

**Exploring the narratives of African Caribbean high-  
attaining boys: Perceived peer influences in  
education**

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**A thesis submitted to  
Institute of Education, University of London  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Educational Psychology**

## **Abstract**

The underachievement of African Caribbean boys has been the subject of considerable debate and research in education but few studies focus on this group's achievements. Difficulties associated with racial identity and masculinity are amongst explanations offered for African Caribbean boys' educational underachievement and research has also implicated the peer group's contributions to undermining academic performance.

This thesis explores the subjective experiences of high-attaining African Caribbean boys regarding their perceptions of peer influences in school. Seven pupils were given two narrative interviews (2 months apart) about their relationships with peers and experiences related to 'peer influence' and the impact they consider that this has on their education and attainment. Interviews also addressed the impact of family narratives on the boys at school. The interviews were analysed using Gee's (1991) structural linguistic narrative approach, which as well as helping to identify narratives also allowed analysis of how the boys performed their identities in co-constructing their narratives with the interviewer.

The findings suggest that the boys perceive peers to have some influence on their educational experiences and subsequent attainment. Narratives espoused the positive aspects of peer relationships as being emotionally and practically supportive and helping boys' motivation to study through competing for high grades. They also highlighted that peer distractions could lead to underachievement. Pupils used multiple and complex strategies to manage their relationships so that they continued to attain well. These included strategic self-presentation, deploying resources (e.g. social capital) and utilising support from teachers and family members. Family racialised narratives were found to play an important role in developing racial identity and academic orientation.

The thesis discusses the implications of these findings and critically comments on the use of narrative interviews and analysis in research with young people and its relevance to schools and Educational Psychology practice.



## Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of my family, friends and partner to whom I owe my inspiration and persistence in embarking on this journey. I would like to thank my mother for being my rock and supporting me through the difficult periods and my partner, Joel, for being so patient and encouraging throughout.

I would like to extend my gratitude to my supervisors Professor Ann Phoenix and Maureen Hennessy for their consistent support and input in my research. Ann, your knowledge and expertise have been inspiring and without you I would never have known the wonders of narrative research and been able to achieve my goals with this thesis. Maureen, your belief in me and my research gave me the confidence to face the unknown and I thank you both for your invaluable contributions.

I would also like to thank the school for supporting my research and allowing me to make contact with the boys and their parents. Most importantly, however, this research would not have been possible without the generosity of the boys who shared so much of themselves with me and made this thesis possible. Boys, hearing your lives enriched my own and I am extremely proud of all of you and your achievements and important contributions to this research. I only hope that I have done you justice and represented you as the amazing young men that I found you to be.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis in loving memory of my grandmother, Gladys Mae Robinson, who sadly passed at the beginning of my research journey. Her devotion to helping others inspired me and I hope that she would have been proud of this research.

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*I have begun everything with the idea that I could succeed, and I never had much patience with the multitudes of people who are always ready to explain why one cannot succeed.*

*Success is not measured by the position one has reached in life, rather by the obstacles one overcomes while trying to succeed.*

Booker T. Washington  
Up From Slavery: An Autobiography

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## **Chapter 1: Rationale and Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis explores the narratives of high-attaining African Caribbean boys regarding their experiences and perceptions of peer group and family influences in education. As a first generation African Caribbean woman in my final year of educational psychology training, this research was inspired through discussions with colleagues that raised issues around social justice and equality in research; that African Caribbean pupils, particularly boys, were consistently constructed as unsuccessful in education. Consequently, I adopted a different approach to study high-attaining African Caribbean boys and deepen insight into the complexities of their educational experiences.

Education literature has highlighted the Black male underachievement problem since the 1960's (Taylor, 1981) and much research still focuses on the relative underachievement of this group (MacDonald, 2001), despite them having made considerable gains in education (DfEE, 2000a). Recent research suggests that the achievement gap is reducing with African Caribbean pupils showing consistent gains in educational achievement between Key stages 3 and 4 (Kingdon & Cassen, 2010). Gillborn (1990) highlighted that African Caribbean males are performing better in school than their predecessors but are still often falling behind other ethnic groups. Nonetheless, how attainment is measured and pupils are ethnically categorised can influence the achievement levels reported (Gillborn, 1990; Reed, 1999; DfES, 2003) and institutional racism and teacher low perceptions have also been implicated in the problem (Tickly, Haynes, Caballero, Hill & Gillborn, 2006; Phillips, 2011).

Previous local and national initiatives and deployment of resources to raise the attainment of African Caribbean pupils and those from disadvantaged socioeconomic groups appear to have had some measure of success. Evaluations of the New Labour mentoring scheme, Aimhigher, suggest that it had a substantial impact upon widening participation (Doyle & Griffin, 2012) and increasing pupil attainment and educational aspirations (Carter-Wall & Whitfield, 2012). A study by Morris and Golden (2005) showed a statistically significant relationship between pupils' involvement in the project and GCSE

exam performance, although some authors have suggested that the collaborative partnerships built through the project contributed to the increases in attainment rather than being a direct cause (Hatt, Baxter & Tate, 2007).

The Coalition government's decision to cut public spending saw the discontinuation of Aimhigher in 2011. In the current economic climate of austerity and changing government agenda it may be that the pattern of successive attainment gains made by African Caribbean pupils might reverse in the absence of investment in efficacious initiatives.

The 'Aiming High: Raising the Achievement of Minority Ethnic Pupils' report (DfES, 2003) highlighted issues around the over-representation of African Caribbean boys in permanent exclusion rates and special schools and their vulnerability to involvement in crime that impacts upon attainment levels. The exclusion problem was prioritised for investigation in the review 'Getting it. Getting it right' (DfES, 2006). Findings supported the view that racial inequalities exist in education and that Caribbean boys find 'street culture' and anti-academic lifestyles persuasive (DfES, 2006, p.12). The issues raised highlights the importance of the educational context in which schools' practices and treatment of Black boys as well as pupils' subjective attitudes and values impact on their educational attainment.

Writers suggest that the complexity in the experiences of Black Caribbean pupils poses challenges to their educational achievement (MacDonald, 2001). Although it is important to understand the factors that undermine academic performance, the focus on underachievement can affect the morale of Black Caribbean pupils within education (DfES, 2006), so it is important to engage with research that explores the successes of individuals in this group to reflect their voices and educational experiences.

Black Caribbean academic success is an under-researched area (Byfield, 2008) and few studies in the UK have sought to identify factors that support and promote success (Rhamie & Hallam, 2002). The focus on underachievement has had little impact on recommendations to change the

state of affairs (Ibid.). Contemporary research may wish to consider approaching the issue of Caribbean underachievement by investigating the skills and resources that some Caribbean pupils have in managing challenges in school and attaining well. In so doing, highlight and capitalise on the strengths and resilience of individuals and provide a counter-balance to negative stereotypes reinforced by some research, which can exacerbate the issue (Ibid.).

Researchers suggest that African Caribbean individuals' ability to manage peer-group pressures contributes to the issue of African Caribbean underachievement (Sewell, 2001). However, some African Caribbean boys are succeeding in education and managing to attain well. Since these boys are subject to peer influences (Gilman, 2009) that can affect their attitudes and educational performance, how do they achieve? In order to begin to answer this question, it may be helpful to study African Caribbean boys who are achieving in order to explore their experiences, their abilities and their skills in negotiating their identities within school.

Particular researchers have commented on the social processes that might underlie the trends observed in Black academic attainment (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Sewell, 2001; Horvat & Lewis, 2003). The research evidence available suggests that African Caribbean boys actively contribute towards their low educational performance through hyper-masculine behaviours which include rejecting academic values and school work, the orientation to which is seen as feminine (Parry, 1997; Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2002; Jackson, 2003). In the current political context and economic climate, questions of what enables some African Caribbean boys managing to attain well while most do not remain largely un-researched.

This thesis aims to contribute to providing insights into the issue of African Caribbean achievement by investigating the perceptions of peer group and family influences through the narratives of high-attaining African Caribbean males, to offer an account of the impact that these might have on individuals' behaviours and motivations to be academically successful. It thus provides a counter-balance to traditional research in the area which has predominantly

focused on underachievement and aims to evoke more helpful discussions about raising the attainment of this group by highlighting factors associated with success. The thesis offers some insight into the complexity associated with being a high-attaining African Caribbean boy by focusing on both the positive and negative influences that peers might have on them. It is hoped that developing an understanding of these boys' experiences within educational psychology research will highlight important implications for schools, education policy, educational psychology practice and the communities it serves.

High-attaining African Caribbean boys were interviewed about their experiences of peer and family influences on their academic values and performance using a narrative approach. Interviews also elicited boys' constructions of their peer relationships and how they manage them, as well as boys' racialised and masculine identities. Methodologically, the thesis aims to discuss and throw light on the use of narrative interviews and analysis in research with adolescents and discuss its relevance to Educational Psychology practice.

This research is relevant to the field of Educational Psychology as Educational Psychologists (EPs) have obligations to seek to obtain and reflect pupil voice in their work (DfES, 2001; Harding & Atkinson, 2009). EPs explore narratives in consultations with pupils, parents and school staff and listen to personal stories that hold meaning for the narrators. Since this research explores the experiences of African Caribbean boys in school, it informs understandings, perceptions and assumptions currently held about this group, and helps to provide an understanding of peer and family influences perceived from individuals' own points of view rather only from theoretical work identified by the literature.

The thesis begins with a review of the literature which highlights the issues, debates and theoretical constructs most relevant to this study and addresses gaps in the literature which were used to identify the research questions proposed in this thesis. The theoretical framework and methodological approach employed in this study are then addressed before the findings

relating to the research questions are presented in chapters 5-9. The thesis ends with a discussion of the findings in relation to theory and existing literature and an outline of the implications and limitations of the study, as well as suggestions for possible future research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This literature review explores some of the issues raised by research on peer group and family influences in education along with factors which are important, such as identity and masculinity, to African Caribbean male pupils' experiences of peer influence on attainment. Whilst the review does not attempt to present an exhaustive account of the social and psychological processes involved and issues of relevance, it highlights the complexity of the issues given that research in these areas have developed through different epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies. The gaps identified in the literature inform the research questions addressed in this thesis.

Contributions to the literature on achievement, ethnic identity and social integration have been largely from the USA, and less attention to these issues has been given by Britain (Edwards, Franklin & Holland, 2003). Further, most research in the UK has focused on Black academic achievement in the context of higher education (Wright, Standen & Patel, 2010). Explanations offered for this are the countries' differences in terms of the communities that live within them, their political contexts, labour and education markets (Edwards et al., 2003) and social class conceptualisations (Ball, 1993), all which help to focus research on issues that appear relevant. This thesis acknowledges these differences and the limitations in generalising findings from the USA to the UK, although literature from the USA is more readily available and so feature to a greater degree. However, some attempt has been made to synthesise the literature to develop an understanding of the debates central to this study.

As this study concerns African Caribbean boys' peer relationships within a school context it was important to identify key concepts and issues of relevance for the literature review. The literature that comprises this review was found by employing a number of search strategies within a search engine (i.e. Google Scholar), databases (i.e. British Education Index, Australian Education Index and ERIC), libraries (i.e. Institute of Education Library and Senate House Library) and e-journals such as Taylor and Francis Online. Keywords relating to the major issues identified were considered and

variations of these keywords were used to search for articles that might be relevant. As such, several searches were employed independently, for example, using keywords such as 'peers', 'peer group', 'peer influence', 'friends', 'adolescence', 'black boys', 'African Caribbean pupils', 'African Caribbean boys', 'African Caribbean males', 'masculinity', 'hegemonic masculinity', 'identity', 'racial identity', 'education', 'attainment', 'UK', 'underachievement' and 'African Caribbean parenting'. Variations of these keywords were also used, as well as combined Boolean operators to narrow searches, for example "black boys" and "attainment". Articles generated by the search engine and databases were sorted in terms of relevance and then by dates to find the most current literature in these areas. Specific keywords identified within articles that had not been explored but appeared relevant were also input into the search e.g. 'motivation theory', and reference was also made to works which had cited relevant articles and those which had been referenced in the literature. Hand searches were also made in libraries and books around specific topics were explored for their relevance.

