evidence of other family members influencing students' curricular decisions at Brimpton High. A student from Brimpton High, named Tom, described how he was influenced by his uncle to pursue a career in the RAF. During the interview he was vague about the subject choices and appeared disinterested in my line of questioning regarding the curricular options process at Brimpton High, however when asked about his aspirations for the future, beyond his time at school, he became much more engaged in the interview. To the question 'what would you like to do when you leave Brimpton High?' he replied "I want to join the RAF like my uncle". As the interview developed I learnt that Tom lived with his mother, who was not in work at the time of the interview, and had never known his father. It became apparent that Tom's uncle was the only male role model in his family and that Tom was determined to follow his uncle in to the military when he leaves school. In Tom's case it would appear that the IAG provided by the school was somewhat lost on this student as Tom had little interest in any Further Education college and was only interested in a career in the RAF.

4.7.3 <u>Other Family Members: Croyston High</u>

Similar to the extent that students' parents affected the curricular decisions that students made there was no reference in the student interviews that other family members had a significant influence on the curricular selections that students made at Croyston High.

4.8 <u>Findings: School Policy and School Politics: The Government's New Priorities and the Impact on Schools</u>

Every secondary school has a decision to make regarding how it responds to national education policies set by the current government and the three schools involved in this study are no different. However, the extent that the schools have responded to the government's initiatives differ significantly. My research suggests that both Armscliffe High and Brimpton High have responded very differently when compared to Croyston High. Armscliffe High and Brimpton High have both embraced the EBacc as a measure of school success and have tailored their Key Stage 4 curriculum accordingly. However, an alternative approach was taken by the other school in this study, Croyston High, where an alternative response to national policy is taken and instead students are provided with a broad and balanced Key Stage 4 curriculum that puts the interests of the students ahead of the latest government initiatives.

4.8.1 <u>Government Priorities: Armscliffe High</u>

My research, as stated already, points towards the students' parents at Armscliffe High as being the most influential group impacting on the curricular decisions that they make. As the students' parents are so heavily involved, engaged and supportive in the education of their children it is reasonable to assume that they are knowledgeable about the government's latest priorities and are eager for their children to benefit by pursuing such a curriculum. The decision of the students' parents to advise their children to select curricular options that will help them secure the EBacc is a decision, and an opinion, that could be formed in two halves. Initially the students'

parents are likely to have learned about the government's latest education priorities and the introduction of the EBacc via the media, through sources such as the television news and newspapers. However, a representative of the school described how when students' parents attend the parents' information evening held each year at Armscliffe High and they hear the leadership of the school providing information in support of the government's latest priorities, then the opinion of the students' parents as to what their children should be studying during Key Stage 4 becomes fully formed. As the students' parents have such a significant influence over the curricular decisions that the children make then from this point onwards it becomes clear what subject choices the majority of students will make.

4.8.2 <u>Government Priorities</u>: <u>Brimpton High</u>

At Brimpton High the vast majority of students are advised to select subject options that will enable them to pursue what the school describes as being the 'EBacc pathway'. The main benefit to both of the schools, of encouraging students to follow such an academic route, is that the schools can expect to see an increase in the number of students satisfying the government targets of achieving a GCSE A*-C grade in English, Mathematics and three other academic subjects. For Brimpton High this is likely to see GCSE results that place the schools in a higher, and more competitive, position in the national and local school league tables. In the current climate, where school performance is particularly competitive and school performance is a key issue for a variety of different groups, including Ofsted, the Local Authority and the students' parents, offering students a curriculum that is likely to see an increase in the number of students successfully achieving the government's minimum student targets is desirable for the school.

Shortly before the start of this research project the school was listed as 'having notice to improve' and was described to me as being 'on the brink of special measures'. In the academic year before this research project began the curriculum at Brimpton High was broad and varied, consisting of a range of academic and vocational subjects. The school offered a wide variety of

applied learning and vocational courses and had access to specialist teaching facilities for alternative programmes of study. However, by the time this research project began, according to the school staff I interviewed, the curriculum had changed significantly and the vast majority of alternative curriculum options had been dropped from the Key Stage 4 curriculum.

Following a disappointing Ofsted inspection and a decline in exam results over a period of several years the school found itself in a difficult position, therefore when the government introduced new priorities Brimpton High saw this as an opportunity to reverse the fortunes of the school by investing in changes to the curriculum. For this reason the school promoted the EBacc heavily during the curricular options process, affecting the students involved in this research project, and the vast majority of students chose to pursue an EBacc curriculum.

When I interviewed the Principal at Brimpton High she explained the school's decision to alter the Key Stage 4 curriculum to be in line with the government's priorities. She described how a shift towards an academic curriculum would be best for the students of the school and would better equip them for the future and make them more competitive with students from other schools in the area when applying for their Further Education College or 6th form of choice.

However, when I interviewed one of the form tutors at Brimpton High the message I got was very different. The form tutor told me that the school was in an extremely difficult position for a number of different reasons. First and foremost the school's exam results were declining, as described earlier in this chapter, additionally the form tutor also explained to me that the number of students at the school has been dropping rapidly during recent years. During the first year of this research project the number of students in Year 11 sitting their GCSE exams at the school was 222, during the second year of this research project the number of students in Year 11 fell to 168 and during the final year of this study, when the students I started working with in Year 9 were now in Year 11, the number of students sitting their GCSE exam was just 100.

During the period of this research project the number of students throughout the school dropped from 838 to 493. I asked the form tutor if the reason why the number of students in the school was due to changes in the local demographics and the number of children born to local families. However, she replied that this only a small part of the reason for the drop in student numbers and that instead local families were choosing to send their children to different schools in the area. When I pursued this line of questioning to better understand why parents of potential students would choose to send their children to a different school the form tutor told me that the main reason was the school's approach to the curriculum. She told me that many students' parents disagree with the changes that the school has made to the school and in particular to the curriculum, which the form tutor told me the students' parents described to her as being limiting and not suitable for the majority of students.

The form tutor I interviewed also described how the changes at the school have led to a significant number of early retirements, teacher redundancies and the introduction of temporary contracts for all new staff members. She told me that morale is very low as teaching staff are worried about the future of the school and are concerned that in, the words of the form tutor, "by trying to please Gove and his league tables we might all be out of a job and the school might have to close".

The image of the school presented by the form tutor contrasted significantly with the image portrayed by the Principal. Whereas during her interview the Principal of the school made no reference to the local or national school league tables, or to the reduction in student numbers, the image that the form tutor presented was one of a school experiencing challenging circumstances and an uncertain future.

4.8.3 Government Priorities: Croyston High

In contrast, Croyston High's Key Stage 4 curriculum leads students in an entirely different direction from that which the government identifies as being a national priority. Whilst this may

seem like an unusual, and somewhat provocative, decision on the part of the school, my research shows me that the school's leadership is confident that the curriculum offer they provide is suitable and addresses the specific needs of the school's students.

During an interview at Croyston High the Principal told me that "she had a responsibility to her students and not to Michael Gove (the government's Education Secretary at the time of the interview)". When I asked the Principal to expand on her comments she explained to me that during her time as Principal she has seen a wide variety of different government initiatives and priorities come and go and at all times, despite the difficulties she may experience regarding her professional opinion, she has stood by her own educational ethics to provide a curriculum that her students' need. I asked the Principal if there was an element of risk in such an approach due to the emphasis that the Education Secretary attached to the latest priority concerning academic subjects. However, she dismissed these concerns by referring to her school's improved exam results performance over recent years and described how the school's consistently strong exam results over time provide an opportunity to offer a curriculum that provides for the priorities of the school's students, rather than the priorities of the government.

This argument regarding the option of offering students a curriculum that addresses their particular needs, rather than the government's latest priorities, raises some interesting questions. The stance that the Principal of Croyston High takes could easily be shared by the Principal of Armscliffe High, where the exam results of recent years have also been consistently strong and competitive with other local schools. However, the position at Armscliffe High is very much one targeted at addressing the priorities of the current government. My research implies that such a decision is based on two particular factors, one to ensure that the school remains competitive in the local and national school league tables when new forms of school performance measurement are being used, but, perhaps most pertinently, to satisfy the priorities and demands of the students' parents. I see this as being an example of socio-

economic status influencing the students' curricular options process as it is the parents that are educated to a university level and are more affluent that are driving social mobility.

The staff interviews at Brimpton High prompted me to re-consider the decision of the Principal at Croyston High not to promote an EBacc combination of subjects for students of the Academy. I started by returning to the student interviews from Croyston High and I noticed a common theme occurring that may explain why only five of the fifteen students interviewed described their future aims as being a factor that influenced their curricular decisions. Unlike the other two schools involved in this study Croyston High has a 6th form attached to the school, which for the majority of students at the school, and the majority of students involved in this study, is their Further Education or 6th form destination of choice. The pattern that I identified by revisiting the Croyston High student interviews revealed that the majority of students were making their curricular decisions for Key Stage 4 based on two main reasons: either past experience of which subjects they either enjoyed or had experienced previous success with, or they were taking advantage of the opportunity to elect to study a new subject that they have not studied before. Unlike at Armscliffe High, the factor of any pre-requisites and entry requirements for Further Education has little influence on the curricular decisions that the students of Croyston High make because they continue their education at the Croyston 6th form.

Another interesting finding I identified, specifically concerning Brimpton High and Croyston High, became evident when I combined the findings of the staff interviews from Croyston High and re-visited the Croyston High student interviews. The finding concerns the significant role that vocational education continues to hold in the school's curriculum at Croyston High. Whilst Brimpton High appears to have disregarded the vast majority of its vocational curriculum Croyston High continues to embrace a wide range of alternative and vocational curriculum options, which are made available to students to select to study alongside more traditional academic subjects.

4.9 <u>School Policy and School Politics: EBacc or Breadth and Balance?</u>

The decisions that the students in each school make are contrasting and can be linked to the different advice that students receive. There is evidence that students in Armscliffe High and Brimpton High are being influenced by the advice they are given by the school to select particular subject options. This advice is in line with the requirements that are most likely to satisfy the majority of students' future aims. Students at Armscliffe High in particular have ambitions for the future that involve continuing their academic studies at a specific 6th Form college. As a result the school provides students with advice regarding the curricular options that are most likely to support such an application. All this means that the students at Armscliffe High are actively encouraged to make subject choices that will provide them with an opportunity of achieving the EBacc. One of the students that I interviewed at Armscliffe High called Harry said "I am making the subject choices that are most likely to get me in to Thorpe College and then to a really good university". Whilst another student called Georgina said "I don't know if I will be able to get in to Thorpe College so I have to do the EBacc to give myself the best chance of getting in because I know that Thorpe College will give me the best opportunity of getting in to a good university".

There is clearly an additional benefit to the school within this equation as not only can the schools claim to be providing the students with an appropriate vehicle to access the most desirable Post 16 options, but also the schools can reap the rewards they will receive from an improvement in the local and national school exam result league tables.

There is data within my research that suggests staff at both Armscliffe High and Brimpton High have even changed the original subject choices of some students in order to ensure that as many students as possible are studying EBacc subject options. It would appear that the priorities of providing students with the curriculum 'tools' they need to have the opportunity to pursue their first choice Post 16 destination, whilst also satisfying the current government priorities, are really at the heart of the information, advice and guidance provided at Armscliffe High and

Brimpton High. Unfortunately in both schools staff informed me that there is evidence of students underperforming when they have been denied their original curricular options and have instead been enrolled on to subjects to satisfy the criteria of the EBacc. Regrettably when students should be experiencing an opportunity to exercise agency, perhaps for their first time in their lives, it seems that for some this opportunity is being denied in pursuit of priorities of the government and, in turn, the school.