## 2.1 Peer group literature

A substantial proportion of children's lives are spent socialising with peers and the ability to form and maintain friendships is implicated and important in children's emotional, psychological and cognitive development (Rosenthal, 1993). As children develop, the influence of parents is weakened against the counter-influence of peers, and young people become more susceptible to peer group influences (O'Brien & Bierman, 1988; Young & Ferguson, 1979).

The term 'peer group' that is used throughout this thesis follows Brown's (1990) definition, adopted in more recent research (Ryan, 2000, 2001), of "small, relatively intimate group of peers who interact on a regular basis" (Ryan, 2000, p. 102) which is distinct from a crowd and includes more than just best friends. In this study, peer groups are groups with which individual pupils identify themselves in school.

### 2.1.1 The importance of peers

Adolescents are educated in groups (i.e. classes) and consequently necessarily experience social interactions and influences that will impact upon their views, attitudes and behaviours in relation to learning (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). Whilst the school system may have a particular culture of achievement, groups of young people within it may develop their own attitudes and behaviours towards education that may, or may not, be conducive to achieving. Individuals may accept peer group norms because friendship characteristics serve important psychological functions for development such as intimacy, belonging, relatedness, companionship and alliance (Chu, 2005).

Peer groups often have their own cultural norms and codes for behaving which might include styles of dressing, communicating and particular attitudes (Horvat & Lewis, 2003). Within schools, there is a complex matrix of social networks, in which pupils are flexible members (Cotterell, 2007). The fluidity of group membership and the diversity found in peer groups' cultures and values are important considerations when exploring the influences that they might have on individuals.

There are numerous positive and negative peer effects documented in the literature, including encouraging or undermining motivations to achieve (Urdu & Schoenfelder, 2006) and be socially responsible (Wentzel, 1998), preventing or supporting disruptive behaviour (Cullingford & Morrison, 1997), influencing risk-taking behaviours (Ennett & Bauman, 1994; Urberg, Degirmencioglu & Pilgrim, 1997) and valuing schoolwork (Robertson & Symons, 2003). However, the nature of peer group influences is complex and multifaceted (Ryan, 2001) and influences can be moderated by the characteristics of the adolescent being influenced as well as those of the influencer, and the type of behaviour to be affected (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011).

There is some evidence that best friends are more influential in maintaining some deviant behaviours than just same-age peers (Morgan & Grube, 1991). Self-esteem and confidence are considered protective factors to negative



peer pressure (Connor, 1994). However, it is important to acknowledge that adolescents also engage in collective behaviours in classrooms that are not deviant (Cotterell, 2007).

### 2.1.2 The impact of peer influences

The literature is divided between positive and negative influences of peers. Research has shown a link between peer relationship problems and psychopathology development (Deater-Deckard, 2001). Peer rejection can lead young people to internalise problems that can develop into psychopathological conditions (e.g. depression). Therefore, it is important that individuals can establish and maintain links with members of their peer group.

Not all peer relationships are helpful and conducive to adaptive psychological functioning and pro-social behaviour. Cullingford and Morrison (1997) explored young offenders' recollections of their experiences regarding peer group pressures. The authors proposed that peers have an important effect both within and outside of school, and that there is often competition between friendship and academic group spheres. The methodology used had three important limitations, however.

First, Cullingford and Morrison (1997) used a group of young offenders aged 16-21 who were all institutionalised and had experienced school exclusions. Consequently, the results they obtained are likely to be skewed due to the extremity of participants' current situations, which might have impacted upon how they constructed meaning in their lives and recalled their schooling experiences. The study does little to explore the less salient forms of peer influences commonly experienced by pupils attending schools today.

Second, Cullingford and Morrison (1997) do not describe their analytical procedure or the type of analysis used to draw themes from the data, so the research is limited in rigour and transparency. Furthermore, although Cullingford and Morrison present the research problem well, they do not specify their epistemological stance or research question. Consequently, they

fail to 'own' their perspective and do not allow readers to understand their assumptions and values held about the research, thus limiting its coherence.

Third, some of the authors' claims about their findings do not fit well with the interview extracts they used to evidence the themes they discuss, creating further problems for transparency and coherence. For example, they state that peers were involved in the emergence of offenders' criminal behaviours. However, the data they present actually suggests that offenders turned to crime individually in response to being excluded from school, for example, 'everyone was off school, so I just started robbin' things' (Cullingford & Morrison, 1997, p.67). In addition, the authors make a strong claim that 'peers are a powerful influence on the behaviour of adolescents' (Ibid., p.61) and do show that this can be the case. However, it is inappropriate to claim this on the basis of their study which used case studies of a niche group of young offenders; the findings are not transferable to a wider population. The data were subjective recollections of peer influences, and thus the authors ought to have been careful to report that this finding (i.e. peers being a powerful influence on adolescents) was the retrospective perceptions of the young people. Nonetheless, Cullingford and Morrison offer an alternative method of studying peer group influences, from the perspective of the individuals who experienced them, and present the complexities of peer group influence and how individuals can be negatively influenced when their families are particularly unsupportive.

Whilst offering a stimulating read the research failed adequately to explore the perceptions of the unique role that peers played in developing anti-school attitudes and behaviours, as the experiences narrated by participants drew on family and school issues that made them more at risk of negative peer pressure. It focused on young men who had taken a deviant path and thus questions remain about whether negative peer influences are prevalent in the everyday experiences of male pupils, or only for a select few. This exposes a gap in the research that a study which investigates the experiences of boys who are doing well in education and do not have home-based issues might fill, by presenting the current state of affairs as perceived by the individuals themselves.

Although the dominant discourse is that adolescent peers have negative effects on academic achievement (Bottrell, 2009), they can also positively influence motivation and achievement (Cotterell, 2007). Pupils' motivation to succeed in education can result from interactions between individuals and their social context (Urduan & Schoenfelder, 2006) so peers can be influential in developing academic motivation and, subsequently, affect educational outcomes positively if the individuals that pupils align with are oriented towards academic success (Ibid.). Furthermore, they can influence how pupils feel about school, and friendship security can impact upon pupils' attention and participation in class (Cotterell, 2007).

Achievement goal theory asserts that individuals can be oriented towards two types of goals: mastery, concerned with the learning of a task, and performance, which involves social comparison and competition to demonstrate competence and ability (Urduan & Schoenfelder, 2006). Self-determination theory further suggests that one must feel a connection between oneself and one's social environment, and be competent and in control of one's actions in order to experience motivation (Ibid.). Academic motivation, therefore, involves social appraisal and comparison processes, self-esteem and competence, and peers can be instrumental in developing and supporting these elements that play a crucial role in adolescents' educational outcomes.

Research suggests that peers have an indirect effect upon achievement. They may not necessarily offer practical support but can influence individuals by shaping their values and attitudes towards schoolwork (Robertson & Symons, 2003). Ryan (2001) studied peer groups as a context for developing motivation and achievement in seventh-grade adolescents from an American middle school. This research made links between peer group (assigned through social network analysis) motivation (measured through self-report surveys) and achievement, as measured by Grade Point Average (GPA), over two time points.

The study found that high-achievers tended to be in peer groups with other high-achievers and in this social context, levels of achievement for pupils

showed less of a decline over a seven month period than when in a peer group of low-achievers (Ryan, 2001). This trend supports the homophily theory, that pupils tend to affiliate with like-minded peers, in terms of attitudes and behaviours, through processes of selection and socialisation (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). However, the study did not offer alternative explanations that might have accounted for changes in peer group affiliation, subsequent motivation and achievement levels, such as the structure of classes and adjustment to school. Issues such as pupils' evaluations of self-efficacy and ability in the context of increasingly demanding educational expectations were also not explored and the researchers failed to consider the fluidity of peer relationships over the daily course of school. The study was not designed to present an account of pupils' subjective social experiences. This thesis aims to address this, since it is relevant to a discussion of peer influence, and offer helpful comments on the debate.

Peer mediation and counselling practices in schools, based on social learning and constructivist theories, have helped pupils develop the skills to manage stress, build self-esteem and resolve conflicts (Cartwright, 2005). The use of peers in mentoring and teaching other children is established as a successful intervention for vulnerable groups of children who have social communication disorders (Deater-Deckard, 2001), children for whom inclusion might be an issue, who might experience bullying and victimization or who are involved in transitions to new schools (Dearden, 1998).

The transition from primary to secondary school has been shown to impact on pupils' academic performance and research suggests that pupils' educational progress dips between year 7 and year 10 (OFSTED, 1999). However, pupils' friendship networks and siblings can provide security during school transitions, giving pupils resources to navigate this difficult passage (Holland, Reynolds & Weller, 2007).

Harper (2012) interviewed African American college students and found that students valued older same-race peer mentors who supported them through the transition to college, inspired them and enabled them to feel a part of the college community. Harper (2012, p.11) reported that 'It was peers, mostly

older Black men, who helped the achievers figure out how to succeed', and were more influential than academic tutors. It appears that peers can be more influential than other sources of support and promote the engagement and participation of some pupils in education. However, it could be that these high-achievers already had the confidence and positive attitudes they needed to be motivated by peer models as they had successfully navigated their way through high school, and their affiliation with positive peers might have reflected their developmental maturity. Younger adolescents may well be different. This research aims to shed light on whether this might be the case.

Whilst friendships serve important psychological needs and can encourage academic motivation, learning and a sense of belonging in school, some peer relationships can exert a powerful negative force that certain individuals fall prey to, because they fill unmet needs, particularly, in the absence of supportive family relationships (Cullingford & Morrison, 1997). Although previous peer studies have used retrospective accounts and social network modelling, the present thesis explores individuals' contemporaneous narratives, thereby offering a more insightful account of the affective issues that are relevant to peer influences on some adolescent African Caribbean boys in a UK school.

## 2.2 Theories and debates in Black achievement

Pupils' attitudes towards education vary with those of their social group (Ryan, 2001) and research consistently finds that friends often share similar attitudes and behaviours (Brechtwald & Prinstein, 2011). Studies investigating the underachievement of ethnic minority groups have implicated peers as a strong force that can affect individuals' aspirations, attitudes and behaviours (Cassen & Kingdon, 2007; Ford, Grantham & Whiting, 2008). The need for nurture, to be respected, popular, acquire social status and uphold preferred reputations in line with 'cool' peers can be stronger than desires and pressures to fall in line with school expectations for behaviour and achievement (Sewell, 2001; Sewell, 2000; Phoenix, 2000).

Debates on identity formation and masculinity are central to any investigation of peer influences, particularly on African Caribbean boys as theories around masculinity, racial identity and fear of undesirable labelling by peers are amongst the explanations offered for their relative underachievement. Some literature suggests that the development of racial identity, a good understanding of who one is and how important race is in their lives, has implications for academic achievement.

### 2.2.1 Identity theories

Grantham and Ford (2003) defined racial identity as how much people value, understand and are aware of their racial heritage. A strong sense of racial identity can have a positive impact on self-esteem and subsequently effect educational work ethic and goal achievement (Byfield, 2008), and might underlie pupils' academic performance (Ford, 1996; Grantham & Ford, 2003).

Being able to identify with a group can exacerbate or buffer the effects of discrimination (Chavous, Bernat, Schmeelk-Cone, Cadwell, Kohn-Wood & Zimmerman, 2003) but if Black pupils do not have a healthy sense of racial identity they are more likely to surrender to negative peer pressure (Grantham & Ford, 2003). Such findings have led to recommendations (e.g. mentoring programmes) to equip Black pupils with problem-solving and conflict-resolution strategies to overcome difficult peer interactions and reduce some of the social barriers to their achievement (Sewell, 2001; Grantham and Ford, 2003; Whiting, 2009).