Those students from Brimpton High referred to above have many similarities as the students Hodgson and Spours (2015) referred to as the 'missing middle' (see sub-section 2.2.2.1). Prior to the introduction of the EBacc these students from Armscliffe High would most likely have been enrolled on a programme of study made up of core academic subjects, whilst students from Brimpton High would most likely be following a programme of study made up of a combination of core academic subjects combined with elected vocational subjects. Regrettably it is these students from Brimpton High in the 'missing middle' that are at risk of underperforming on their prescribed EBacc pathway.

When compared with the approach taken at Croyston High we can see yet another significant contrast. The students of Croyston High are actively encouraged to make a free choice when selecting their subject options. Of the fifteen students involved in interviews for this research project none of the students interviewed were even aware of the EBacc. When I started my research with students at Croyston High it was clear that the students were unaware that a particular combination of curricular options would allow them to claim having successfully 'secured' the EBacc. The students were unaware of the combination of subjects that could help the students to fulfil the requirements of the EBacc or the benefits that achieving the EBacc could provide them with in the future. It is interesting to observe that whilst some schools feel under pressure to pursue the EBacc for their students, another school seems to practically disregard it.

It is clear that policy is at the heart of a school's approach to curriculum and within this study there is evidence of the consequences that policy can have on schools. The policy that led to the introduction of the EBacc had a direct impact on the curriculum provision, and in turn the elected learning pathways that students chose to follow, in two of the three schools involved in this study. When this theory is combined with the way that students' parents cooperated with this agenda it is possible to see how it is even more likely that the students at these schools would follow the EBacc and not choose from options based on interest or prior enjoyment.

At Armscliffe High and Brimpton High there was clear evidence that the curricular priorities identified by the school were heavily influenced by government policy. At Armscliffe High the EBacc was energetically promoted to students who wanted to progress to study A-levels at their preferred Further Education destination. As continuation of study to the preferred local Further Education College was a key objective of both students and their parents it is possible to identify a relationship between government policy, the school's curricular priorities and how these factors influence the students' parents.

At Brimpton High the curricular priorities of the school were also heavily influenced by government policy. However, the school's motivation for altering the curricular options available to students based on government policy is based on contrasting motivations of that of Armscliffe High. At the time that the EBacc was introduced Brimpton High was a failing school and fully adopted the government's policy in an attempt to reverse the fortunes on the school. As a result the curricular options process at the school was made practically redundant as all students were required to select from a narrow range of subject options that would guarantee they had at least the potential to achieve the EBacc.

The situation at Croyston High was different from that at both Armscliffe High and Brimpton High and yet no less affected, rather than influenced, by government policy. Despite the influence of government policy the curricular priorities at Croyston High are set by the

leadership of the school to address the needs of students and the local community. As a result students can select curricular options from a greater range of subject choices than at either of the other schools involved in this research project. However, by not doing more to facilitate the government's policy concerning the EBacc the school has seen its standing in the Local Authority performance tables drop. As a result the school could be classified as requiring improvement when the school is next inspected by Ofsted.

In conclusion it is clear to see that there are consequences linked to government policy for all schools, whether a school follows or ignores government policy. Those schools that follow government policy to the letter are most likely to see an improvement in their exam results, whereas schools that choose not to adjust their curriculum in line with government policy are most likely to drop in examination performance tables. However, it is unlikely that all students required to follow the EBacc curriculum will be successful and are therefore being put at risk by the school's decision to respond to the government's expectations so profoundly.

However, it is interesting to observe that although schools like Armscliffe High and Brimpton High may see an improvement in exam results this does not take in to consideration those students who do not successfully achieve the EBacc. Such students may well have benefited from access to a wider range of curricular subject options. In contrast, a school like Croyston High may offer a broad and balanced curriculum, tailored to the needs of its students with consideration for the needs of the local community, and yet see a drop in position in the school exam performance league tables.

It is difficult to identify a definitive 'right or wrong' as an argument could be made for following both scenarios. Government policy is written by experts employed in an advisory capacity. The advice they provide is aimed at improving school performance across the country to ensure that school leavers are appropriately equipped to contribute to society. Any school that chooses to

ignore the policy laid out by the government must do so with conviction that the decisions they make and the actions they choose to implement are right for their students.

4.10 <u>Re-addressing the Research Questions of this Study</u>

With access to all the findings of this research study I am now in a position to re-visit the research questions that I asked at the beginning of this study.

The overarching research question that I asked at the beginning of this study was:

>   1.0   How do a sample of students in England, aged 14-16, select curriculum pathways?

To help me answer this question I considered three additional sub questions:

>   1.1   To what extent are the curricular decisions of the students influenced by family and friends?

The results of this research project identify that some students' curricular decisions are influenced by family and friends. However, the way that family and friends influence the curricular choices of these students differs significantly between the schools involved in this study. There is clearly a key role for parents to play in the curricular options process, however the results of this study suggest that the extent of parental involvement differs from school to school.

Although this research question aimed to identify the extent that family and friends could influence the curricular choices of a student aged 14-16 in reality the results of this study found no evidence that the students involved in this study were influenced by their friends or peers.

At Armscliffe High students' parents were very much involved in helping their children make curricular selections because the school chose to actively engage them in the process. At

Armscliffe High students' parents were invited to a meeting where they were spoken to about their role in the options process and how they could best advise their children. The parents also attended an information evening with their children where they could visit different subject areas and discuss the benefits of different curriculum selections with teachers and other staff members. Finally the parents were provided with literature to take away about the different curricular options and pathways, which they were encouraged to read, and refer to in their discussions, with their children. This level of parental involvement resulted in the students of Armscliffe High being heavily influenced by their parents.

The situation at the other schools involved in this study was significantly different. At Brimpton High and Croyston High students' parents were much less involved in the curricular options process. Neither school held a meeting to inform students' parents about the options process, nor was there a parents evening for students and their parents to meet with teachers from the different subject areas. Instead, much more ownership was given to the students to make their curricular decisions independently.

    1.2   To what extent are the curricular decisions of the students influenced by their socio-economic status?

The three schools involved in this study all serve communities of different socio-economic status. As a result it is possible to compare the extent that students' curricular decisions are influenced by socio-economic status. The results of this study suggest that students from families of higher socio-economic status are more likely to take an active role in the curricular decisions process. At Armscliffe High, which serves a middle class community, students' parents are heavily involved in the decision making process. The results of this study identified that the overwhelming majority of students from Armscliffe High aspire to attend a particular, successful, local FE centre, Thorpe College. Statistics suggest that the vast majority of students who attend Thorpe College successfully secure a place to study at a top university. Therefore, as the parents

of students from Armscliffe High are much more likely to have attended university and work in professional industries, they are more likely to want to encourage their children to pursue curriculum pathways that are most likely to provide them with the best opportunities to be successful.

At this stage of my analysis I am presented with an important question: does the local socio-economic status influence a school's policy and curriculum offer and therefore the learning opportunities available to its students or does a designed school curriculum reproduce a socio-economic status by providing particular learning opportunities? The results of this study suggest that in fact both happen. For example, at Brimpton High school curriculum policy is decided by national policy in spite of local families of low socio-economic status and yet at Croyston High the school curricular policy is decided in light of the local families of lower socio-economic status.

From the results of this study I can conclude that the extent of a student's socio-economic status impacts on the curricular pathways that students choose. At Croyston High, which serves a lower class community, students' parents are not heavily involved in the curricular options process. The literature review for this study informs us that parents of lower socio-economic status are less likely to take an active advisory role in the children's curricular choices. The results of this study support this claim as the parents of students from both Brimpton High and Croyston High do not play a significant role in the curricular decisions that their children make.

This lack of involvement from students' parents, such as those from Brimpton High and Croyston High, created opportunities for the leadership at the school to make changes to the curriculum provision of the school. Such changes to the curriculum design of the school may not have been possible at a school where students' parents were more involved in the decisions the school makes.

The Principal of Brimpton High expressed that government policy is interpreted by the leadership of the school to ensure that there is a suitable common curriculum for all and that,

for the students whose parents who do not know how best to advise their children, most doors will remain open to them when they do choose a career pathway. In the case of Brimpton High it may be that a significant number of students' parents tried to be positively engaged in their child's education, but were not vocal about the changes to the curriculum that the school's leadership made. This was beyond the scope of this research, which did not include interviews with parents. However, the findings do show that parents in the more socio-economically advantaged school community are well informed about the EBacc policy and pathways to future aims that lead to higher education and use this informed status to advise their children. Whereas students' parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less focused on higher education and more focused on current interests and enjoyment in subjects.

1.3   To what extent the curricular decisions of the students influenced by the culture and context of their schools?

The results of this research project identify this third sub question, concerning the extent that students' curricular decisions are influenced by the culture and context of their schools, as being a key finding of this study. More than any other factor the culture and context of the different schools influences the different curricular pathways that students choose to follow. The findings of this study suggest that a key factor that influences the curricular decisions that students make is formed by the culture and context of schools. The parents' advice and the curricular options available at the school, two other key factors discussed in the analysis, can both be traced back to the schools' responses to national policies.

The culture and context of each of the schools involved in this study were influential, but each for different reasons and in different ways. This is a key finding of this study due to the way that the context of the school intersects with parental influence and socio-economic status of the school's families and the local area.

Each of the schools involved in this study has a responsibility to be aware of the expectations that central government has for all schools. In turn these expectations guide the curriculum policy that is in place at each school. Therefore, as the literature review of this study identifies, as the government makes changes to the way that school performance is measured, such as with the introduction of first the EBacc and then Progress 8, so too do many schools alter the curriculum offer that they provide for students.

Responding to the expectations of central government is something that most schools simply cannot ignore. At the beginning of this research project central government introduced the EBacc as a new performance measure for schools as discussed within the Literature Review in Chapter 2. As a result of this development Armscliffe High made changes to the curriculum options that they made available to students. The key changes that Armscliffe High introduced were designed to ensure as many students as possible would be enrolled on a curriculum that would provide them with an opportunity to secure the EBacc and therefore contribute towards the school's EBacc percentage and help the school respond successfully to the government's new expectations.

A similar situation can be identified at Brimpton High where the curriculum offer available to students also changed in response to the new priorities as outlined by the government. The situation at Brimpton High however, although similar to that at Armscliffe High, was more extreme. Unlike Armscliffe High where students still had a degree of choice over concerning EBacc subject selections, at Brimpton High almost all students, regardless of suitability, were required to select curricular choices from a framework made up only of EBacc subject choices.

The situation as described at Brimpton High developed from a necessity for the school to improve its performance in response to government expectations. At the start of this research project Brimpton High was a school classified as 'Requiring Improvement' due to underperformance in the school exam performance league tables. As a result the school

leadership at Brimpton High identified the new EBacc performance measure as an opportunity to reverse the fortunes of the school. The situation at Brimpton High is an extreme scenario as it became clear early in my study that the opportunity to make a 'free' choice of subject options had been all but removed from the students.

Croyston High is the exception as throughout this study the school never encouraged students to select subject options that would put them on an EBacc pathway. In doing so the leadership at Croyston High were choosing to disregard the expectations of the government's new priorities. The findings of this study show that this decision was made because the leadership of the school believed that the students deserved to have a free choice of a wide range of different curriculum options and with it an opportunity to pursue their own areas of interest. Such a decision from the leadership of the school was a bold statement from the school and potentially one that they may prove to regret.