Nigrescence Theory (Cross & Vandiver, 2001) is a staged model that suggests that Black individuals' development of racial identity requires a shift from understanding oneself as belonging to a Black community and identifying with its racial experiences and problems to come to realise one can maintain both frames of reference and cultures (of the Black community and majority culture) without conflicts of identity (Grantham & Ford, 2003). Discovering which stage of racial identity development an individual may be operating within could allow an understanding of their motives and drives for

achieving educational success and the means by which they achieve it. It is reasonable to suggest that a study of African Caribbean adolescents might tap into racial identity instability, as adolescents undergo periods of change and development (Chavous et al., 2003).

Chavous et al. (2003) explored the relationship between racial identity and academic outcomes for African American students, using a prospective research design that allowed for predictions of outcomes based on participants' racial identity beliefs. They used cluster analyses to produce profiles of racial identities and linked them to beliefs about education, their performance and later attainment (Ibid.). Their findings suggested that pupils with a strong affiliation to a group were buffered and protected by this connection, perhaps making them more aware of discrimination and more motivated, which facilitated their educational success. Although this study offered a different way of investigating racial identity and was able to link it to academic outcomes, it did not take account of the contexts in which adolescents' belief systems are formed, for example, within the peer group (Ibid.).

Whiting's (2009) theory of scholar identity suggests that African American males can be successful in education and overcome barriers to achievement by perceiving themselves as academicians, studious, intelligent or talented (Ibid.). Whiting (2009) proposed that nine characteristics contribute towards the development of a scholar identity and subsequent academic success for African American males, suggesting that self-efficacy, that is the belief that one is competent and able, provides the foundations for the other characteristics, which allow pupils to be resilient and helps them in times of challenge. Self-efficacy helps pupils to remain optimistic of success and reject any stereotypes that may be imposed upon them (Ibid.). Other characteristics that contribute to build a strong, persistent and high achieving African American male pupil include willingness to make sacrifices and the need for achievement being greater than the need for affiliation. The advantage in scholar identity theory is that interventions and strategies to support Black pupils can be targeted to address each of the identity characteristics that may require development (e.g. pupils' self-efficacy) but

the theory lacks data to support the collective impact of the characteristics proposed. Exemplar pupils who embody these scholar identity characteristics are not presented, so how representative is this of 'real life'? Further, how convinced can we be that scholar identity is indeed the answer to Black academic success?

Identity theories have considered personal experiences that relate to social functioning and needs in order to account for racial and scholarly values that can impact upon individuals' attitudes towards and behaviours within education. These conceptualisations have generated some helpful suggestions for interventions that have been used in educational settings to some effect, in raising self-esteem and Black pupils' skills strategically to resist negative pressures. However, a question remains: To what extent does the socio-political context play a role in the formation of identities that contribute towards the educational achievement of African Caribbean boys? Perhaps research that uses a methodology such as narrative inquiry where context considerations are inherent and brought to the fore can begin to answer this question.

Narrative inquiry posits that we represent our multiple social identities through narrativity (Somers, 1994). The method 'provides an opportunity to infuse the study of identity formation with a relational and historical approach that avoids categorical rigidities by emphasizing the embeddedness of identity in overlapping networks of relations that shift over time and space' (Somers, 1994, p.607). This thesis thus explores how narratives can present the multiplicity of identities that may be implicated in African Caribbean boys' academic achievement.

### 2.2.2 Peer and academic management theories

Black high-achieving pupils have been theorised to face a dilemma in which they experience positive feelings associated with their high academic performance but paradoxical psychological distress, isolation and rejection from their peers because of it (Grantham & Ford, 2003). Grantham and Ford



(2003) proposed that the affective dissonance experienced by high-achieving Black students leads them to undermine their achievements and sabotage their own success, as their psychological need for affiliation and social acceptance may be greater than their need for academic achievement.

Sewell (2001) argued that Black pupils are subject to powerful forces exerted by the peer group which is characterised as challenging authority, Black consumer culture, high self-esteem, hyper-masculinity and kinship culture. This can impede on their academic progress as they endeavour to prove themselves worthy members of the group and able to project their racialised and gendered identities in ways that the group deems acceptable if their self-esteem and support needs are to be met (Sewell, 2001). However, the finding that Black peer groups are diverse (Horvat and Lewis, 2003) can complicate the issue.

One of the dominant theories in the literature is offered by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) who suggested that some Black pupils actively resist engaging in achievement-related behaviours to avoid their peers labelling them as 'acting white' which may discourage them from performing their best in school. This theory has been the subject of much debate and criticism in explaining the Black-White achievement gap.

Although Fordham and Ogbu (1986) made a direct link between peer pressures to resist Euro-centric values and actions to promote collective Black identity and academic achievement, critics have pointed out that they used a small sample and participants themselves did not report this link, nor use the term 'acting white' in their narratives (Tyson, Darity Jr. and Castellino, 2005). This calls into question the credibility of the authors' claims. Although the thesis appears theoretically sound it may not be an accurate representation of why peer groups apply pressure on Black males to discourage them from achieving. Furthermore, can we be certain that this peer pressure reflects ethnic minority cultural views and not gendered views?

Tyson et al. (2005) investigated the dilemmas associated with high achievement experienced by academically and intellectually gifted pupils from several public, middle and high schools in the USA, exploring the 'acting

white' assumption. Study participants were categorised as Black, White or Other, although only data obtained from the Black and White students were reported. Participants were asked questions about their friends and peers' responses to pupils who were high and low achievers in semi-structured interviews, and school staff was also interviewed. The authors employed two types of textual analysis; a manual coding approach which was then verified using a computer-based approach, to prove the data credible and make analyses transparent and coherent.

Tyson et al.'s (2005) findings strongly suggested that Black students were oriented towards achievement and valued academia but they did not experience or at least report difficulties with their peers regarding their high achievement. The authors concluded that the 'burden of acting white' was not pervasive in the schools they studied; some Black students did experience teasing for being smart but this was not racialised. The authors further noted a 'burden of high achievement among Whites' (Tyson et al., 2005, p.596) and criticised Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) thesis for having overlooked similarities in the experiences of high achieving Blacks with those of Whites. The study was rigorous and reported on the experiences of Black and White students in order to make some meaningful new suggestions to add to the wealth of literature on the peer influence debate and built on the criticisms of Fordham and Ogbu's work.

The 'acting white' thesis is a reductionist perspective (Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus & Harpalani, 2001) and does not adequately capture the range of experiences encountered by Black students who are managing to achieve in spite of any pressures applied by their peers. The theory offers only a partial explanation of the trends observed in Black pupils' achievement and may not apply to all Black students. Although the original studies by Fordham and Ogbu are dated, there has been current research, some of which contributes to the validity of the 'burden of acting white' hypothesis (for example, Ford et al., 2008), and some that refutes that Black pupils experience peer pressures that influence them to downplay their achievements and underperform in school (see Spencer et al., 2001; Tyson et al., 2005).

Hemmings (1996) found that the students in her study were responsive to the cultures that were prevalent within the schools they attended, proposing that specific school cultures can influence how pupils perceive 'pressures' and respond to them. This indicates the heterogeneity of school cultures and that pupils' responses to them are fluid and diverse; individuals can and do actively negotiate identities for themselves within the variable social contexts offered by school environments (Hemmings, 1996). Furthermore, individuals' attribution styles can affect the strategies they use to cope with stressful events such as peer pressure (Weinstein & Ryan, 2011).

Horvat and Lewis (2003) suggested that some Black students use strategies that allow them to 'manage' academic success to resist peer pressures to underperform. In a multi-method study using triangulation of both observation and interview data with different groups of interviewees (e.g. students and school staff), Horvat and Lewis (2003) investigated the experiences of Black female students in their senior high school year. The authors found that participants navigated between different peer groups and actively negotiated their academic success within and between them as they played down their achievements to peers who were less academically successful but could share their success and show support to peers who were like-minded and successful (Horvat & Lewis, 2003). Participants also found a balance between academia and engaging in social activities. The authors argued that pupils resisted peer pressures and Black stereotypes and that they strategically 'managed' their school success but also acknowledged that peers could be helpful in supporting academic achievement, by, for example, helping in developing a healthy sense of competition; individuals were able to use their peers to inspire and motivate them to achieve. This was also found in a recent (2011) study (unpublished) by the present researcher.

In a small qualitative study investigating professional males' reflections on factors that affected their educational performance, the present researcher (Robinson, 2011, unpublished) found that men perceived that their secondary school peers offered support and encouragement as well as fostered competitiveness in academic attainment. However, participants also indicated that family members provided role models and positive reinforcement which

instilled pride in individuals for their achievements and inspiring teachers also contributed to high achievement. These findings echoed those of Rhamie and Hallam (2002) which suggested that individual factors, home, school and community systems interact to produce academic success for some African Caribbean males. Further, individual factors (e.g. personal characteristics and identity) and resources may determine how boys respond to peer and other influences and manage demands and expectations of educational success.

Whilst Horvat and Lewis's (2003) perspective on managing school success better discusses individual agency than the controversial 'acting white' thesis, their suggestion of managing school success based on their study is limited in transferability due to the fact that they used a small all-female sample. Thus, the study is limited in rigour, as the sample may be inadequate to explain how high-achieving pupils manage school success; it merely reflects the experiences of the females in their sample. Furthermore, the authors do not define the vague descriptor 'Black' which they use to categorise their participants and thus do not account for, nor aptly consider, the political, social, historical and migration experiences of the various groups and individuals to whom the label refers.

In the UK, some classification systems tend to collapse African and Caribbean groups together, although they are 'culturally and ethnically distinctive' (Reynolds, 2004, p. 4). This thesis uses the specific descriptor category African Caribbean in consideration of the differences observed in Black African and African Caribbean pupils' attainment and schooling experiences. In so doing, the research provides accounts that might highlight the unique experiences of African Caribbean boys in relation to peer influence and how they manage probable peer cultural expectations to be 'cool' with school and family expectations to achieve.

Perspectives on the academic achievement of Black pupils rarely integrate concepts of individual characteristics or identity, diversity, culture and context (Spencer et al., 2001) and therefore do not offer a holistic account of the experiences of Black pupils in education. Research ought better to consider the range of peer relationships and cultures that co-exist, with which pupils

identify. Whilst the 'acting white' thesis has illustrated some of the complexities in African American experiences of schooling and offered reasons why some pupils might undermine their achievement, the suggestions might be less relevant currently. Further, research in this area has largely been from the USA, and little UK research has sought to present the experiences of African Caribbean boys with regards to peer pressure and influence. The present thesis attempts to do just that, accounting for current pupils' experiences amidst a backdrop of improving academic attainment for young people of African Caribbean heritage.

### 2.3 Masculinity theories and debates

One of the issues in the masculinity debate is that the very doing or performing of masculinity is constructed in social interactions and boys respond to, negotiate and position themselves in relation to dominant or idealised forms of masculinity, termed 'hegemonic masculinity' (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2002). These constructions of masculinity are also influenced by the number of resources individuals have available (Swain, 2006).

Literature on the positions of masculinity that boys adopt in educational settings includes ethnographic studies to identify typologies of pupil groups (e.g. 'academic' versus 'sporty') and how boys construct their masculinity within social groups (Swain, 2006). This has provided some understanding of how group identities and crowd affiliation can influence individuals' particular orientations to specific aspects of school life and values. However, as Chu (2005, p.8) highlighted, research is needed on how boys 'actively respond to certain realities of their peer group culture' and resist social pressures to conform, exercising their rights to perform personal versions of masculinity that they view as 'authentic'.

Black pupils' school experiences are mediated by their gendered identities and affect the relationships they are able to form with their peers (Wright, Weekes, McGlaughlin & Webb, 1998). Researchers have suggested that

circumscribed views of Black masculinities as embodying 'machismo' and hegemony pathologises Black boys' responses to school experiences (Ibid.). However, boys' awareness of social constructions of what Black masculinity is meant to be and how it should look, leads some to reject these notions, and actively to construct, negotiate and define new versions of masculinity (see Wright et al., 1998). The social processes that underlie pupils' educational experiences should be prioritised in research (Reed, 1999) as they serve to benefit and disadvantage some boys who occupy certain spaces in school. African Caribbean boys might be able to comment on their understandings of these processes and the emotional impact that they have on them, their subsequent behaviour and achievement.

Schools' structures, the ethnic composition of their pupils, their ethos, inclusion and bullying policies can all contribute to the ways in which boys manifest and exercise their masculinities and perform gendered identities. These factors then are likely to be linked to boys' experiences and subsequent feelings and perceptions about themselves and others, which impact upon their achievement.

Sewell (2001) proposed that Black boys' peer group cultures are characterised by hypermasculinity and consumer culture. Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2002) also noted that 'style' leadership was particularly attributed to African Caribbean boys and the way boys dressed gained them high status. Sewell's (1997) ethnographic study of Black boys in a British school highlighted that some position themselves as superior and in opposition to other ethnic groups in terms of attractiveness and being hard, particularly, in contexts where racist cultures are evident. Boys constructed and exercised different forms of masculinity in an attempt to resist racism and gain power but often reinforced racial stereotypes. Sewell identified pupil typologies as serving psycho-social needs whereby Black boys experienced self-esteem, collective belonging and a sense of group identity. He reported on observations that groups of boys conformed to certain schooling and masculinity behaviours or rebelled against them and assumed an oppositional defensive stance. Peers were implicated in the construction of racialised masculinities as boys constructed themselves relative to other boys

from different ethnic groups, and took up or rejected positions in school according to others' views of them. Sewell (2009) argued that peer group pressure is a stronger influence on Black boys' academic achievement than institutional racism. However, the extent to which the findings from his ethnographic study are applicable to boys today is questionable, particularly as the school he conducted the research in was notoriously underachieving and we cannot be sure that the pupil typologies he identified were not reflecting a cultural stance in response to the then socio-political climate and prevalence of institutional racism. It is reasonable to assume that since then UK schools and the ethnic composition of pupils occupying them have changed which might suggest changes in attitudes and peer group cultures.

Frosh et al. (2002) conducted an extensive qualitative study investigating 11-14 year olds' thoughts about emerging masculinities within the school context, using a narrative analytical framework, which involved interviewing both boys and girls in group and individual contexts. The authors found that within the London schools they studied, masculinities were racialised and that African Caribbean boys tended to be denigrated in spite of being popular and that the canonical narratives that were espoused, which are general stories about lived cultural experiences that justify certain behaviours (Frosh et al., 2002), contradicted more personal narratives. Furthermore, the study found that few boys managed to be academically successful and popular as hegemonic masculinity ideals did not allow for commitment to schoolwork and learning. Thus, male peers explicitly disapproved when other male pupils held academic values. Boys created an oppositional culture in which status was constructed and boys policed identities through using homophobic language to label others as 'gay' if they did not subscribe to popular ways of 'doing boy' (Frosh et al., 2002).

The peer group acts to define the parameters of acceptable expressions of masculinity and exercises social control by doing so. If boys are able to resist falling in line with hegemonic masculinity ideals but can still remain popular and be academic, how do they do so when these concepts are traditionally antithetical? The understanding of this calls for further research of the conditions and characteristics, strategies and resources that allow some male

pupils successfully to attain status, popularity and favour whilst remaining academically focused. The current thesis is an attempt to begin to answer this question.

#### 2.4 The role of families

Research exploring the impact of attachment relationships on children's social interactions has implicated the parental relationship in developing children's social skills and peer support-seeking behaviours (Allen, McElhaney & Marsh, 2007). Adolescents who are able to seek social support are better able to cope with challenges (Herman-Stabl, Stemmler & Peterson, 1995; Hampel & Peterman, 2005). Consequently, parents' attachment can affect adolescents' ability to develop supportive peer relationships which can impact on their coping skills and resilience.

The available literature on resilience has largely sought better to understand how to harness individuals' potential to cope and adapt through risky and adverse environmental conditions and identify protective factors to support healthy development (Botrell, 2009). Social capital is one buffer that has been identified as protective against disadvantage (Botrell, 2009). Writers have conceptually defined social capital in two ways: by 'stressing the collective goods of reciprocity, trust and cooperation' (Holland, Reynolds & Weller, 2007, p. 98) in social networks and in reference to the absence of social resources to explain inequality (Ibid.). Theorists have emphasised the importance of family organisations and relationships in generating social capital through parents' investment in their children, giving them attention and information, talking about personal issues and providing parameters for behaviour and academic expectations (Edwards et al., 2003). Families reinforce 'bonding capital' which is concerned with maintaining social ties and solidarity, and is personal, whereas, 'bridging capital' is concerned with building relationships with different people, enabling people to get ahead and act in the public good (Ibid.).



Holland et al. (2007) argued against the dominant conceptualisations of social capital that suggest that children are recipients of their parents' social capital rather than active in generating their own. In their analysis of three studies, focusing on education and employment, intimacy and ethnicity, Holland et al. (2007) showed that young people use their own social capital to negotiate transitions and construct their identities, and that Caribbean children forged strong bonds with their communities and families to help them negotiate new school environments and behaviours within them.

Writers have argued that Black families develop 'respectability status' (Wright et al., 2010, p. 64) to counter the negative assumptions and ideas that are projected onto them. This leads to some Black youths working to disprove negative stereotypes. In addition, strengths found within Black families are trans-generational and thought to develop from historical experiences associated with struggle and racism (Wright et al., 2010) and studies have noted a strong culture of close bonding, academic orientation (Hill, 1971; Ford, 1993) and resilience within them (Wright et al., 2010).

The role of parents and family members in helping Black pupils to orient towards academic achievement should not be underestimated. Research into the impact of parental involvement on educational outcomes supports the view that when parents take an interest and are actively involved in their children's education this can have a positive effect on educational engagement and pupils' attitudes (Attaway & Bry, 2004). Reay (2000) demonstrated that mothers, in particular, invested 'emotional capital' in their children (i.e. emotional resources and skills) which supported their academic success and that this transferred to social prestige (Wright et. al., 2010, p.14). Further, Wright et al. (2010, p.14) reported that Black youths perceived that 'vigilant maternal intervention' supported their academic focus and aspirations. Ford (1993, p.60) writes, 'the messages Black parents directly and indirectly communicate to their children regarding school achievement - and children's perceptions or interpretations of those messages - influence children's subsequent achievement orientation'.

A study, like this thesis, that engages with family narratives might tap into the support that family members and experiences might provide to African Caribbean pupils who are high-attaining, enabling an understanding of the role of the family versus that of peers in promoting pro-education attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. Consequently, adding to the debate on adolescent academic influences.

## 2.5 Summary of the literature and research questions

The literature has implicated peer effects in the academic outcomes of young people (Gilman, 2009; Robertson & Symons, 2003) in addition to health-related behaviours (Lynskey, Fergusson & Horwood, 1998) and risk-taking (Jaccard, Blanton & Dodge, 2005). Research on the underachievement of African Caribbean boys also implicates peers as an important influence (Sewell, 2001; DfEE, 2000b; Sewell, 2000).

Peer influence literature has generated some important insights but the methodologies most commonly used to research the issue have largely been quantitative (O'Brien & Bierman, 1988) and ethnographic. However, narrative approaches have highlighted the complexities in boys' friendships and peer cultures, their performance of masculinity and their perceptions of threats to academic attainment and peer relationships (Phoenix et al., 2003; Chu, 2005).

Research in the field has given less attention to the perception of peer influences, how individuals ascribe meaning to their experiences and actively negotiate identities and respond to peer cultures (Chu, 2005). This constitutes a gap in the literature and suggests a need to explore individuals' experiences in depth to better understand the nature and impact of peer influences alongside the influences of family members. Analysis of high-attaining African Caribbean male pupils' narratives not only offers insights into their experiences, allowing us to understand their perceptions of influence, but might tap into cultural and personal assumptions and aspects of identity that underlie behaviour.

Whilst a number of researchers have attempted to offer theories about the academic achievement of Black pupils, particularly, in relation to racial and scholar identity development, peer and academic success management, and masculinity, little research explores the positive effects of peers on this particular group of young people, for whom underachievement has long been documented in educational research. Crucially, the majority of research that has contributed towards our understanding of the experiences of academically successful Black males is from the USA, and as such, the theories proposed may not necessarily fit with the UK population, given differences in the countries' ethnic compositions, education systems, cultural norms and immigration histories.

Little research has focused on the subjective experiences of high-attaining African Caribbean males in secondary education in the UK. As such, there is a need for research that can develop our understanding of the social processes that can positively or negatively impact upon achievement in academic settings for African Caribbean boys (Hallam & Rhamie, 2003) and represent pupils' perspectives, as Ford, Grantham and Whiting (2008) highlighted, 'Perceptions are a powerful determinant of behaviors' [*sic*] (Ibid., p.224). Research should seek to investigate how to capitalise on the positive effects of some peer relationships and ameliorate the negative influence of others (Ryan, 2001), but also consider how family influences work alongside peer group influences.

Although the literature has yielded conceptual frameworks for the study of peer group influences and qualitative studies have increased our understanding of African Caribbean boys' educational experiences, the majority of studies have focused on retrospective accounts in the context of post-compulsory education (Wright et al., 2010). Furthermore, the transparency and coherence of studies around the topic is called to question when researchers fail to engage with reflexive practices that could offer readers a greater understanding of their assumptions and experiences in undertaking research.

Applying a narrative methodology to the study of boys' relationships, and the impact of their influences and school experiences, could offer the literature insight into pupils' interpretations of their social experiences and the resources they employ to manage them in order to maintain their academic attainment. In addition, it allows participants to construct their experiences without being constrained by the researcher's agenda and so could generate novel data with respect to the issues being explored. Further, a narrative approach can enable an understanding of boys' identities at the intersections of ethnicity and masculinity and identify the relevance of these important constructs in the context of adolescence.

The research questions proposed in this thesis are:

1. Do 14-15 year old boys who are attaining well (i.e. they have achieved level 7+ in their English, Mathematics and Science Key Stage 3 SATs attainment tests) consider that their experiences and relationships with their peers impact upon their education? If so, how and how do the boys feel about this?
2. How do the boys manage their peer relationships?
3. How do family narratives impact on the boys' views about school and their attainment?
4. How do the boys perform their identities as they co-construct their narratives during interviews?
5. How does the narrative interview method impact on the narratives produced and on how boys and the researcher feel about the research and reflect on the process?

This thesis explores the experiences of high-attaining African Caribbean boys regarding their perceptions in relation to peer influences in school. Pupils were interviewed about their experiences of peer influences and their potential impact on academic performance using a narrative approach. The thesis presents the boys' perceptions of the cultural values and norms of their

peer groups, their educational experiences and how they respond to and manage their peer relationships, as well as the potential impact of family narratives on the boys' views on education.

Reflexive accounts of the interview process will be offered to allow readers an understanding of my assumptions and reasoning during data analyses and the conclusions drawn. The thesis also attempts to throw light on the use of narrative interviews and analysis in research with young people and discuss its relevance to Educational Psychology practice.

## Chapter 3

### Theoretical and Methodological Perspective: Narrative Inquiry

Narratives are considered to be 'meaningful units' (Moen, 2006, p. 2) of talk that help to structure our experiences and help us make sense of our lives through the dialogic interactions in which they take place. Whilst the terms 'story' and 'narrative' have been differentially adopted by researchers, this thesis employs the term 'narrative' to account for participants' storied versions of their lived experiences. This acknowledges that narrative 'ways of knowing' (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995, p. 115) hold some believable truths and are subjective representations of one's history, rather than viewing them as fictitious, as use of the term 'story' sometimes implies.

Since the act of narrating personal experience comes naturally, the skill of which develops in infancy (Engel, 2006) and according to cultural conventions (Sandelowski, 1991), it appears a useful approach for studies that want to explore human experience, its interpretation and meaning. Individual narratives also reflect others' voices that encompass their 'intentions, expectations and attitudes' (Moen, 2006, p. 3) and through temporally ordering descriptions of events narrators bare their views and beliefs about the world (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Consequently, narratives are autobiographical and reflect performances of identity (Somers, 1994; Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001).