Whilst Brimpton High removed the opportunity for students to make independent curriculum choices the school did go on to benefit as the percentage of students successfully achieving the EBacc increased significantly, which helped the school to dramatically improve its overall league table performance and move from an official performance grading of 'Requires Improvement' to a performance grading of 'Good'.

The reverse is true at Croyston High where the school has slowly moved from being graded as 'Good' to 'Requires Improvement' as the school's exam performance has declined. The decision to allow student's free curricular choice instead of strategically targeting the EBacc in response to government expectations has had a significantly detrimental effect on the performance of the school in relation to the government's performance priorities.

4.11 <u>Summary</u>

Although there is evidence that students' families influenced the curricular choices that students made there is also evidence that the information that families used to provide their advice and guidance was being carefully selected by the schools.

For example, at Armscliffe High when students' parents were invited to a meeting to discuss the curricular options process the parents were advised of the new EBacc performance measure being introduced by the government. They were also advised that securing the EBacc would provide the students with the best opportunity to secure a place at Thorpe College. As successful entry to Thorpe College was the main priority for the vast majority of students from Armscliffe High information about the EBacc and the entry requirements to Thorpe College was the key information that students' parents took from this meeting. When this factor is combined with the fact that the government's new priorities concerning the EBacc were discussed at length in the national media it becomes possible to see how the students' parents could become influenced as to advise their children that the EBacc was the best curricular pathway to follow. Therefore, although it may appear that students' parents were the key influencing factor in the curricular decisions that their children made the reality is that the students' parents were advising the students to select the subject options that the school had identified as a priority given national policy.

As curriculum policy at the school dictated the message shared with students' parents the theory that it is the students' parents who are directly influencing the students' choices becomes blurred. The reality is that, in the background, it is the school's response to government policy that is the key factor influencing the curricular decisions that students made.

The findings of this study concerning the influence of students' socio economic status can have on the curricular decisions that students make can also be linked with the findings concerning school culture and context. As the literature and the research findings for this study suggest,

families with a higher socio-economic status can have a significant influence on the curricular choices that students make. However, when we consider this fact alongside what the results of this study reveal regarding parental involvement at each school the results are interesting. As previously discussed the students' parents at Armscliffe High took a hands-on approach to the curricular options process. The students' parents at Armscliffe High follow the expected norm of parents from families of higher socio-economic status by wanting to be actively involved in their children's curricular options process. However, the findings of this study suggest that the involvement of these parents was actually intended to re-inforce the priorities of the school's curriculum plan.

The advice that the students' parents at Armscliffe High received regarded the EBacc and the necessity for students to achieve the EBacc to secure a place at the FE college of their choice. It is difficult to question the value of the advice that the students' parents from Armscliffe High received as the recommendations of the school were designed to directly support students to achieve their goals.

In contrast to the situation at Armscliffe High, the leadership at Croyston High chose not to inform either the students or the students' parents about the EBacc. Instead the options process involved students choosing subject options from a curricular framework, designed by the school's leadership. This framework does not require students to select a Humanities or Modern Foreign Language subject and instead students have the opportunity to select from a wide range of alternative subject options. This range of alternative curricular options includes subjects such as Construction, Hair and Beauty, Hospitality, Business Studies, Health and Social Care and Media Studies.

In light of the government's new priorities concerning the EBacc such a decision from the school is surprising as the school would be unlikely to perform well in line with the government's new EBacc percentage performance measure.

The situation at Brimpton High was different from both Armscliffe High and Croyston High as, rather than engage in a prolonged dialogue with students' parents regarding different curricular options, the school made decisions regarding their curricular offer that resulted in almost all students following an 'EBacc pathway'.

The findings of this research study concerning FE destinations of students from Croyston High suggest that one of the reasons why the school chose not to make such a decision concerning the students' curricular options process requirements was because the majority of students from the school aspire to attend the school's 6th form. Therefore, unlike students from Armscliffe High who were aware of particular entry requirements necessary to access Thorpe College, the students from Croyston High did not need to pursue a pre-designated curricular pathway. The findings of this study suggest that the school's 6th form being the students' FE destination of choice is a major factor in the design of the Key Stage 4 curriculum.

As previously described the students' parents from Armscliffe High prioritise studying at Thorpe College as a key aim for their children and therefore, being aware of Thorpe College's EBacc entry requirements is a fundamental requirement. It is therefore easy to understand why the students' parents will insist the students follow the advice of the school and choose the EBacc pathway.

However, as the 6th form provision at Croyston High does not require students to have the EBacc as a baseline for entry to the 6th form the school has an opportunity to decide on their shape of the curriculum. In this case, the principal opted to offer a more broad and balanced curriculum. Therefore, the view of the principal at Croyston High is, that instead of targeting the government's expectations concerning the EBacc, the school can design a curriculum that addresses the need of their students whilst also providing an opportunity for students to pursue particular areas of interest. This study however did not find sufficient data to conclude that the curriculum at Croyston High fully meets the needs or interests of the students.

The findings of this study revealed that whilst many schools in England have focused on promoting academic curricular options to their students, Croyston High has continued to promote the value of vocational and applied programmes of study when studied alongside traditional core curriculum. As Croyston High serves a socially disadvantaged community with high levels of unemployment, the principal of Croyston High described how she was confident that she was aware of the skills deficit shared by school leavers from Croyston High. Importantly she also described how she understood how to address these skill levels and believed in the curricular model that she promoted at the school.

As the students did not need to achieve particular entry requirements to access an FE college of their choice the school instead could focus on addressing what they identified as being the skills shortage of their students. In the case of Croyston High this could be addressed by promoting vocational programmes of study, which would help students become more employable in the future.

Another interesting factor to consider concerns the socio-economic status of the community that Croyston High serves and the involvement of the students' parents in the curriculum that the school provides and the curricular selections that their children make. As previously mentioned the students' parents of Armscliffe High were heavily involved in the students' curricular options process, however at Croyston High the extent of involvement of the students' parents is extremely limited. The findings of this study suggest that this limited involvement of the students' parents at Croyston High played a role in the curriculum design put in place by the school's principal. Due to the lack of parental involvement the school's leadership are able to design a curriculum that they, in their professional opinion, believe to be suitable for the students of the school.

The situation at Brimpton High is different from that at both Armscliffe High and Croyston High as the findings of this study suggest that one of the key priorities of the curricular design in place

at Brimpton High was to address weaknesses of the school's performance. Therefore, in an attempt to address the challenges that the school faced regarding its exam results performance, the school's leadership removed a significant amount of choice from their students regarding curricular choices. For this reason the role of the students' parents, as well as provision of impartial IAG, are equally significantly reduced.

In contrast the moral and ethical stance taken by Croyston High, and in particular the school's principal, is a stance that the principal of either Armscliffe High or Brimpton High would be ill advised to take. At a school where students' parents are more heavily involved in the curricular decision making process, or a school that is underperforming with government priorities, it is far less likely that the curriculum model in place at Croyston High would be supported by the students' parents. As the students' parents at Croyston High are less involved in their children's education the school is likely to experience significantly less pressure from the students' parents to follow the government's expectations concerning the EBacc that are publicised in the media. The findings of this study collected from student's interviews even suggest that some students' parents may even be unaware of the government's EBacc performance measure.

Despite this ethical stance taken at Croyston High to provide a curriculum model for their students with little regard of the government's expectations concerning academic provision and the EBacc the short term outcomes have been detrimental to the performance of the school. Whilst others schools, such as Brimpton High have been able to reverse the fortunes of the school by embracing the government's new performance measures, the exam performance of Croyston High has dropped significantly. As a result the school has a low league table position compared to other schools in the same Local Authority.

Having considered the three sub research questions that I set at the start of this research project I am now in a position to summarise my findings and address the overarching research question of this study.

1.0   How do students in England, aged 14-16, select curriculum pathways?

The results of this research project have revealed that the curricular decisions that student's aged 14-16 make, and the curricular pathways that they follow, can be influenced by a wide variety of different factors. The findings of this research study suggest that some students' curricular decisions are influenced by their family and that linked to this factor is the influence of a families socio-economic status, the aspirations that the family have for their children and knowledge of the value that the government attaches to different educational qualifications. However, the results of this study suggest that the key factor influencing upon the curricular decisions that students make relates to the context of the school that the students attend and the policy that the schools set and follow in response to government expectations.

5.0 Chapter Five

5.1 Discussion

All of the students that I met during this research study expressed how much they had enjoyed the opportunity to make decisions about their time at school that the curricular options process provided. If we compare these findings with the literature regarding student's subject choices in Chapter Two, then it is clear that my research reflects the comments of Foskett (2001). Foskett (2001) wrote that the subject's selection process is a time of genuine interest and excitement that students look forward to with anticipation. During this research study I have interviewed a significant number of students over a period of time, and I can confidently report that the vast majority of students demonstrated the 'interest and excitement' that Fosektt (2001) refers to.

I will begin this Discussion chapter by re-visiting the following key themes from the Findings chapter:

- Information, Advice and Guidance

- Future Aims

- Decision Making

- Influence of parents

- Influence of siblings

5.1.1 Influence of School Context (Information, Advice and Guidance)

The findings of this study support the findings of Foskett (2004) who described how students are drawing from an increased number of informal sources of advice, such as parents and friends, when making their curricular choices. Such an increase can be linked with the decrease, evidenced within each of the three schools involved in this study, of services provided by careers guidance counsellors in schools and those provided by the Connexions service.

This point can also be related to the research of Marson-Smith *et al* (2009), as described in the literature review of Chapter Two, which describes how many young people differ in the choice of person from whom they seek advice and guidance and how many young people often draw from more than one source. However, following the reduction in specialist guidance services from many secondary schools, students making decisions about their curricular options will no longer be able to draw from these valuable sources of advice and guidance as readily.

If we link these findings with the literature concerning Information, Advice and Guidance discussed in Chapter Two then a series of interesting factors are presented. For example, Hodkinson *et al* (1996) identified how, historically, students trusted the IAG provided by 'careers specialists' working in schools. These specialists may have been Connexions advisors employed by the Local Authority or guidance councillors employed by schools. Hodkinson *et al* (1996) suggested that those providing advice and guidance were not 'loyal' to a particular subject area in the school. Therefore, they were less likely to have any kind of prejudice towards or against a particular subject that could see them offer students advice to select curricular options that did not match or support the young person's ambitions for the future. This neutrality, it is suggested, resulted in enhanced feelings of trust for the student. Hodkinson *et al* (1996) described these guidance specialists as being essential to the students' curricular options process.

However, my findings reveal that the involvement of impartial guidance specialists has dramatically reduced in all three schools involved in this research study, with one of the three schools no longer providing students with any access to a guidance advisor. This is particularly concerning due to the strong role that schools can play in the curricular options process, as schools can now advise students in light of their own interests, such as exam result league table performance, rather than the interests of the child. Therefore, what the independent IAG was introduced to counteract has in fact now come to pass.

5.1.2 <u>Student Decision Making</u>

During the literature review of this research study the reasons why young people make the decisions that they make was researched in depth. One of the key findings concerned the different 'models' that can be used to categorise decision makers. Three different decision making models were identified: a social model, an affective model and a rational model. In addition, there is a hybrid model that incorporates elements of more than one decision making model.

During the analysis of the research collected during this study it has become possible to apply the theory of the different decision making models to the participants of the study.