Narrative approaches can be useful in illuminating information about social life, culture, assumptions and beliefs and creates opportunities for individuals to tell their stories in ways meaningful to them, and therefore, can reflect personal identities (Reissman, 1993). Identities are taken to be how people understand themselves and how they arrange or configure their beliefs, ideologies and 'selves' to sit meaningfully within social niches (McAdams, 2001). The ways in which people author and create their stories of experiences are interpretive and access to these interpretations and perceptions may be vital to understanding influence (Ryan, 2000). Narrative studies also allow researchers better to understand the impact of experiences on individuals and gain access to information of which individuals may not be

consciously aware (Bell, 2002), for example, the emotional affect associated with past events.

This research employs an experience-centred narrative methodology embedded within a social constructionist epistemology. The experience-centred narrative approach makes the following assumptions: Narratives are meaningful and ordered sequentially; they re-present, reconstruct and express human experience and can transform or change over time and between different social contexts (Squire, 2008). Narratives not only reflect temporality but are particular and subjective (Bowman, 2006) and studies of narrative are more concerned with meanings than facts (Bochner, 2001).

The literature on narrative inquiry generally assumes that narratives are socially constructed and do not represent truth, but multiple personal truths of lived experiences that 'sit at the intersection of history, biography, and society' (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p. 132). Narratives are dialogical and constructed in reference to the listener, their values and expectations (Hänninen, 2004). Further, they are filtered through the narrator's and researcher's lenses of gender, social class, language and ethnicity; these factors impact on the experiences shared and the meanings ascribed to them and constitute their co-construction. Consequently, the context in which narratives take place and the relationship between the narrator and listener is important (Hunter, 2010). It is therefore important that this thesis offers information about the social and cultural context in which the research takes place and account for the researcher's positioning. Further, presenting my reflections will allow readers to engage with my assumptions, emotions and decision-making, thereby, offering the thesis some transparency.

Narrative inquiry is appropriate to this study seeking better to understand the lived experiences of African Caribbean boys in school in order to offer insight into their perspectives on peer group influences and the strategies used to manage them. As narrative interviewing is little directed by interviewers and encourages participation and the sharing of accounts and power (Duncan & Watson, 2010), the approach may allow pupils to feel empowered in telling their experiences and produce authentic data in the context of the

collaborative research relationship. Narrative inquiry is research that is mindful (Johns, 2010) and 'makes audible the voices and stories of people marginalized or silenced in more conventional modes of inquiry. To that extent its aspirations or ambitions are emancipatory and transformative' (Bowman, 2006, p.14). This approach may then enable new understandings of the social experiences of some African Caribbean boys in the UK by not imposing any existing theoretical ideas on the data.

### 3.1 The role of the researcher

Narrative interviews allow researchers to 'listen attentively and empathetically' (Smythe & Murray, 2000, p. 311) to the lived experiences of participants and promote the sharing of subjective interpretations of significant events in the life course. Interviews allow the co-construction of meaning between participant (narrator) and researcher, giving insight into the interpretations of meanings ascribed to experiences from the cultural frames of reference of both researcher and narrator, positioning the researcher as an active witness to the narrative rather than a distant observer (Bochner, 2001).

Narrative interviews required the researcher to employ active listening to participants' accounts of peer influences in school and reflect on them to make sense of their experiences within the interviews and wider social contexts. Considering the transformative nature of narratives, I reflected on post-interview conversations and engaged participants in a second interview after a 2 month interval to provide an opportunity to continue conversations and follow-up on issues that appeared emotionally significant (Squire, 2008).

Narrative researchers engage in active decision-making about how to present narratives to the audience, designed to convey a particular message, which might involve content analysis using constructs such as narrative plot (Colyar & Holley, 2010), or structuralist analysis (Gee, 1991) to present how narratives are co-constructed (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Taking into account the co-constructive nature of narratives, I present my reflections on



the interactions between myself and the boys during the interview process and comment on the implications of engaging in narrative research, in consideration of the ethical and validity issues relating to narrative inquiry. I also highlight factors that might have impacted upon the narratives told during the interviews, such as the rapport between participants and researcher.

### 3.2 Ethical Considerations

The researcher applied for BPS ethical approval and this was granted. To minimise threats to data confidentiality, the school was requested to identify pupils appropriate for the study (i.e. those who met the criteria for inclusion), so the researcher would not have access to the pupils' personal details. Letters describing the aims of the study were sent to the school which included information about the study and consent forms for pupils and parents to sign and return. Pupil and parental consent was given prior to the boys' participation in the study.

Participants' rights to anonymity and confidentiality were explained to them and they were informed that any disclosure of information that suggested they were at risk of harm or if the researcher developed concerns about their safety or well-being from information shared in interviews, this would have to be passed on to the school for investigation. I was mindful that through the process of interviewing, participants might remember past experiences which might affect them emotionally, and thus, I was considerate of the issues they raised in interviews and how they were presenting. I had a school staff member that I could contact if any participants became distressed. I would also have stopped the interview to engage with the pupil as I would in my practice as an Educational Psychologist to allow an opportunity to explore this and ensure their well-being.

Interviews were held in private rooms in the school to ensure that participants felt comfortable to express themselves freely. During interviews, I encouraged the pupils to speak openly about their experiences and reminded

them of the research confidentiality agreement and their rights to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. Participants were also assured that there was no 'right answer' to the questions. I maintained a curious 'non-expert' position throughout the interviews, in keeping with the appreciative inquiry approach adopted by Educational Psychologists in consultation (Wagner, 2000).

Interview data were recorded on a digital voice-recording device that was kept securely and confidentially and only accessible to the researcher. Debriefing to each participant was offered after the second interview was completed in order not to influence the narratives told during the interviews. Participants' names were changed in the thesis to retain their anonymity and confidentiality.

There is a need for this study, which explores the experiences of high-achieving African Caribbean boys, to present my reflections on the process of interviewing participants and how the data were co-constructed in interviews to show transparency and make the findings more trustworthy. This offers readers an account of my experiences in undertaking this study, helping them engage with the co-construction of meaning that led to the interpretations developed, thereby, offering coherence and helping readers understand the researcher's motivations and experiences (Yardley, 2000). This adds ethical and moral integrity and provides accountability for the data. By positioning the research in context it will suggest a lens through which readers are invited to view and appraise the findings.

It is believed that sharing narratives can 'increase our working knowledge of ourselves' (Atkinson, 1998, p.1), thus can have a positive effect on participants. Narrative interviews can be an intervention through which the narrator becomes self-aware, gaining a better understanding of their past and orienting them to future action (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000).

Narrative researchers are open and honest about how their own experiences and frame of reference might impact upon the research, its participants and their data. Narrative inquiry asserts that truths are multiple and relative; narratives are intersubjective and require the development of mutual

understanding between the researcher and researched (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995), and is able to present the complexity of human experiences, how they are understood within a cultural framework and comment on the affective meanings ascribed to them.

Narrative inquiry is criticised for its inability to claim that the 'stories' presented are true; this raises a credibility issue. Researchers suggest that there is a 'narrative truth' (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 164) by which narratives can be evaluated through their plausibility, coherence and finality. The way in which narratives are constructed, how events are linked together and organised with reference to temporality create 'narrative coherence' (Fivush, Habermas, Waters & Zaman, 2011, p. 324). However, some critics argue that imposing such criteria reflects a positivist interest in seeking 'truth', and does not account for the often ill-constructed narratives generated by autobiographical accounts (Sandelowski, 1991). Researchers should be more interested in how meaning is ascribed to experiences rather than the authenticity of the narrator's account (Ibid.) and this is the position this research holds.

In my aim for analytic transparency I will highlight how interpretations were made and any dilemmas that were encountered. A reflective account of interview processes will also be provided as is best practice in qualitative research.

Upon completion, of the thesis the findings will be provided to the participating school through a presentation to senior leaders and will also be made available to the local authority Educational Psychology Service.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

### **4.1 Research design**

The research employs a qualitative case study design, using experience-centred narrative interviews to explore the perspectives of African Caribbean boys in relation to their experiences of peer influences in school. The research questions lend themselves well to a qualitative methodology which aims to explore personal accounts and perceptions of peer influences to understand experiences from individuals' points of view (Cullingford & Morrison, 1997) and the subjective interpretations of events and processes that underlie influence (Ryan, 2000). Interviews were carried out twice with each participant as the benefits of this process have been documented to be useful in allowing participants to reflect on their own experiences (Phoenix, Frosh & Pattman, 2003) and the rapport built over time between the researcher and participant can affect the narratives given (Josselson, 2007). As narratives are fluid and reconstructed with new personal experiences (Bell, 2002) and reflect temporality and causality, deeper, more insightful accounts may be generated by repeating the interview process.

The type of narrative interviews used here are in-depth interviews, supported by aide memoires for the questions proposed, that aim to offer more valid, representations of individuals' experiences and perspectives than traditional question-response interviews, yet offers a means by which participants' narratives can be explored for themes. It employs a more naturalistic everyday approach to communication between researcher and interviewees, using active listening and 'story-telling' to co-construct the lived experiences of individuals. Such interviews appreciate different perspectives, promote interviewees' use of spontaneous language when telling their stories and stipulate that interviewers refrain from interrupting them (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). The narrative approach 'gives prominence to human agency and imagination' and as such 'is well-suited to studies of subjectivity and identity' (Riessman, 1993, p.5).

## 4.2 The local authority and school contexts

It is important that a study investigating narratives is able to position the research in cultural and socio-political context, as narratives are influenced by these factors. As such, some information will be presented about the local authority and school context in order to account for the positioning of the research. However, having ethical consideration for the need for the identity of the school to remain anonymous, only data that might potentially hold some relevance to the study will be presented in brief.

The outer London local authority has some of the most deprived wards in England and a rapidly-increasing population. In 2004, it was recorded that 50.4% of the population was non-White British with the largest ethnic minority groups being Greek Cypriot, White-other, Black Caribbean and Black African. In addition, the local authority has an increasing problem with gangs and associated criminal activity.

The school from which the participants were selected was a large mixed community comprehensive secondary school which had a unique system of organising its pupils into class groupings. This organisational change had been implemented during the course of the participants' attendance at the school.

In 2012, the school reported that 49% of the Key Stage 4 cohort was pupils for whom English was an Additional Language (EAL) and over 31% of the school's pupils were eligible for Free School Meals (commonly used as an indicator of poverty), compared to the national average of 13%. In 2012, 51% of pupils achieved 5 A\*-C grades at GCSE including English and Mathematics, compared to the local authority average of 55.5% (Information taken from Department for Education website). The school composition in 2012 included 49% of pupils at Key Stage 4 with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and 12% of pupils with a Statement of Special Educational Needs.

### 4.3 Participant selection and characteristics

Seven African Caribbean pupils were selected for this study via recruitment through the school, in which I was a practicing Trainee Educational Psychologist, thus were selected using an opportunistic method. The school was given an outline of the study rationale, aims and methodology.

Using a criterion sampling method, pupils selected for inclusion met the following criteria:

1. Had at least one parent self-reported to be of African Caribbean ethnic background
2. Had achieved Level 7 in Key Stage 3 SATS tests in Mathematics, English and Science
3. Had parental consent for involvement in the study (See Appendix 1)
4. Had given personal consent to be involved in the study (See Appendix 2)

All pupils were studying in the final term of year 10 during the first wave of interviews and at that point ranged in age from 14-15 years. By the second wave of interviews, which took place at the beginning of the following term in year 11, all boys were aged 15. All participants had siblings and were from working class backgrounds as denoted by their parents' occupations, reported in the second interviews.

Each participant was given a pseudonym in order to protect their identities. Given the small sample in this study and because participants were identified by school personnel, based on the selection criteria stipulated, no further details about the boys will be given due to ethical reasons (i.e. risk of compromising their identification) and as no other information is relevant to contribute towards answering the research questions.

#### 4.4 Research questions

The research questions that this thesis aims to answer are:

1. Do 14-15 year old boys who are attaining well (i.e. they have achieved level 7+ in their English, Mathematics and Science Key Stage 3 SATs attainment tests) consider that their experiences and relationships with their peers impact upon their education? If so, how and how do the boys feel about this?
2. How do the boys manage their peer relationships?
3. How do family narratives impact on the boys' views about school and their attainment?
4. How do the boys perform their identities as they co-construct their narratives during interviews?
5. How does the narrative interview method impact on the narratives produced and on how boys and the researcher feel about the research and reflect on the process?