The social decision making model sees decision makers influenced by external forces beyond the control of the individual, such as:

- An individual's background, including their class, ethnicity, gender, etc.
- Influence of other individuals over the decision-making process (parents, teachers, etc.)
- Nature of education and training provision
- Economic conditions

The social decision making model closely resembles the key influences this study identifies as being in place at Armscliffe High and Brimpton High. One of the key driving factors behind the curriculum offered at Armscliffe High and Brimpton High was the introduction of the EBacc, therefore 'the nature of education provision' was clearly a key influencing factor on curricular decision making for the students at both schools. The most common influences on curricular decision making as identified by the students who participated in this research study from Armscliffe High were the students' parents. At Brimpton High the most common influence on student's decision making came from teachers and the school leadership. It is therefore possible

to link the social decision making model to both Armscliffe High and Brimpton High. It is also possible that the social model applied at Croyston High, however the data collected in this study did not highlight this.

The decision making model most closely linked to Croyston High is the rational decision making model. The rational decision making model involves a process of evidence gathering and careful consideration of the costs and benefits of the different options and courses of action available. Such a model can exist where students have a genuine free choice to make curricular selections. At Croyston High, more than any other school involved in this research project, students are free to make curricular decisions based upon their own rationale for the future. For this reason, it is possible to link the rational decision making model most closely with the students at Croyston High.

The conclusion I come to was that these differing models suggest that the rational decision making model is driven by factors which closely align to the socio-economic status in which the school is located. Hence it is the expectations of parents and their influence on the principal's decision making process on which subjects are offered and which curricular guidance is followed. I can also conclude that all students involved in this study, in one way or another, reflected all the models but they were qualitative differences in how they were represented.

Due to the scale of this research project it is difficult to group all students involved in this study neatly in to the different choice model categories identified in the literature review, however, during this study I was able to observe agency and the wider social structure. Therefore, although the findings of this study do suggest that the students of Armscliffe High and Brimpton High both align with, rather than follow or are guided by, the theory of the social choice model, whereas the decision making of students from Croyston High follow the theory of the rational choice model, however I acknowledge that there is room for further research in this area.

5.1.3 <u>Influence of Family (Parents</u>)

The findings of this research project suggest that students' parents play a significant role in the curricular options process and if we compare the role of the students' parents of Armscliffe High with that of students' parents from Brimpton High and Croyston High then we see a distinct contrast. Whilst at Armscliffe High the students' parents are at the heart of the curricular decisions that students made, at both Brimpton High and Croyston High there is minimal involvement from the students' parents. Emily, from Croyston High, summarised the role her parents played in her subject options process by saying "they signed my form and that's it", referring to the document which students use to select their subject options which, before being returned to school, must be signed by one of the students' parents. Students from Brimpton High shared similar responses to that of Emily from Croyston High, which suggests that students' parents from both Brimpton High and Croyston High did not play a significant role in the curricular options process.

There can be a number of reasons why a student's parents can fail to actively engage in the schooling of their children as in the case of Emily's parents at Croyston High. The number of students from Croyston High involved in this study who have parents who studied at university informs me that the majority of students' parents did not pursue their education beyond school or college. This lack of experience, and knowledge of, Further and Higher Education could potentially lead to a devaluing of the role that a successful school education can play in a young person's life and of the benefits that Further or Higher Education can bring (Lareau, 2003).

Upon reflection the lack of engagement, and knowledge of the process, from students' parents in their children's educational careers reinforces the need for the students' teachers to be available to step in and fill the gap left by any parents who are detached from school life and lack suitable knowledge to provide useful and affective advice and guidance.

When linking these findings with the literature regarding parental influence in Chapter Two then the work of Lareau (2003) is particularly pertinent. Lareau (2003) identified a correlation between the level of influence that a student's parents have on their children's curricular decisions and the parents' class and social standing. The findings of my research suggest the students' parents with the biggest influence are those from a middle class community, whose children attend Armscliffe High. In addition, of the parents involved in this project it is those with students attending Armscliffe High whom are most likely to have been a student at university and work in a professional industry.

Lareau (2003) develops this theory further by suggesting that, despite parents with more experience of a successful education having a greater influence on their children's curricular choices, parents from lower class communities and with less experience of the education system are just as interested in supporting their children make suitable curricular choices. Lareau (2003) suggests that these parents want to be involved in their child's curricular options process, but often lack the confidence due to their own lack of knowledge about the process. However, I have learned from student and staff interviews that some parents, from certain communities, such as those with children attending Croyston High, are actually disengaged, and appear disinterested, in their children's curricular options process. As a result, these parents have very little influence or involvement in the curricular options process.

5.1.4 Influence of Family (Siblings)

The findings of this research study suggest that students can be influenced by their siblings. My interviews with Rebecca from Armscliffe High and Lauren from Croyston High, described in the Findings chapter of this report, demonstrate how young people can be influenced by siblings in different ways, however, in comparison to other factors identified in this study the influence of siblings was relatively insignificant. When Rebecca from Armscliffe made her curricular options she was influenced to try and follow in her brother's successful footsteps. By way of contrast,

when Lauren from Croyston High made her curriculum options she was influenced to make selections that would help her avoid the difficult situation that her brother experienced. Therefore, I suggest that it is necessary that schools begin to acknowledge the experiences of students, and their friends and siblings, so that the risk to students' agency of such challenging situations are adequately addressed.

5.1.5 To what Extent is the Curriculum Independent from Government Policy?

The key finding of this research study leads to an important discussion concerning the extent that a school's curriculum can be independent from government expectations. The findings of this study collected from interviews at Croyston High suggest that to disregard government expectations is a risky strategy for any school, regardless of the well intentioned aims of the school, such as in the case of Croyston High where the curriculum is designed in such a way as to address the skills shortage identified by the principal of the school. The reality is that Croyston High's decision not to prioritise the government's expectations concerning the EBacc are that the school is now graded as an underperforming school and classified as 'Requiring Improvement'. This finding would suggest that whilst schools retain independence from central government to design their own curriculum, in reality schools that choose to do so put themselves at risk of underperforming. Ironically schools that are classed as underperforming, like Croyston High, because they have chosen to retain their independence from central government regarding curriculum are likely to find themselves under closer scrutiny from the local education authority and, potentially, facing a reduction in their autonomy. Many schools like Croyston High have now become Academies as a necessity for underperformance and now have less independence to design their own curriculum than ever before.

5.1.6 What do the Findings of this Research Study Mean for Existing Knowledge and Future Policy and Practice?

The results of this study are valuable to advancing knowledge concerning factors that influence the curricular decisions that the students make and the different pathways they choose to follow. The key finding of this study suggests that the most influencing factor on the curricular choices that students make is in fact school policy responses to government expectations. Whereas previous research has considered the role that family and friends or socio-economic status can have on a young person's chosen curricular pathways and aspirations for the future, this study reveals new theory concerning the key role that government expectations can have on the decisions that students make whilst at school.

The impact this finding has on future policy regarding curricular decision making and the Key Stage 4 options process is particularly pertinent for improving practice in the future. I acknowledge that influencing changes in government policy is beyond the reasonable expectations of the findings of a small scale research project, however the contribution to knowledge by this study could inform the process that schools provide for students.

Central government will continue to make alterations regarding expectations for state schools in England, however there are a series of recommendations that arise from the findings of this study. The first recommendation I make concerns the information that is shared with students and their families about the different curricular options available and the different pathways that subject choice combinations can lead to. The quality and accuracy of the information that is provided by all schools regarding the curricular selections they provide must be of a high standard, providing information about each of the different curricular options concerning content and what students can expect to learn, assessment methods, historical success rates and potential pathways following successful completion. This includes providing information about current policy such as the EBacc.

The involvement of students' parents in the curricular options process must be something that is encouraged, and in addition to information about the different curricular options and pathways available to students, students' parents must be aware of recent developments in education and government priorities. Although many students' parents, particularly those with higher socio-economic status, may already be aware of recent developments in education the findings of this study suggest that there are many students' parents who do not take an active role in their children's education who are unaware of the government's education priorities.

In addition to providing students, and their parents, with accurate information about the different curricular options in context with the priorities of the government and the school, the second recommendation I make having considered the results of this study concerns the quality of the guidance provision available to students and their parents. Providing students and their parents with an improved quality of information about the different curricular options and pathways available would only be effective when paired with an improved guidance infrastructure.

Since the changes in guidance provision that developed following the devolution of the Connexions service the findings of this study suggest that existing guidance provision is not sufficient. Specialist independent guidance having been removed from schools has left school teachers as the only 'official' guidance provision available to students in schools. One of the key factors of this finding concerns the lack of an independent guidance source. As students do not have access to independent guidance there is an increased opportunity for schools to provide students with information and guidance that satisfies the priorities of the school, rather than the needs of the students.

The relatively new National Careers Service does provide students with an alternative guidance source, however as identified within the literature review of Chapter 2, the face-to-face service of Connexions being replaced by a website and telephone line, is unpopular with young people.

Therefore, the second recommendation that I make, in order to help provide students with better quality independent guidance, the National Careers Service should reintroduce the in-school service previously provided by the Connexions service. Until such provision is reinstalled to secondary schools there will be no mediator between the needs of the students and the curriculum priorities of the school.

The third recommendation that I make concerns the need to actively engage students' parents in the curricular options process. The findings of this study highlight that in some schools, students' parents are involved in the curricular process of their children, whilst other students' parents are not. Students whose parents were heavily involved in the curricular options process described how they valued the opportunity they had to discuss their different curricular options with their parents. It is reasonable to conclude that the students' parents are the most accessible source of advice and guidance available to students, however the reality is that too many students' parents choose not to actively participate in the options process. There could be a number of reasons why students' parents make this decision not to be involved in the process. These reasons could include: not feeling confident in their knowledge of the different options and available pathways to contribute to discussion about the process or being uninformed of the specifics of the process and what role they can play in supporting their children. For these reasons it is necessary for schools to do more to explain to students' parents the value of different curricular options, and if necessary, be prepared to adapt their curriculum offers in light of any input from parents of their students. Maintaining an effective relationship between a school and the parents of its students is pertinent to designing a curricular model that is supported by all and recognised as being suitable and fit for purpose. At Brimpton High, where the curricular design has taken shape without input from students' parents, student numbers are dropping significantly as parents, dissatisfied with the breakdown in communication between the school and students' parents, opt to send their children to a different school. By engaging all students' parents more effectively schools will be helping to achieve one of the aims

of the National Curriculum, as outlined by Gillard (2011), to aid public understanding of the work of schools.

Therefore, the third recommendation I suggest is that all schools work hard to directly engage all students' parents in the curricular options process. Engaging students' parents would ensure that they were aware of what role they can play in the curricular options process for their children. The most practical way to do this would be for all schools to hold a parent's information evening, similar to that which students' parents from Armscliffe High benefit from attending. In addition to a meeting for students' parents I suggest that an open evening, for parents of Year 9 students only, during which curricular areas can promote their subject to students' parents and answer any questions about the subject and any potential future learning pathways. This would also be a way for the school to be more responsive to parents.

In order for the three suggestions that I outline above to work effectively it would be necessary for students and their parents to be provided with only honest and accurate information and guidance and for transparency from all parties involved.

With the recommendations that I have outlined all students would have the opportunity to make informed choices with consistent, standardised information, advice and guidance.

5.1.7 **What are the Limitations of this Study?**

I acknowledge that there are limitations of this study and that two opportunities for additional research exist that would enhance the existing findings of this project. The first opportunity I have identified involves conducting additional research involving the parents of the students involved in this study. The data I collected concerning parental involvement in the students' curricular decisions came from questionnaires and interviews involving students and staff members from the three schools. It would have been a valuable addition to the study to have

interviewed the students' parents in order to better understand what level of involvement and understanding they had in the student's curricular selections.

The second opportunity I identified to further develop the findings of this research study involves additional research of the final FE destinations and Post 16 pathways chosen by the students involved in this study. Having a record of where the curricular decisions that students made have led to would provide an opportunity to reflect on the early student interviews and the learning ambitions the students identified at the beginning of this research study.

6.0 <u>Chapter Six</u>

6.1 <u>Conclusions</u>

This research study aimed to investigate the different factors that influence the curricular decisions that students, aged 14-16, make. I was interested to better understand the factors that influence the curricular choices that students were making, whether that influence came from their parents, their siblings, their peers, their teachers, their school, their social standing or their wider social and economic position. Alternatively, I wanted to explore whether students' curricular decisions were based on the success rates that certain subjects had or did the students have a keen interest in a particular subject area and clear goals for the future that studying a certain subject would help to achieve?

The key findings of this study suggest that students aged 14-16 are influenced by a variety of different factors. In each school involved in this study the key influencing factor differed. At Armscliffe High an influencing factor on students' curricular choices was identified as being the students' parents. Armscliffe High is a school where students' parents take a key role in their children's education and therefore, in such a school, it is understandable, given what we know about social mobility, that the students' parents had a significant influence on the students' curricular choices.

What we learn from Brimpton High is that the curriculum structure at the school can also be a significantly influencing factor on a student's curricular choices. Brimpton High offers a narrow range of curriculum options for students and therefore, almost by default, the school itself provided a significant influencing factor on students' curricular options by providing such a limited number of subject options for students to choose from.

At Croyston High an influencing factor on a student's curricular choices was the student's interests and aspirations. Croyston High offers a broad and balanced curriculum, in contrast to

that offered at Brimpton High. As a consequence Croyston High is in a position to provide students with opportunities to select curricular options that will allow them to pursue their interests and aspirations.

A common factor that influences the curricular choices at all three schools involved in this study is that of curricular policy and how government policy on curriculum is interpreted by each school. The findings of this study suggest that the government's curricular policy, when combined with the embedded values of each school, has an influence that impacts on the curricular options available to students. A key factor within this process involves the role in each school of the principal and the influence they have on moulding the schools values and principles. These values and principles must then be installed within the school in partnership with the students and the students' parents. The schools' curriculum must be built upon these shared values and principles in order to best support the communities they serve. However, it is also necessary for the principal to be aware of the performance of the school and the schools position in examination league tables. It is this factor that is becoming an increasingly influencing factor on the curricular policy implemented within each school and, therefore, the curricular options available to the students. The combination of influence from government curricular policy and the values in place within each of the schools is a key finding of this study.

It is difficult to offer a personal opinion on the conclusions to this research study as I find myself being torn between two key findings. What is being offered at Croyston High sounds ideal for the students of the school as they are able to benefit from genuine free choice without influence from teachers or others within the school. Students may be influenced by their parents and other family members, but the variety of provision available at the school offers opportunities that are not in place at the other schools involved in this study.

However, whilst I recognise what is on offer at Croyston High sounds ideal, I am also aware that what the school is doing negates the priorities outlined by government policy. Such a decision

by the school is a bold one, as although they may provide for the needs of the students they are likely to suffer negative consequences in the government's school performance league tables. Poor performance in exam result league tables could then have further negative implications for the school if restrictions are placed on the decisions the school can make. Furthermore, as a result of poor performance in exam result league tables, the local community could lose confidence in the school and parents from the local community may want to select a different school for their children to attend. Another argument could suggest that some students from Croyston High are being placed at a disadvantage by not being encouraged to pursue curricular options that could help them secure the EBacc. Although the school is taking a moral stance to provide a curriculum that they believe will satisfy the needs of the local community in may be that in doing so they are neglecting the wants of some within the community who have aspirations to pursue their Further Education somewhere other than at the 6th form at Croyston High.

On a personal level I know that I will be able to reflect upon the findings of this research study in the future in relation to my own professional practice. As a school teacher I have responsibility for providing students with Information, Advice and Guidance concerning the different curricular options available to them. Therefore, having a better understanding of the different factors that influence the choices that students make will be valuable in helping provide students with the best quality IAG possible.

It is my hope that, upon publication, the recommendations that I have made, based upon the findings of this research study, will help others within the teaching profession to also provide better quality of Information, Advice and Guidance. In doing so they will be able to help more students identify their most appropriate route for learning and, potentially, career pathway for the future.

I have often thought that one of the many roles of a schoolteacher is to act as a compass to guide young people on their journeys towards the future. Teachers, with their specialist knowledge and expertise, are the people best positioned to provide personalised and impartial Information, Advice and Guidance. It is therefore the responsibility of teachers to fill the gap in young people's knowledge and guide all students in making their decisions. It is my hope that, with a better understanding of the factors that can influence the choices that young people make, all teachers will be better equipped to fulfil their role as an accurate and reliable compass.

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Appendices

Appendix (i) – Extract from DCSF's Guidance Handbook on IAG

We want every child to succeed, and we will never give up on any child. That is why we need a radical change in the way Information, Advice and Guidance is delivered. This strategy will modernise IAG and careers education to make it accessible for today's generation of young people and to keep pace with a rapidly changing economy.

The IAG Guarantee

Young people in schools are entitled to:

- Support from a Personal Tutor who knows them well and who can help them to access specialist advice and ensure any learning needs or issues are quickly addressed
- High quality programmes of careers education which help young people to plan and manage their own careers
- Impartial information, advice and guidance about learning and work options including about Apprenticeships, Diplomas, Foundation Learning and GCSEs/A levels)
- Information, advice and guidance about the benefits of higher education and how to access the opportunities that it affords
- A programme of work related learning (in Years 10 and 11), giving young people direct insights into the world of work

All young people are entitled to access, through wider commissioned services:

- One to one advice and support from a local specialist Connexions adviser when needed
- Information and advice by telephone and on-line every day (including evenings and weekend) through Connexions Direct
- Further specialist support from local services as needed
- Information on all local learning programmes for 14-19 year olds via their local 14-19 prospectus
- Support for young people to move to adult information, advice and guidance services when they reach the appropriate age
- The ability to apply for post-16 learning opportunities on-line through a Common Application Process by 2011

Appendix (ii) – Participant Information Sheet

The curricular choices of young people aged 14 to 16 in three secondary schools

Participant Information Sheet

We would like you to take part in the above named study but before you decide, please read the following information.

You can choose not to take part without having to give a reason and without penalty.

This is a small-scale unfunded study on the **curricular choices of young people aged 14 to 16 in two secondary schools** and involves:

- – Completion of a questionnaire
- – Participation in a group interview
- – Participation in a one on one interview
- – Participation in a follow up interview in the Spring term of Year 10
- – Participation in a final interview in the Spring of Year 11

The study is being undertaken by David Johnson, a student at the University of Leeds.

The study involves interviews with students, teachers, school management and other adults involved in students' curricular choice, transition and information, advice and guidance.

For student participants the research will involve participation in a group interview and a series of short individual interviews.

Taking part in the study will give you the opportunity to reflect upon your experience of making curricular choices.

You may withdraw from the study at any time without needing to give a reason and any data or information obtained from you will be destroyed.

There will be informal feedback to schools that will be illustrated and supported by case studies based on the findings from the student's interviews. There may be further academic publications such as a paper in an education journal.

The anonymity of the schools, staff and students would be respected in any reports or publications arising from the study. Any matters discussed in confidence would be carefully respected. Pseudonyms will be used where appropriate. No personal information will be collected and any interview data held on computer or notes taken would use codes for respondents and sites and be securely stored for a maximum period of three years.

Ethical approval has been sought and obtained for this study from the University of Leeds, UK.

If you agree to take part, would like more information or have any questions or concerns about the study please contact ed06dpj@leeds.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.
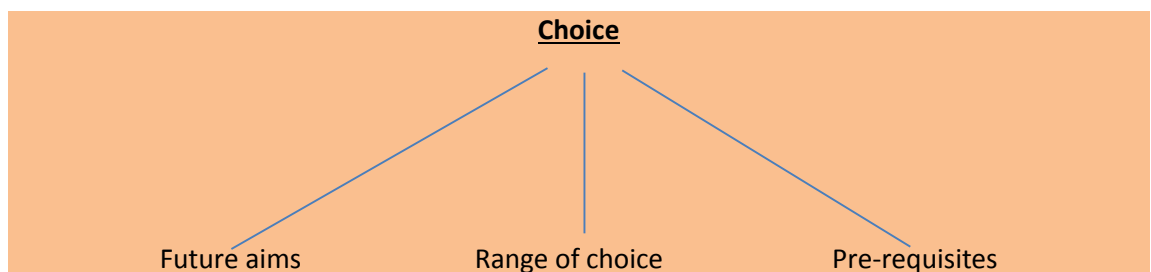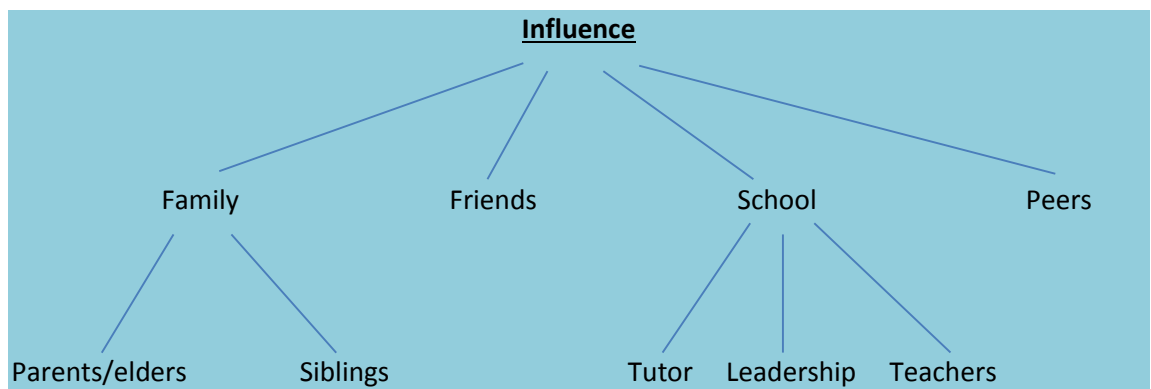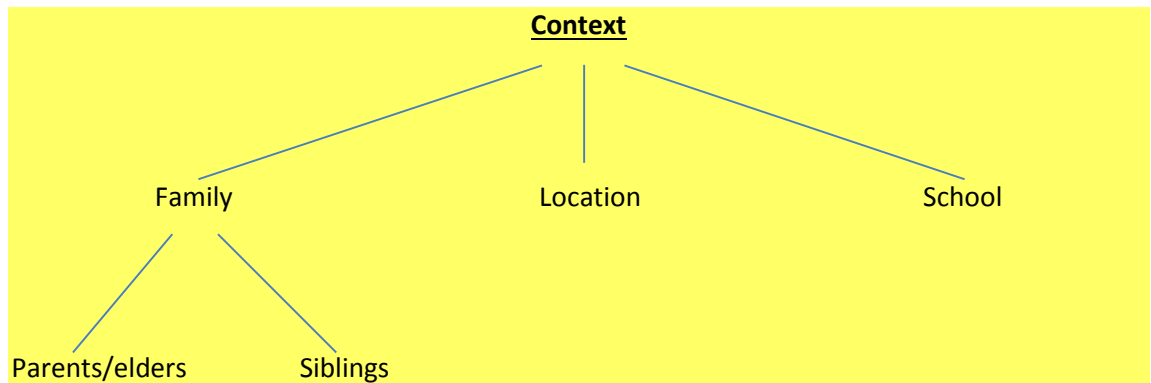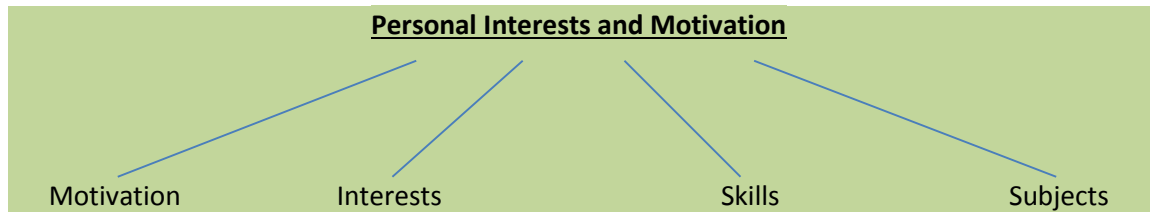
Appendix (iii) – Consent Form