#### 4.5 Pilot interviews

Pilot interviews were conducted with two male pupils aged 14 and 15 in order to help construct the questions for the narrative interviews that proved most effective in generating the detailed information required to answer the research questions. Open-ended questions were piloted and adapted after each interview to develop an aide memoire, and feedback was sought on boys' experience of the interviews.

#### 4.6 Interview aide memoires

The aide memoires used to structure the narrative interviews were informed by my reflections on how well the questions captured the information needed to answer the research questions and finalised after the pilot interviews. The

aide memoire for the second interviews did not significantly differ from the first. However, in discussion with my research supervisor, it was felt that the first question should not suggest the narrative structure, and that it would be helpful to obtain information on the pupils' socio-economic backgrounds.

The questions posed in each of the interviews are outlined in the Table 1 below:

Table 1: First and Second Interview Aide Memoire Questions

First Interview Aide Memoire	Second Interview Aide Memoire
<p>Ice-breaker:</p> <p>Before we start the interview, I would just like to get to know you a little, learn something about you. Can you tell me one unique thing about you?</p>	<p>Ice breaker:</p> <p>How were your summer holidays? What did you do?</p> <p>How did your exams go?</p>
<p>1. We all remember events in our lives in different ways and when we share our experiences with others we often piece together these memories like stories. Can you tell me what school life has been like for you until now?</p>	<p>1. Can you tell me what school life has been like for you until now?</p>
<p>2. What are your views on school? Where do they come from?</p>	<p>2. What are your views on school? Where do they come from?</p>
<p>3. Can you tell me about you and your school friends? Firstly, how you did you come to be friends?</p> <p>Follow-up prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kind of people are they? Age, gender, ethnicity</li> <li>• What sorts of things are important to your friends? Is that the same for you?</li> <li>• What kinds of things do you do together?</li> </ul>	<p>3. Can you tell me about you and your school friends? Firstly, how you did you come to be friends?</p> <p>Follow-up prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kind of people are they? Age, gender, ethnicity</li> <li>• What sorts of things are important to your friends? Is that the same for you?</li> <li>• What kinds of things do you do together?</li> </ul>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kinds of things do you talk about with your friends?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kinds of things do you talk about with your friends?</li> </ul>
4. What does having friends in school do for you?	4. What does having friends in school do for you?
5. Are there any times when you have felt under pressure from people in school? Follow-up prompts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To do what?</li> <li>• How did you feel?</li> <li>• What did you do?</li> <li>• Had/has that happened before/ since?</li> </ul>	5. Are there any times when you have felt under pressure from people in school? Follow-up prompts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To do what?</li> <li>• How did you feel?</li> <li>• What did you do?</li> <li>• Had/has that happened before/ since?</li> </ul>
6. What do you think about how you're doing in school? Follow-up questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do your friends think about this?</li> <li>• Is this important to you?</li> </ul>	6. What do you think about how you're doing in school? Follow-up questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do your friends think about this?</li> <li>• Is this important to you?</li> </ul>
7. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences or relationships in school?	7. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences or relationships in school?
8. How did you find the interview? Follow-up prompts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was it what you expected?</li> <li>• Any other comments?</li> </ul>	8. What is your parents' occupation?
	9. How did you find the interviews? How did this interview compare to the first? Follow-up prompts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you have any feedback/comments on the process?</li> </ul>

The themes in answer to the first research question, exploring participants' experiences with their peers and their relationships, were generated through the elicitation of boys' school life narratives with the initial aide memoire question and subsequent data analysis using Gee's (1991) structural linguistic approach. The first six interview questions served to develop boys' constructions of their peer relationships and social experiences and their understanding of how peers impacted on them and their attainment. The narrative interview also allowed the boys to consider the meanings of their social experiences in school, and analysis of the linguistic structures used to narrate these experiences offered some insight into how pupils' felt about the events they shared.

The second research question exploring how participants manage their peer relationships was addressed by asking pupils about how they had developed their friendships, what interests they shared with their friends and whether they had experienced pressure in school. The third, fourth and fifth aide memoire questions were designed to unpick the social context and demands of the peer group and how the pupils respond to them, allowing boys to recall specific events and openly talk about them. Insight into boys' management of their peers was also gained through closer examination of their narratives during analysis using Gee's (1991) approach, exploring the use of unconscious strategies through participants' talk, and by using the researcher's reflections on the interviews to inform analytical interpretations.

The third research question was addressed by exploring participants' perceptions of the origins of their views on education. The boys invariably referred to family members having an influence on their views and through this, family narratives were uncovered and shared. Boys' selections of family narratives were analysed better to understand how particular historical events impacted on their ideas about themselves and their attainment.

The fourth research question, relating to the participants' co-construction of their identities was answered through the process of analysing the boys' interviews using Gee's (1991) structural linguistic approach to narrative analysis which stipulates several levels of textual data analysis that aims to

preserve the structure and form of narratives and better understand the functions of the linguistic devices employed by narrators to share their personal experiences and meanings.

Gee's (1991) structural linguistic approach to narrative analysis is a data-driven form of analysis which asks critical questions of the data at five levels of analysis and requires close readings and restructuring of the text (Young & Frosh, 2009). This privileges interviewees' meaning-making as well as attends to 'the emotional and conceptual movement of textual themes' (Ibid., p. 4). The questions generated by close examination of the structure of narratives and the linguistic devices used to give meaning and coherence to them imposes constraints on the possible interpretations and meanings that can be developed from the data (Gee, 1991). Whilst interpretations generated through this approach are considered to be plausible, they are not exclusive and other interpretations may well exist and this is affected by the researcher's value assumptions and methodological choices (Emerson & Frosh, 2009). This analytical approach acknowledges that a balance needs to be struck between the plurality of meanings that narratives open up and the constraints that the interactions between researcher and interviewee and subsequent narrative structure imposes and has an analytical and ethical leaning towards over-interpretation (Emerson & Frosh, 2009).

Participants' narratives were interrogated through the application of the structural linguistic approach to deconstruct the narratives and explore them at a deeper level than merely linguistic content, but also form. Consequently, this highlighted the performative functions of language, positioning, subjectivity and the narrative voice adopted by the boys and explored the dynamics in the interview process between the researcher and participant.

Using this approach to analysis unpicked contradictions in participants' speech, and their pauses and repetitions indicated the unconscious processes at play in the construction of their responses to interview questions. Gee, Michaels and O'Connors (1992, p.23) suggested that 'false starts and repairs are meaningful indicators of underlying planning, and so themselves are also guides to structure and meaning'. Applying this level of

interpretation to the narratives allowed the researcher to uncover particular discourses and indicators of the pupils' identities, from not only their personal perspective, but that of the researcher. The researcher's reflections (see Appendix 6) were also referred to in the answering of research question four to assist the interrogation of the narratives and identities espoused within the interview context.

The final research question exploring the impact of the narrative interview method on the data obtained and the researcher and participants' feelings about the research was answered from the perspective of the researcher through the engagement with, and presentation of, field notes and post-interview reflections. In addition, participants' reflections on the process were elicited using question nine in the second interview.

#### 4.7 Procedure

An initial group meeting was held with the participants in order to explain expectations for their involvement and for them to ask any questions. The meeting took place in the school that the pupils attended and addressed the research rationale, interviewing process, data collection, confidentiality, ethical issues, data protection and plans for the dissemination of findings.

During the meeting (attended by 6 of the 7 participants) the boys were asked to complete a short form (Appendix 3) in order to gather some information about the characteristics of the sample. The results of which are presented in Appendix 4 (see Appendix 5 for reflective diary of initial meeting).

The school administrator assisted in the co-ordination of a schedule for interviewing the boys which was worked around the pupils' school timetables. The first wave of interviews was conducted three weeks after the initial group meeting.

On each interview day, the administrator collected participants individually from their classes and brought them to the private room that had been arranged for me. The private room was a small office which had a desk and

chairs in it. Participants sat a short distance from me, directly facing, with the desk positioned to the left of me and the door closed.

I reminded the participants of their rights to anonymity, confidentiality and data protection and of my responsibilities with regards to safe-guarding and child protection which would override the confidentiality agreement. Participants were asked whether they were happy to continue and reminded that they could withdraw from the study for any reason at any time.

The boys were interviewed using the Aide Memoire for Interview 1 (see Table 1, p.48-49) and I made field notes throughout the interviews which helped to construct the immanent questions using the language that participants used, which probed for further narrative information. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Immediately after each interview, reflective notes on the process of the interview were made and any emotions I had experienced or thoughts I had generated during the interview.

The second wave of interviews was carried out three months later. Wave two interviews followed the same procedure as the first and had the same duration, although interviews were carried out in a different private room. This private room was large and contained a desk and desk chair and a circular table with chairs around it at which both I and the participant sat adjacently to face one another, with the door closed. Interview responses were elicited using the Aide Memoire for Interview 2 (see Table 1, p.48-49) and were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Field notes were made during the interviews and reflections were recorded immediately after each interview as before.

#### 4.8 Approach to analysis

Interview data were analysed after each wave of interviews. Data were uploaded onto a computer and listened to once in their entirety before being repeated and transcribed by hand. I carefully listened to the audio and noted words and phrases that were emphasised by participants' use of volume and

stress and represented this in the transcriptions by capitalising these words and phrases. Changes in participants' prosody and pitch (i.e. the rising and falling of speech tone), which signalled the transition from one 'idea unit' to another were also noted. An idea unit contains one piece of information and follows a pattern of one glide in the pitch of speech, with transition to a new idea unit being indicated through a slight pause and change in pitch (Gee, 1991). For example, see the following sentence:

"It was like sometimes really good and sometimes really bad"

The speaker placed emphasis on the words 'really good' and 'really bad', and used three different pitch glides within this sentence. The first glide showed a steady pitch up until the word 'like', then there was a slight pause and rise in intonation up until 'really good', before a another switch to a descending glide. Such changes in intonation and glides in pitch indicated that a single idea unit was contained within each pitch glide, and was represented in the text using a slash symbol. Consequently, the changes in speech throughout the sentence were represented in the following re-structure:

"It was like/ sometimes REALLY GOOD/ and sometimes REALLY BAD"

Other conventions were applied to the transcribing of the data which enabled the researcher to represent the patterns of speech in the boys' narratives, and the ideas conveyed within them i.e. emphasis placed on certain words which indicated the focus of the sentence and importance of the idea. Table 2 (p.55) presents the transcribing conventions applied to the data:

Table 2: Transcribing Conventions

<u>Transcription Symbol</u>	<u>Representation of Narrative Data</u>
(.)	Short pause (up to 2 seconds)
(..)	Medium pause (2-4 seconds)
(...)	Long pause (5+ seconds)
-	False start (Sudden halt in speech rendering a sentence incomplete)
/	Separation of idea unit by a change in pitch
Capitalised words	Emphatic speech denoted by change in tone and/or loud volume

Several idea units often made up a sentence or 'line' in transcribing terms. This was represented by the numbering of lines (sentences) in the transcription.

After transcribing the individual interviews, each transcription was analysed line-by-line and annotated with my comments about points of interest and ideas conveyed in the interviews. As the interview data contained both narratives and shorter answers in direct response to specific probing, transcriptions were examined for particular narratives, that is, descriptions of events that took the form of beginning, middle and end. The structure and context of these narratives were preserved by highlighting them within the larger body of text. The highlighted narrative texts were then structurally organised using Gee's (1991) structural linguistic tools i.e. stanzas, strophes and parts.

A stanza is made up of two or more lines that relate to one another in terms of idea or topic (Gee, 1991). A strophe is a larger unit of meaning, made up of related stanzas. A part is the largest unit of meaning, consisting of several stanzas, which can be best considered as a chapter within a narrative in which the general plot is conveyed. These stanzas, strophes and parts were given titles that conveyed the ideas contained within them (i.e. content, in the restructuring of the transcriptions).

A second restructuring of the narrative transcripts incorporated the performative functions of the language used by the researcher and interviewee, i.e. represented the co-construction of meaning in the interview context in relation to the interactions within the process. Some of the titles given to the stanzas, strophes and parts were changed with these considerations in mind (see Appendix 7 for a worked example of levels 1 and 2 analyses). This process comprised the first level of analysis (for a more detailed explanation of level 1 analysis see Gee, 1991; Emerson & Frosh, 2009).

The second level of analysis consisted of another reading of the structured narrative texts to look closer at particular markers which indicated pupils' planning and construction of their narratives to create meaning and cohesion between the stanzas. These were indicated through the boys' false starts, repetitions, disruptions and sudden shifts in ideas as well as their use of linguistic devices e.g. conjunctions, adverbs etc. (Gee, 1991, p.28). These linguistic markers help to 'constrain interpretive demands on the hearer' (Gee, 1991, p.29) and indicated how ideas flowed in the narrative which supported my interpretations of their meanings.

The third level of analysis examined the main plot of the narratives and information which supported or contrasted them (see Appendix 9, p.217-220 for an example). This was done by reading through the narratives again and identifying and highlighting the main clauses within the texts which were often those which were said emphatically (denoted in the text by capitalised words) and usually using the simple past tense (See Gee, 1991, p.29). Subordinate plots which featured in the narratives were also taken to be important to the



structure of the main plots and reinforced their meaning. This gave me the overall picture of what the speaker wanted me to hear and know about their experience and the impact on and outcomes for them.

The fourth level of analysis involved the micro-reading of the texts to identify the different narrative voices or points of view within the text that the speaker told their narratives from, which Gee (1991, p.30) refers to as the 'psychological subject'. Participants frequently transitioned between first, second and third-person narrative voices in order to convey particular ideas and their positioning within the event. Through this, their subjective thoughts and feelings about past events were demonstrated, and supported my interpretations of the impact and meaning of the narrative to them, as well as my own responses to the narratives (see Appendix 9 p.217-220 for example).

First-person narratives (i.e. those from the reference point 'I' and 'me'), evoked stronger responses in me as the listener and represented the speaker as the central character who was able to openly and directly express their thoughts and feelings. Second-person narrative voices, for example, those that used the plural pronoun 'you' when conveying information, allowed the speaker to retell events in ways that drew me into the story, making them relatable and generalised. Sometimes, participants used 'they' or 'them' when referring to other people, presenting their alignment, contrast and positioning in relation to characters within their plots. Second and third-person narrative voices sometimes served to depersonalise the experiences shared, indicating the emotional impact of the event and the boys' attempts to distance themselves from this within the interview context.

The fifth and final level of analysis considered the interpretation of themes from the data which were generated through the examination of all the preceding levels of analysis (i.e. the structure and content of the narratives), with particular focus given to the information that speakers presented as integral to their narratives. Themes extracted through analysis of the issues the speaker focused their narratives around, as being central to their ideas, arguments and understandings and this process was supported by the syntactic structure and considerations of the plot and narrative subject

positioning (see Appendix 9 p.217-220 for example). Field notes and post-interview reflections were also crucial in the emergence and support of the themes generated by these levels of analyses of the narrative texts. I used them to inform my interpretations and scrutinise and interrogate the narratives, and engage with the dialogical aspects of the interview and my input in how these themes emerged through co-construction.

Analyses of the first wave of interviews prior to carrying out the second interviews helped to me uncover themes in participants' narratives and see if there were any gaps in the data which I thought would be useful to explore in the second interview for depth and clarity. The first wave of analyses evoked particular questions pertaining to each participant's narrative that I wanted to know more about, for example, the emotional impact of some experiences and why boys chose to engage in certain behaviours, and I sought to follow up on these in the second interviews. Whilst my questioning in the second interviews used a similar approach to the first interviews, if participants did not raise the same issues as before I highlighted some of the narratives previously given in an effort to answer some of the questions posed by the data in the first interview and elaborate on those narratives.

Transcribed narratives were discussed with my researcher supervisor, who has extensive experience in narrative methodology, as part of the analytical process. Several research supervisions were spent interrogating the participants' narratives and my interpretations of them. My personal reflections on the interview processes and emotions around them were also interrogated with my research supervisor. Furthermore, I sought feedback on the findings through peer consultation groups with other research colleagues in order to ascertain the coherence of the findings and reach consensus on the interpretations to ensure their trustworthiness. These measures were taken in order to provide a credibility check for the research findings and interpretations.

Although interviews were analysed as an independent cases, commonalities in boys' experiences allowed me to find themes across their narratives although some themes in boys' narratives were unique and considered to be

equally valid and therefore are also presented. Whilst it was considered that the findings could be presented as focused case studies, time and word count limitations indicated that a more efficient way of presenting the data would be in thematic form across boys' narratives, in answer to the five research questions. I also felt that this would be more coherent for readers to understand the key issues of relevance for the boys and significance of some experiences which appeared to be shared. Due to the detail of the narratives and that the school had identified the participants, it was considered that presenting the data as case studies could have made the boys more identifiable and jeopardised their anonymity.

## Chapter 5: Peer Experiences and Impact on Education and Attainment

The results presented in this chapter help to provide an answer to the first research question: Do 14-15 year old boys who are attaining well (i.e. they have achieved level 7+ in their English, Mathematics and Science Key Stage 3 SATs attainment tests) consider that their experiences and relationships with their peers impact upon their educational experiences and attainment? If so, how and how do the boys feel about this? The key themes are presented in this chapter although supplementary findings are presented in Appendix 10 (see p.221-230 for elaborations on these findings and additional themes in answer to research question 1).

### 5.1 Purposeful friendship selection

Some boys' views on their friendships were expressed spontaneously in response to the first aide memoire question exploring their schooling experiences, whilst other responses were elicited through aide memoire questions 2, 3 and 4 about their views on education, who their friends are and what friends do for them.

All boys in the study reported having, currently, good friendships in school based on common interests and views about education as well as their perceptions of their friends' future prospects. However, two boys (Shaun and Michael) commented on instability in their friendships with peers in primary school and were ostracised for being high-attaining and unskilled and uninterested in football. All boys described having long-established friendships and saw themselves as similar to their closest peers in many respects:

"I came to be friends with them

Because of football-

Like, football trials/ and that stuff"

(Luke)

“cos we’re IN a lot of the same CLASSES/ AS WELL  
We almost have, like/ the same MENTALITY  
Of WORK, WORK, WORK”

(Nigel)

“I chose-/ I chose friends that I KNOW will-  
Will HAVE a GOOD FUTURE  
So they will encourage ME/ to have a good future as well”

(Joseph)

For some boys like Luke, football brought him and his friends together and was considered an important interest between friends although Shaun and Nigel highlighted that their friendships developed through other extra-curricular activities (i.e. martial arts and dance). Nigel also introduced other factors important in maintaining good friendships which include peers’ accessibility and proximity, in terms of being in the same classes. Joseph expressed his autonomy in friendship selection and chose those he perceived had potentially successful futures. He believes that friends can help support his own future success; that receiving their encouragement will propel his own life.

## 5.2 Difficulties with secondary transition

For some boys, the transition to year seven from primary school was a difficult time where they missed their friends from primary school and they experienced threats to their safety. This theme was spontaneously generated by the first interview question and in response to the question about their views on education.

The social norms and culture of the secondary school were things that the boys had to learn and manage. For Nigel, this was eye-opening to 'real-life' issues e.g. crime, that he was not as previously aware of:

“Year seven was the year/ when I started to  
Sort of/ started to realise all the stuff  
Like, that HAPPENS/ OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL  
Like, that might be BROUGHT IN  
Like sort of CRIME/ or sort of BAD STUFF like THAT  
GANGS-/ THAT’S when I learnt about GANGS  
So it’s like a BIT HARD for me”

(Nigel)

Nigel told me that he found year seven “the hardest” and that he became more aware of gangs which contributed to the difficulties he experienced as a year seven pupil in the school. Nigel further contextualised his narrative around secondary transition and explained the culture of ‘rushing’ in the school and how it affected him:

“A BIG GROUP of people  
Will (.) PICK ON an individual  
To either RUN UP/ and cause TROUBLE with them/ maybe  
Erm (.) ATTACK THEM/ sort of”

“sometimes it would be  
Like the last day-/ it’s the LAST DAY

YOU'S LOT ARE GETTING IT-

So, like, MAYBE/ you didn't wanna really

COME TO SCHOOL”

(Nigel)

Nigel constructed his narrative using alternating person view, switching from the objective third person to the first person and then ending in the second person narrative voice. In so doing, Nigel presents the character voice of the other person in the narrative as a dominant figure, bringing the context and emotions within it to life, before switching to a generalised second-person narrative tone, and this last switch serves several functions. Firstly, to convey a generalisation of the experience, and secondly, a connection between himself and myself, the listener, but this also helps to distance himself from the emotions around it, implying that these emotions are difficult and complex. Nigel's fears around being threatened with rushing meant that he was reluctant to attend school, and this subsequently would have impacted on his education and engagement.

### 5.3 Peers' impact on educational values

Michael was the only boy who said that he perceived his peers as influential in his views on education in terms of sharing aspirational goals. His narrative below highlights how his friends were influential:

“CERTAIN friends/ should I say/ had a GOOD influence in school

'Cos they were-/ they had, like, the same ASPIRATIONS as ME

Not the same JOB aspirations/ but they were-/ they looked-

THEY SAT DOWN with me/ took some time out

Saw what they wanted to do/ saw how they needed to get it

And they're striving to GET THAT/ at the MOMENT"

(Michael)

Michael's narrative suggests that his friends invest time in planning for their futures and that he is also included and involved in these practices. He indicates that his friends have the same aspirations as him and that they are able to work out what they need to do now in order to meet those aspirations is a positive influence on him, and is likely to affect how he perceives education and attainment, as a direct route to achieving his goals for the future. Michael implies that his friends are aiming and working hard to meet their goals although the language he uses is suggestive of this effortful working not necessarily being permanent, as he refers to this being 'at the MOMENT'. Michael highlighted that not all friends have a good influence on their peers but that sharing the same aspirations and friends taking time to help individuals realise their future goals and how to meet them can be supportive and encouraging of positive educational values and attainment.

The other boys espoused positive views about education, that it provided opportunities for future success (.e. acquiring high status jobs and money, teaching them important life-long skills, knowledge and social tolerance) but perceived that these views were influenced by family members and teachers rather than peers or friends. Whilst some boys said that they discussed their future aspirations with their friends and that they aspired to continuing with further education with their friends, they were reticent about how their friends influenced their educational values although they clearly identified practical ways in which their peers influenced them.

Five of the boys denied that they cared about what their friends thought of their educational performance and all the boys expressed in some form, that



they focused more on what they were doing rather than what their friends were doing. However, that the boys were able to reflect on cultural practices such as competing for grades, talking about school work, helping and sharing ideas about homework, is suggestive that the educational values held between them are mutually positive. Furthermore, that some boys reported being able to talk to peers who were less academically inclined and tried to discourage them from engaging in bad things and witnessing the undesirable outcomes of other peers is indicative that peers do influence some boys' educational values and serve to reinforce them.

#### 5.4 Emotional and practical support

Some boys alluded to the affective benefits of their peers relationships, and felt that their closest friends offered them security and reassurance, particularly, in critical times such as the integration into secondary school in year seven:

“it makes me know that there’s people out there  
If I NEED THEM/ like, WHEN I need them”

“It’s REASSURING that I know someone’s THERE”

(Junior)

“But it also helps/ when you have, like/ other people in school  
To almost LOOK OUT FOR YOU”

(Nigel)

The boys articulated the value they attached to the comfort and reassurance gained from their friends in school. Access to friends in times of need and the support provided by them in terms of supervision and protection can be important. Peers can and do offer physical as well as emotional support to their friends.