The curricular choices of young people aged 14 to 16 in three secondary schools

Consent Form

	Please confirm the statements by putting your initials in the box below
I have read and understood the participant information sheet.	
I have had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study, and have received satisfactory answers to all of my questions.	
I have received enough information about the study.	
I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study: 1 At any time 2 Without having to give a reason for withdrawing.	
I understand that any information I provide, including personal details, will be confidential, stored securely and only accessed by those carrying out the study.	
I understand that any information I give may be included in published documents but my identity will be protected by the use of pseudonyms.	
I agree to take part in this study. Participant Signature …………………………… Date Name of Participant: School or organisation:	
For student participants: I agree to my son or daughter taking part in this study. Signature of Parent/Guardian ……………………………… Date Name of Parent/Guardian:	
Researcher Signature ………………………………… Date Name of Researcher	

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study.

Appendix (iv) – Student Interview Transcript Coding Themes

Personal Interests and Motivation

Motivation   Interests   Skills   Subjects

Context

Family   Location   School

Parents/elders   Siblings

Influence

Family   Friends   School   Peers

Parents/elders   Siblings   Tutor   Leadership   Teachers

Choice

Future aims   Range of choice   Pre-requisites

Appendix (v) – Example Abstract of Student Interview Transcript

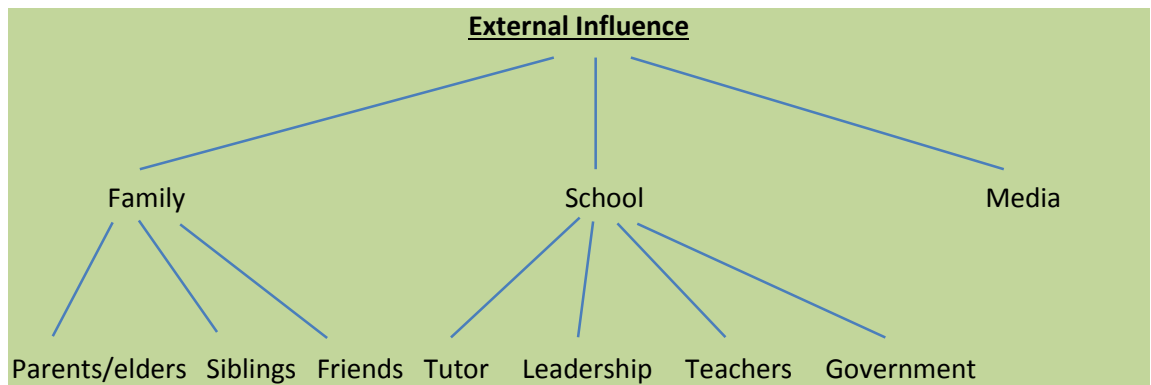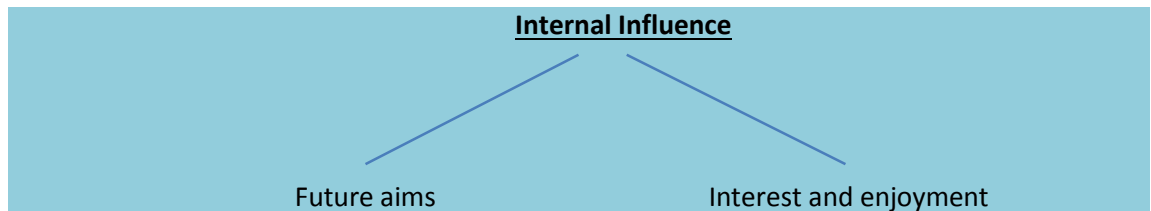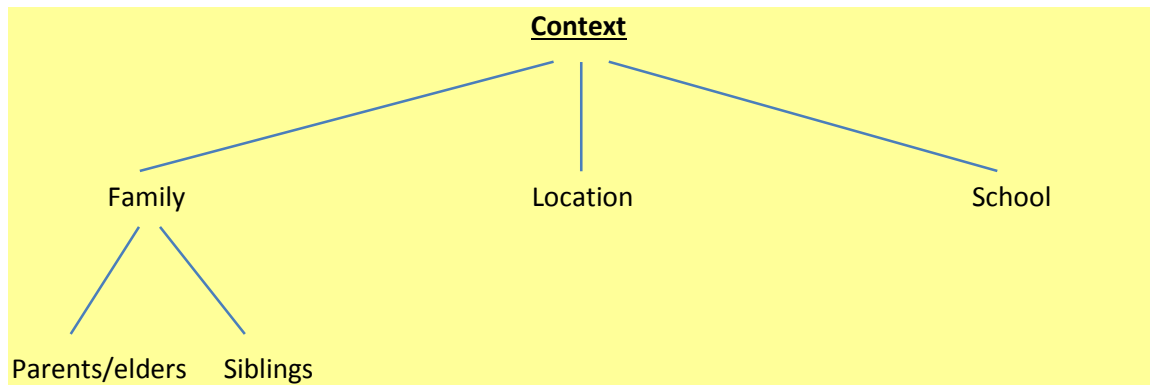| Coding	Interview transcript	Commentary
Context – siblings	**DJ**: So, you're Rebecca and you're in Year 9. How old are you now Rebecca? **Student**: **14** **DJ**: You're 14, alright. So, the first couple of questions are easy questions about family, brothers and sisters, mum and dad. So, do you have any brothers and sisters? **Student**: Yes **DJ**: Can you tell me about them? How old are they? How many you've got? Older? Younger? What they do. **Student**: **I only have one brother**. He's in **Thorpe College**, first year. **He's 17**, he turned 17 in March and do you want me to tell you what he's studying? **DJ**: Yeah	Student is 14 years old and has one brother who is 17 and in his first year studying at Thorpe College.
Context – siblings	**Student**: **He's (her older brother) studying Maths Statistics, Chemistry, Biology and Business**, because **he wanted to be a doctor**, but then when he was studying biology his teacher told him that **he wasn't really smart enough**. **DJ**: He has some hard subjects, doesn't he? What does he have? Maths, Statistics, Chemistry, Business? **Student**: It's Maths Statistics, it's just as one. **DJ**: Oh, together? As one? Maths Statistics. **Student**: Yeah **DJ**: Maths Statistics, Chemistry, Biology and Business. That's tough, isn't it? **Student**: Yeah **DJ**: **Is he clever?** I know you said his Biology teacher said that he's not a genius but is he clever? **Student**: **Yeah**	Student's older brother is studying a challenging range of academic subjects at Thorpe College. Some students know less about what their siblings do or study than this respondent, who seems to have a very clear understanding of what her brother is studying and why.

	DJ: He must be, mustn't he? **Student**: Yeah **DJ**: Did he come to this school? **Student**: Yeah	
Influence – Siblings	**DJ**: I know we're here to talk about you, but how did he do in his GCSEs? **Student**: **He did quite well in his GCSEs**. I think in his History he wanted to be a grade above, but he got what he was expected. **DJ**: OK and were his results C's and above? **Student**: Yeah **DJ**: **A's, B's and C's**. Not bad, eh? So no pressure for you then? **Student**: No (laughs)	Student's older brother achieved very well in his GCSEs at the same school that the respondent attends, achieving grades A-C in all his subjects.
Choice – range of choice	**DJ**: Tell me about Thorpe College, Thorpe College's good isn't it. I'm not from this area, I'm from Leeds, but I think that **Thorpe College is the place to go if you're bright and an academic**. **Student**: Yeah. **Gladstone College** is more about…it **isn't as stressful as Thorpe College**. **DJ**: Like pressured and demanding? **Student**: Yeah **DJ**: What's the other one? It used to be called Fenbury College. **Student**: There's Langton College **DJ**: Would you say that Thorpe College is the best? **Student**: I would say that **Thorpe College is the best**, yeah **DJ**: I suppose it depends on what you want to do. **Student**: Yeah **DJ**: But if you're bright and academic and you want to go to university then Thorpe College is the one to go to?	Student has a clear understanding of the different popular FE destinations available locally. She knows what each college can offer and what to expect as a student in each.

	Student: Yeah **DJ**: So are Gladstone College and Langton College for people who are not as clever? There's no wrong answer, I'm not trying to catch you out, I'm just trying to learn. Or are these colleges for people who want to do something more specific? Like they want to learn about being a hairdresser or they want to learn about being a cook? **Student**: Erm, I think you can learn all the stuff that you do at Thorpe College but it isn't as pressured. The teachers don't pressure you as much when you work. I think you can do more vocational courses as Gladstone College as well and at Fenbury.	
Choice – future aims	**DJ**: OK. I'm jumping ahead now but it fits in to what we are talking about. I'm going to guess here and say that **you want to go to Thorpe College**. **Student**: Yes.	Student confirms that they have ambitions to attend Thorpe College after completing their GCSEs.
Context – parents	**DJ**: We will come on to why in a little bit. So that was a question about your brother and that was really interesting. He's doing very well. Now, your parents, mum and dad. Do you live with both of your parents? Can you tell me what they do? **Student**: **My parents are divorced**, but over a two week period **I spend one week with my mum and one week with my dad**, but the days are separate. They are separate so it's not one week with my mum and then one week with my dad. They like spread it out. **My dad is a financial advisor for his own company** and **my mum is a financial director at my granddad's company which is Simply Biz**.	Student's parents are divorced and her time is divided between her two parents. Dad is a financial advisor and Mum is a financial director of a successful family business.
Influence – parents + siblings	**DJ**: Interesting and your brother does Maths Statistics at Thorpe College. Now in a minute I'm going to ask you what your favourite subject is. **Student**: OK (laughs)	Maths, finance and business clearly play a strong role in this family and it is reasonable to think that this could influence the student.

Context – parents	DJ: If it's not Maths I'll be surprised, but don't answer just yet. That's interesting. Do you know if both, or either, of your parents went to university? Student: **Neither of my parents went to university**. I think **they went to college**, but **my dad dropped out** of college just at the end of his first year. His reasoning was because he said he wanted to leave earlier so that he could get the jobs before the people in the second year got them. DJ: Clever and it worked? Student: Yeah	Neither of the student's parents went to university. Instead they went to college and then entered the workplace.
Influence – siblings	DJ: Good for him. Does your brother want to go to university? Student: I guess so, yes.	Student suggests that her brother intends to go to university in the future.
Choice – future aims	DJ: Do you? Have you thought about it? I know it's a long way off. Student: Erm, I'm kind of thinking about it, **I had an idea of what I wanted to do** and **then it's kind of changed a bit** so now I'm a bit unsure. DJ: Do you want to tell me what your idea was and what it is now? Student: **I wanted to do something in business** since I was in Year 7 because I've been brought up in business and **then I was thinking of doing something in marketing** because I like graphics but **then I was thinking about becoming a special needs teacher**. DJ: That's very different. Student: Yeah, **or doing something in law but I'm not sure**.	Student makes a very interesting reference to having been 'brought up in business'. Despite this her future aims/career ambitions have shifted from business, to marketing, to special needs teacher to law. Perfectly normal for a young student, but also lacks some of the focus and intent that some other have.

Personal interest and motivation – interests	**DJ**: Well it's likely that your ideas will change again as you go through Years 10 and 11 and then through Thorpe College and then eventually you will find the idea that you want. Now, jumping ahead a bit again. This is the question that I was starting to guess your answer to. What are your favourite subjects in school **Student**: **I do like Maths**, but I have a few favourites. **DJ**: That's fine, just tell me what you enjoy and why. **Student**: **I don't really like English** because **I find it hard to think of getting the structure whilst also being creative at the same time. I like graphics because you can do what you want with it**. You get the design brief and you can do what you want with it, so I like that. I like working with all the different colour schemes and trying to make it fit. **I like maths. I don't really like science**, but I prefer science over English. **I quite like IT** as well. **DJ**: It's interesting what you say about graphics. You say that you like the creative side of it, but there are also the rules that you have to follow. It's not like art where you just get a blank sheet of paper. In graphics there are a certain set of rules. It's interesting. That's like marketing. You can be creative but you've also got to fit to the marketing brief.	Student lists a variety of subjects as being among her favourites, including maths, graphics and IT. However she 'really doesn't like English' because she struggles with the creative aspects of the subject.
Choice – future aims	**DJ**: So, at the end of Year 11 and we've kind of already talked about this, if I gave you options of **going to sixth form** or **getting a job** or **sitting at home**, what do you think you would do? I know it's 2 years away, but where do you want to go? **Student**: **Thorpe College**	When asked about what she would like to be doing after she has completed her GCSEs given sensible options of continued study or working the student responds quickly and categorically that she wants to go to Thorpe College.

Appendix (vi) – Staff Interview Transcript Coding Themes

Staff Interview Coding

Context

Family — Location — School

Parents/elders   Siblings

Internal Influence

Future aims   Interest and enjoyment

External Influence

Family — School — Media

Parents/elders Siblings Friends Tutor Leadership Teachers Government

Appendix (vii) – Example Abstract of Leadership Interview Transcript

Coding	Interview transcript	Commentary
Context – school	**DJ:** Can I start by asking you how many students you have in Year 11? **Principal:** 264	The interview starts by establishing some context of the school and the year group in question. The students that have been involved in this study since Year 9 are in a year group of 264 students. A slightly above average size cohort.
Context – school	**DJ:** Can you tell me about the options process that the students go through? **Principal:** Well there is a whole structured programme that starts from the September that the students return to school in Year 9. There's not just one assembly, there is a whole series of assemblies that are led by a variety of people, including myself. Then there is a vocational co-ordinator who will do a bit and talk to them specifically about applied courses, then the careers staff will come and talk to them as well, so there is quite a few assemblies that build up to three big assemblies that really take them through the nitty gritty and take them step by step through the options booklet and the options process. This stage of the process then coincides with a parent information evening and then following that it becomes much more personal. The vocational co-coordinator will speak to students individually who expressed an interest in a vocational programme and	During this passage of the interview the principal outlines in detail the variety of events and activities that happen in school to support students in making their curricular decisions. The principal supports what the students shared with me regarding a variety of assemblies, but does so in more detail. She identifies a series of assemblies that are led by different staff members including herself and the vocational co-coordinator. In addition to these assemblies there are 'mini taster sessions' put on by those subject areas that the students in Year 9 otherwise would not have access to. These sessions give the staff members of those subjects to share information about the curricular options. These departments include Business Studies, Media, Photography, etc. Staff from these subject areas will work with students during tutor time and PSHE lessons to give them an insight in to the

	the individual subject teachers for subjects that the students won't have come across before, such as business, film studies, media studies, photography, will come and spend some time with the students during registration sessions and PSHE lessons to expose them a little bit to what the new subjects are about so there's quite a long programme. When these new teachers do this they don't just go and talk, for example the business studies teachers go in to tutor time and do a series of 'Dragons Den' style activities and the Media Studies teachers take over an English lesson and do a taster session to media. I think all this is very interesting because I think that these students that you are working with will have had a different kind of experience to the students who are in Year 9 now because of the EBacc. We have had to had very long discussion about where we go with that and I am very proud of the fact that we still do not have pathways here and we are still not steering students down particular routes in respect of those measures. I think because here we are not close to floor targets we have a little bit of a luxury in that we can take that moral position, but then our results could be better I'm sure if we did try and steer students, certainly in relation to performance tables and league tables our position could be a lot higher. At the moment we are not forcing students to	options. She explains that how these sessions are designed to be fun and engaging for the students and describes an example from business studies that involves a 'Dragons Deb' style activity.

	do a language. I visited a school last week where they start their options process in Year 8 and start their GCSEs in Year 9, they all do a language, they all do a humanities subject, they all do an expressive arts and they all do a technology, across the board and their results are appalling and now they've just gone in to requires improvement. That's a school that is driven by these external measures such as the EBacc and more recently the academic spread, but I believe that there has to be a balance. I can completely see where that school is coming from because of their position and their priorities in regard to their floor targets, and maybe we are in a privileged position. I like to think that the position of not having to force kids down, forcing is a bit of strong word isn't it, not having the pathways approach is actually making our options offer more personalised and more individual.	The principal also anticipates some of the issues discussed with the students that I have been working with as she describes how the experiences of the students currently in Year 9 are likely to differ from the experiences of those students currently in Year 11 that I first met two years ago when they were in Year 9. In doing so she refers to the EBacc and implies that the introduction of the EBacc was likely to have impacted on the process for those students involved in this study when they were in Year 9. She goes on to describe 'very long discussions' that took place in the aftermath of the first wave of EBacc students and how she is very proud that students are not steered down particular routes of study at the school. This is a claim that, at this stage of my research I do not fully agree with. Some of the students that I have worked with imply that there was a degree of coercion to select certain subject and to pursue a particular pathway of study.

| | | She explains that because the school historically has a strong examinations record they are in a position of luxury that allows them to offer students a free choice and the school is able to take a moral position in the approach to student subject choices and free choice.

She also describes another secondary school that she is familiar with where students are all 'forced' down specific routes of study to ensure that they are provided with as broad and varied a curriculum as possible. However in doing so this other school is producing very poor examination results and now find themselves listed as being a school that 'requires improvement'. She believes that this is an example of a school that is being led by external measures. She says that she can understand why the management at that school are making such decisions based on their precarious position. She suggests that they are effectively 'playing the system' and hoping to inflate their examination performance by removing the element of free choice for their students. However in doing so they have students on programmes on study that they are not interested in and ill equipped to succeed with.

She concludes this passage of the interview by describing that the position of her own |
| :-- | :-- | :-- |

		school and the decision not to have pathways that students must follow creates a more personalised and individual process for the students. It is clear to me that she is very proud in the processes that are in place within her school and that she fully believes that all students are given the opportunity to make a free choice and pursue whichever subject areas they are interested in.
Context – students	**DJ:** So do you feel that it becomes a genuine choice for the students? **Principal:** Yes, exactly that, I do. I spoke to the governors about it the other day and presented the progress figures and explained what it all meant and they were asking me questions like 'are you going to change your options process' and 'what are you doing to do', I said that our stance is that we will continue to inform because at the end of the day do students really know what is right for them, because some do and some do not so you have got to give that information and guidance, but ultimately we still allow students a free choice. I just don't believe that limiting student's choices to particular pathways is just not fair. In fact I think ours is quite the opposite. I've used this analogy before, but it's like we give them this fantastic box of chocolates and say you've got free choice but you can only choose four. It's hard, but I think with the students we tend to get a	Here the principal reiterates her stance that the students at the school get a free choice during the curricular options process. She describes how when questioned by the school's governors about her plans for the future she says that she intends to give the process as it is. Provide students with information and support and allow them to make a free choice. The fact that she refers to conversations with the school's governing body about the situation suggests that there may be an element of pressure to alter things, perhaps to benefit the school's position in the performance league tables. Interestingly she emphasises the point that her message to the students throughout the options process is not to worry and to always ask questions and seek advice and support if needed. She does however imply that some parents increase the levels of worry when they learn about the curricular

	mixed response. Some student say they get sick to death of options and hearing what they should and shouldn't do and some say that they want more. My message throughout for students is ask ask ask, don't worry and don't panic, but we do get parents who worry, particularly when they hear about other schools locally starting their options process before us, but I think, not that you ever do crack these things, but certainly, even though it has become more complex, it has gone really really smoothly and student feedback has been really positive. We do try to tailor the process for individuals and with the lower ability students we do try to provide more one-to-one time so that they fully understand what it means.	options process in other schools being further advanced. She concludes this section of the interview by describing how the school works hard to help lower ability students by providing one-to-one support.
Context – school	**DJ:** Can you tell me about the training that staff receive prior to the start of the options process? **Principal:** Well they start by meeting with me and in that meeting I tell them what they need to do, what their role will be and what I expect from them, then the head of years talk to them as well as a year group team or a couple of occasions and some of that is practical as it takes them through the options process and what it is, because of the way that tutors move with their forms here it only needs to happen once every five years so it's important that we do go	During this stage of the interview the principal describes in detail the training that staff members are provided with in relation to the curricular options process. She describes how the training involves a session led by the principal about the importance of the subject options process followed by a session led by the Head of Year who discusses the more practical elements of the process. At a later stage the principal addresses all members of the teaching staff to explain that it is important that teachers do not try and recruit subjects directly to their subject area and instead

through it again with them. Then I meet with them again to make sure that teachers are aware that the process is not about plugging their own subject and their own political point of view. "Neil" for example is a History teacher and you would think that the introduction of the EBacc would be brilliant for them, but because they are used to taking the more able students then you could argue, if I play devil's advocate, that instead of embracing the EBacc and the fact that so many students wanted to study their subject, there were initial concerns regarding the student's ability. There was a time actually where I had to go to the teachers and saying to them that I'm hearing on the grapevine that you are actually putting some students off because you don't think they are going to get a grade C, and we just can't do that. I mean English is my background so I am never going to be sympathetic to that approach, I mean if a child wants to do a subject then we should be saying yeah ok you can do it and it shouldn't matter if they are a C or above student. So there has been a change in mind set needed and departments like History have had to really change that culture and mind-set.

provide impartial advice to support learners in their choices.

This information seems to slightly contradict a point that was discussed earlier in the interview when principal described how 'new subject areas' are given an opportunity to provide students with taster sessions. There seems to be no other provision for this for the subjects that are not new for the student, beyond their existing lesson time.

The principal raises a very interesting point about the reception of the EBacc in the school. She describes, from the perspective of a History teacher how it is reasonable to assume that teachers of History would be very happy about the EBacc due to the significant increase in learner numbers that they can expect to have. However, she goes on to acknowledge that due to the demand for places on 'EBacc subjects' rather than embrace the new wave of students enrolling to the subject area the opposite was in fact the case. Some teachers of 'EBacc subjects' have been actively trying to discourage students from choosing their subject area if they think that the student is likely to underperform and potentially impact on the department's performance and results.

The principal explained how she intervened to ensure

		that this was not happening and that all students were given an opportunity to pursue a subject area that they are interested in. She describes how 'EBacc departments' such as History needed to have a change of culture and mind set, so that instead of just serving the most able students they instead took an inclusive stance and provided opportunities for all.
External influence – parents External influence – school	**DJ:** The EBacc was something that came up a lot in the interviews that I completed with the students. The students described how people in school were talking about it a lot and it was very much the new thing. In fact all of the students that I have interviewed here have chosen to study subjects that satisfy the requirements of the EBacc. **Principal:** They felt influenced to do it. **DJ:** Well, there was one girl who told me that she wanted to study PE but then she was advised that History might be better for her, so she chose that instead. **Principal:** She wouldn't have been forced in to doing any subject that she didn't want to do, but I think the nature of our students is that if they think it is in their interest's longer term to do a particular thing then they'll do that. I don't think it will have been someone from the school advising her or suggesting that she does History instead of PE. I think	The opening exchanges during this period of the interview were very interesting. When I introduced the topic of the EBacc and described how each of the students participating in my research were doing the EBacc the principal interrupted me and anticipated where my line of questioning was leading. She did this my stating that the students 'felt influenced to do'. At this stage I had not mentioned the trend that I had identified regarding the subject choices the students had made and up to this point in the interview the principal had spoken with confidence how all the students in the school had a free choice regarding their subject choices. However when I first mentioned EBacc she pre-empted the discussion by anticipating I was going to suggest the students were influenced in to selecting EBacc subject options. Clearly this must be based on some information

| Internal influence – future aims | the influence will have come from home. You can see it when you are doing the parent information evenings, as soon as you mention the EBacc, the parents are wanting that and we can see from the numbers with our current Year 9 who have just chosen their options, and these are only provisional figures but we have 82% of students hitting their progress targets and 54% opting for EBacc, which is higher than it's ever been and that's without pathways. Some think that the EBacc is no longer a priority, but the message that we are getting from colleges when they do their talks to the students they talk about BTECs, NVQs and vocational learning as being 'additional learning', but what they want is their 5 A*s-Cs. They actually no longer make reference to 'the EBacc' as such, but instead they just refer to academic subjects. They also say that the academic subjects are not entry requirements, but they do value the academic subjects. Some colleagues have said to me recently, even senior staff 'oh the EBacc has gone now, but really it hasn't at all. It will still be reported on and even if it's not spoken about in terms of league tables, the colleges are still talking about it and universities are still favouring it. I mean my daughter is doing an English degree at York and to get on that course she needed A* A A at A-level but she couldn't have got on to that degree course without a modern foreign | or knowledge that the principal is aware of and may explain why she refers to the options process during the last two years 'since the current Year 11 group were first exposed to the EBacc option'.

When I tell her the case study of a student making a clear decision to study History rather than her preferred option of PE in an attempt to secure the EBacc she replies that the student will not have been forced to do it and that the student will have made their choice based on the long term benefits that she is likely to gain from doing it.

She goes on to explain that any influence to do History to secure the necessary 'EBacc subjects' will have come from the students' parents rather than from the school. The principal links this directly with the information that she shares with students' parents at the parents information evening and describes how as soon as parents here about the EBacc they decide there and then that is what they want their children to do. She also comments that the number of students electing to do 'EBacc subjects' has never been so high.

She describes this as 'being without pathways', but it seems clear to me that whilst they do not have a GCSE pathway or a vocational |
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| | language at GCSE, it really would have stopped her going if she didn't have that. We don't scare the students with that, but we do say to them if you are thinking of going to college or university then go on their website and have a look and make sure that you cover yourselves. | pathway, they very much have an EBacc pathway.

Although she does not say this she does acknowledge the importance of the EBacc and makes it very clear that local colleges do not want BTECs and NVQs and although not referring to the EBacc by name they make it clear that they want new learners to have secured 5 academic subjects graded A*-C .

She concludes this section using her own daughter as an example and describes how some universities consider an applicant's GCSEs as well as their A-level results. |

Appendix (viii) – Example Abstract of Tutor Interview Transcript

Coding	Interview transcript	Commentary
Context – school	**DJ:** Can I start by asking you how many students you have in your Year 11 tutor group? **Tutor:** Well it varied, but you're talking about 25. I lost a few along the way, but I gained a few as well. **DJ:** When did you start working with the students? Have you worked with them since they were in year 7? **Tutor:** No, I picked them up in Year 9 because that's when I joined the school here. They had two different tutors before that. But I've had them for three years and probably the three most important years. Remind me of some of the students you met with. **DJ:** "Rebecca", "Charlotte", "Emma", "Molly", "Georgina", "Rhiona" **Tutor:** Georgina can talk all day long. **DJ:** I imagine she can, she's quite a character. She really went against the grain in some respect, because many of the students were saying a similar kind of thing and she came from nowhere. **Tutor:** She is very much like that as a person. **DJ:** In Year 10 she was saying that she wants to go to university and then in Year 11 she said I might go, I might not, I might decide to be a florist.	During this introduction stage of the interview the tutor confirmed such details as how many students he had in his form class and for how many years he had been working with them. The class size of 25 is average for a high school. The tutor explains that he began working with these students when he started working at the school. At this point the students were starting Year 9. Therefore I know that this tutor has worked with this group of students throughout the period of time of interest to me. The discussion moved on to discuss a specific individual ("Georgina").

	Tutor: Really? That's amazing.	
External influence – parents	DJ: I asked her how would her parents feel about her being a florist and she said they'd get over it. Tutor: Oh really, well I know that her parents really really definitely want her to go to university. They are very ambitious for her. She is quite rebellious in that way. It's very much about her letting any adults know that she knows what she wants and she knows her own mind. Most kids tend to go with the flow, but she is a bit different. It's nice when you meet a kid who thinks for themselves.	Despite what the student told me about being unsure about her future and considering alternative options, such as being a florist the students tutor found this interesting as he knows that her parents are extremely eager for her to go to university. The tutor may be accurate in his summary that the student just wants to exert a little bit of her own influence and imply that it is really down to her what she does in the future. Alternatively the student may really hope to pursue a future career that does not involve going to university, in which case a clash is likely to occur with her parents in the future.
Context – school	DJ: Could you tell me about the options process at the school? Tutor: Well, essentially they started getting prepped for it at the beginning of Year 9. Right at the very start of the year. They start having assemblies and they are given an options booklet. They use the options booklet to make their decisions. They speak to their different teachers about what options they would like to do and then really the tutor role is more of a back seat role. You're there to guide things,	During this passage of dialogue the tutor reiterates much of what the students told me about the options process in the school. However he also describes the role of the form tutor in the process, which he describes as being a bit like a 'back seat role'. The tutor explains how the students are spoken to in assemblies and then are given booklets with information about each of the different subject choices available to them. The tutor

| | but it tends to be more parental than anything. I would say, if anything, that the parents influence the students more than anyone else. We have a yearly review with the students where the tutor will sit with each student for 10 minutes and talk about what they are enjoying and what they are not enjoying and what they want to do in the future. That's just between the tutor and the student. Other than that you're input in to the process isn't massive. It could probably do with being more, more wide ranging. Obliviously you're in the tutor room every day so there's a lot of unofficial guidance that goes on, but really only form those that want to ask, which really isn't very many. There really isn't a great amount of input from the tutor. One thing I would like to see happen is I would like to see students who are in Year 11 speaking to the students who are in Year 9 and advising them about what they can expect from doing certain GCSEs. | implies that students can speak to the teachers of the different subject options, but he does not say how they can do this. Beyond approaching the teacher in the corridor or a break time there does not seem to be a structure in place to give the students access to teachers that deliver subject options that the students are unfamiliar with.

During this passage of the interview the tutor makes his first significant reference to the influence of students' parents in the options process. Whilst describing his own role in the process as being a 'back seat role' he says that the process of choosing is 'more parental than anything' and that 'the parents influence the students more than anyone else'.

He does go on to say that he thinks that role of the tutor in the options process should be larger and he makes a suggestion that older students from Year 11 who are already half way through the options process should be invited to speak to groups of Year 9 students to give them a student perspective of the different curricular options available. |
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| Context – students | **DJ:** So do you find that some students do ask and others don't?

Tutor: Yep, absolutely. It tends to be the most conscientious students that ask, but the questions that | Here the tutor explains that having made their curricular choices the students who do ask questions and do engage in discussion with the form tutor about their option choices are those who want |

	they ask are not questions about what to choose really, they are more like questions about what they can expect to do now that they have made their choices, stuff like that. The students that cause concern are the ones who are not brilliant at school anyway, fortunately we don't have many of those here. For those students they really don't know what to do then we try and guide them as well as we can. In truth those students don't really want to do anything, but they have to so we help them choose, but like I said we really don't have many of those students at all.	to know what they can expect from their choice. They have made their decisions without the support of their tutor, but now are hoping to gain an insight in to what they can expect from their choices. The tutor suggests that the vast majority of students do not need support or guidance in making their decisions as they are mature enough and bright enough to make appropriate and sensible decisions. However, for the minority of students who do require guidance and support in making their decisions then there is more of a role there for the school and the tutors to 'step up' and guide those learners.
Context – students	**DJ:** So do you get some students who are the opposite? They decide on the first day of Year 9 what they want to do? **Tutor:** Yep, you do, and they're usually girls and they know exactly what they want to do and what they're going to pick. Then you have a large chunk in the middle of students who are kind of sure already what they want to do and they are maybe considering their final option, but they have the core of what they want to do already decided. Then you have a small rump at the bottom you need extra support.	Here the tutor reinforces the message from his previous response that the vast majority of students either know what they want to do as soon as the options process beings or they just about know what they want and they just need to finalise their choices. Whilst the small 'rump' at the bottom are those students who require additional support.
Internal influence – future aims	**DJ:** So what do you think makes students make up their mind when they are umming and arring between	During this passage the tutor makes reference to an extremely interesting motivating factor that

different subjects like the large chunk in the middle that you described.

Tutor: Well I think it comes down to what they can get from the different subject options. You get a lot of kids coming to you in Year 9 and asking if I were to do your subject what grade do you think I would get at the end of Year 11. Sometimes these are kids that you've never taught and sometimes never even met, but they want you to tell them what grade they are going to get form your subject and that's all part of the decision making process for our students. What can they get? It's actually a really pragmatic approach. You do find that come to think of it, especially here. Other schools that I've worked in are not quite like that, but here, it's very much what can I get out of each option and then basically going with the options that might get them the most. Kids are ambitious here.

influences the student's decisions. With regard to those students who don't have a future career in mind during the options process and who are unsure of which subject choices to pick, one of the key starting points of the decision making process is to consider 'what they can get from the different subject options'.

The tutor describes a very pragmatic approach that many students take towards the process as they ask teachers 'if I choose this subject what will I get'. The tutor describes that sometimes these are students that they have never met before and yet they are asking questions about pass rates and the likeliness of their own success in a particular subject area. These students are in Year 9 and are aged 13/14 and are asking questions, of teachers who might not know them and may not have taught them before, what GCSE exam result can they expect if they choose that teachers subject.

The students will often make their decisions based on the teachers responses and will elect subject options that are most likely to 'get them' most.

The tutor summarises by saying that the students 'are ambitious here'.