Other boys discussed the support that their friends provided in terms of being there to listen to them when they wanted to express their emotions and help to manage them in school:

“It just makes me MORE COMFORTABLE in school  
And (.) if I’m ANGRY/ I know that I’ll have someone THERE  
To talk to (...)”

(Luke)

“When I THINK too much/ it OVERLOADS/ in my HEAD  
And sometimes/ they can help calm me down  
And like, just talk things out/ with me (.)”

(Shaun)

Luke is reassured by being able to communicate angry feelings to his friends when he needs to whilst Shaun’s friends have a calming effect on him when he talks to them about being overloaded. These narratives, given in the first person voice, indicate the emotional connectedness between friends and the boys’ openness to communicate this with me and be honest about their emotional engagement with friends.

Michael, Luke, Chris and Joseph referred to their experiences around the practical support that their peers provided them with in terms of help with

revision and homework, and that these were mutually beneficial gains from their friendships:

“ME and two of my OTHER friends

Went to HIS HOUSE/ on the weekends

To HELP HIM (.) revise (..)

But if we have-/ if we need HELP

We had-/ they would help US revise AS WELL”

“They will explain it/ in a way that THEY understand

Which I’m more likely to understand

Than the way the TEACHERS/ um, EXPLAIN IT”

(Luke)

“help me with my school work

Like, if I don’t GET something/ one of them who is good at it

Will TEACH me it (..)”

(Michael)

The boys referred to seeking and providing help with school work to their friends both outside of school and inside the classroom which indicates that assistance with work is openly given and received and that they capitalise on opportunities to engage in peer-mediated learning. In addition, the boys perceived that individual pupils have their own strengths that can be utilised to their advantage to develop their own skills by being taught by them.

### 5.5 Modelling and competition

Some boys raised the more implicit positive influences of the peer group, in terms of providing motivation to study through modelling, inspiring and spurring them on, in sports and the arts as well as academia:

“When there’s revision classes on  
My friends/ if they’re going, yeah  
At lunchtime, I think/ I’m gonna be bored by myself  
I might as well GO”

(Joseph)

Joseph’s narrative suggests that he is not always self-motivated to revise, but he will, reluctantly, in order to avoid being bored and alone at break times when his friends are studying. Junior drew on his observations of peers not getting into much trouble for their behaviour and saw this as licence to do the same:

“I SAW some year ELEVEN DO something  
And at THAT TIME/ HE got in trouble  
But when I saw, like/ some OTHER year-  
Year YOUNGER do it/ they didn’t get in THAT much trouble-  
They only got told OFF  
And I thought/ WOAHH that’s COOL/ I CAN do that then/ and  
not get in TROUBLE”

(Junior)

Junior made attributions based on his observations and reasoned that younger pupils do not get into as much trouble for their behaviour as older pupils, and so felt that he could get away with doing things in year seven. This highlights that observing peers and the tendency to use them as models for behaviour can be appealing, especially, when the repercussions and consequences of poor behaviour are not considered to be great.

Some boys made reference to the bidirectional effect of peer relationships and reflected on the impact that their behaviours and views had on their peers. They described taking steps to encourage their peers, support their learning and try to talk some peers out of straying from education:

“And (.) and those people that/ don’t care about education

Or (.) in my opinion/ I’ve-

When you try and talk them out of it

SOME of them DO listen”

(Shaun)

Shaun’s narrative conveys that he takes interest in other pupils and actively involves himself by trying to talk some pupils out of straying from education. However, this is not always successful. Shaun understands that he is able to have some positive influence on his peers through direct contact, as well as by setting an example through his own academic achievements and this view was shared by Joseph. Joseph’s narrative conveyed his personal sense of responsibility in helping his friends and his reasoning for this:

“Like, because I’ve known them/ for a while

And I’m their friend/ I just like to

HELP THEM/ get out of SITUATIONS

Or BAD things/ that they're doing

I try-/ because they're-/ I dunno

Yeah, because they're not as- (.)

They're not as SMART as me"

"I wanna be a successful PERSON

So, like, YOUNGER BLACK people/ can look up to me/ when I'm OLDER"

(Joseph)

Joseph refers to the duration of his friendship with some peers and his perception that they are not as smart as him, as reasons for his endeavours to help them get out of 'bad things' that they do. His connectedness with his friends and his implicit devotion or responsibility towards them is reflected in his narrative, as well as his motivation to be successful in order to be a role model for other young Black people.

Whilst Joseph's narrative highlights that even peers who are not engaging well in education can be a positive influence on boys, it also demonstrates that some boys do work to achieve to inspire others, particularly, of the same ethnic background. Joseph perceives that younger Black people have aspirations to be successful and that these aspirations can be realised and reinforced by observing other similar people succeed.

All boys considered that their current friendships were important in helping them to achieve and do better in school. All but one boy subscribed to hegemonic masculine competitiveness and perceived that friendly competitions encouraged them to aim higher to equal or outdo their peers:

“So it’s like-/ it can ALMOST BE

Like a CONTEST/ to be the BEST

It’d be like/ AH, I got THIS/ what did YOU GET?

Next time/ I’ll get more than you, like”

(Nigel)

“If we have COMPETITION/ with each other

Then yeah (.)/ I’ll try and BE BETTER”

(Luke)

For most boys, competition appeared important in the maintenance of academic attainment and progress. Friends set benchmarks for grades that boys aspired to, and this gave them impetus and motivation to continually improve and surpass their friends’ attainment. The boys’ competition with friends and the development of this culture within their peer groups suggest a positive ethos around attainment that was not concealed but friends could share and show pride in their academic achievements. However, Joseph did not perceive competition as particularly helpful:

“Erm, ENGLISH/ they ASKED ME to come top set

But-/ and the reason I CHOSE

Not to come top set/ is because (.)

I’m feeling COMFORTABLE/ where I am right now

‘Cos IF I’M IN-/ when I was in TOP SET (.)

It wasn’t really the place for me

‘Cos I couldn’t really RELATE to THEM/ TOO MUCH”

“EVERYONE’S in COMPETITION/ with each other

And, like, if you get the WORST-

If you get the lowest grade/ in the class

Then you’re thinking/ ah, I’m rubbish

So that might have an effect/ on your NEXT performance/ in the class”

(Joseph)

Joseph resists competition in the top set by choosing to stay in the intermediate class, and he justifies his decision, firstly, by constructing himself as different to the pupils in the top set. He feels comfortable in his current English class and alludes to how relatable pupils are to him being a factor in how comfortable he is in a setting and considers the top set was inappropriate for him for lack of this. He later describes that pupils in the top set do not work as a class but are “MEANT TO work as an individual”. Joseph prefers the comradeship of the intermediate class and is out of his comfort zone when expected to work alone and competitively.

Joseph’s narrative in the second quote is largely constructed in the second-person which serves to distance him from and depersonalise the experience he shares with me, although his switch to first person voice to convey thoughts around being ‘rubbish’, indicates a personal identification with the issue. Joseph appears unsettled among the culture of competition, and may not be as sure of his academic strength and attainment as some of the other boys.



## 5.6 Social interactions and status implications

Some boys presented another side to friendships which meant that sometimes certain peers inhibited their learning by creating distractions for them in the classroom which got them into trouble:

“there’s a lot AROUND YOU/ that are, like (.)

Ah, let’s do THIS/ let’s do THAT

Let’s mess around/ just talk

While you’re the ONLY ONE (.)

It’s like you’re being PRESSURED

And that HAS HAPPENED to me

And that’s led to detentions/ being in trouble

Like, I think that’s how my MATHS suffered”

(Nigel)

“I was underachieving/ in a LOT OF STUFF

Because I was more DISTRACTED THEN”

(Luke)

Nigel’s narrative conveys his sense of vulnerability to peer pressure to be distracted in class and that he viewed himself as the only one trying to engage with learning, meant that eventually, he got into trouble, perhaps unable to resist the pressures he faced. Nigel observed that his Maths suffered for getting into trouble and makes a direct link between his academic

performance and peer influences. Similarly, Luke expressed that he underachieved because he was distracted by peers.

Shaun and Junior presented themselves as having gained social status among their peer group and discussed what this meant for them academically. Both boys reflected on the popularity that they had gained among their peers. Whilst Shaun's account firmly places him at the centre of his narrative and presents the challenges he overcame in order to be included and be seen by his peers as skilled and talented, his discourse around popularity hints at his disillusionment as he reflects on how his education suffered because of it:

“So, I WAS RECOGNISED/ in SCHOOL  
Because-/ because of my DANCE SKILLS  
I became POPULAR/ because of DANCE and FOOTBALL  
So I was LIKING the POPULARITY a LOT/ at THAT POINT”

“As I was quite young/ it got to my HEAD  
So, at ONE POINT/ I did become the class CLOWN  
And it wasn't WORKING for me/ at all  
Because the only grade that was/ really sustaining itself  
Was my MATHS GRADES because I didn't  
Have to put any EFFORT in/ to get a GOOD GRADE”

(Shaun)

Shaun's narrative highlights the status he acquired for his talents in the arts, and that the appeal of the popularity he held had a detrimental effect on his grades. Shaun's reference to his age, and implicitly, his lack of maturity in allowing the popularity to overpower him to the extent where he adopted a 'class clown' persona highlights challenges associated with being popular and high-status with being academically inclined. It can be difficult to acquire, manage and maintain popularity and attainment. For Shaun, his popularity was maintained at the expense of his attainment due to the social reinforcement of behaviours that earned him attention in the classroom and further reputation as an entertainer. Shaun refers to his natural ability in maths to explain that he could sustain his attainment in these lessons but not in others, as those required greater work on his part.

The reinforcement of confidence and perceptions of being liked and admired may outweigh desires to achieve and attain to some degree for some boys, although for Shaun it was not enough to just be popular, as he states later:

“what I WANTED TO DO/ was become popular

Cool and smart/ at the same time

So I had EVERYTHING going for me”

(Shaun)

Shaun finds popularity appealing and seeks to maintain his status among his peer group, whilst also striving for academic attainment and success. He espouses a determination to achieve all these things which appear incompatible, in order to have 'everything'. However, Michael talked about his failure at acquiring popularity and his resignation to defer popularity in favour of academic success for the time being, indicating that popularity is not achievable by all.

### 5.7 Perceived peer pressure and bullying

The power and status that Junior had acquired through his notoriety and label as the 'baddest' allowed him to change friendship groups and his behaviour without much social resistance or pressure. However, Junior appeared very aware of how the changes in his behaviour amongst his peer group might be perceived and, initially, he attempted to play down his studious activities in order to preserve his reputation.

"Like, PLAY TIME, I used to, like, STAY WITH THEM  
And then at lunchtime/ half of lunchtime  
Be in the library/ like, try and do my homework [laughs]  
And, like, run back out/ and st- still ACT COOL  
And they'll ask, like/ where you been?  
And I'll be like/ I got DETENTION with the teacher/ innit?"

"I FEEL, like/ at that TIME/ if they HEARD that I did  
HOMEWORK  
They'd think that I'm not really-  
YES, I'm the BADDEST GUY/ but, like, not really  
THAT BAD (..)"

(Junior)

None of the boys in this study reported feeling under pressure by their peers when directly questioned about pressure in school, although Nigel, Shaun and Michael expressed that they sometimes felt under pressure from teachers and family members to get high grades. However, unlike the other

boys in the study, Michael spontaneously talked about bullying when asked about his views on education:

“I don’t get bullied-/ I don’t THINK so (.)

Erm, yeah/ I don’t SEE-/ I don’t BULLY anyone-

I don’t SEE anyone getting bullied

So (..) I feel safe in school”

(Michael)

For Michael, feeling safe in school is important and because he does not think he gets bullied, nor has witnessed it or been the perpetrator, this confirms his view that the setting is safe. However, the language that Michael uses presents his uncertainty about experiencing bullying himself and might represent the complexities in boys’ perceptions and acceptance of incidents of bullying. In addition, the boys’ narratives around serious issues such as bullying might have been constrained by unconscious psychological defence mechanisms as protecting their senses of self and the identities that they sought to perform and co-construct in the interviews. In my reflections, I noted Michael’s discrepancy in the language he uses around experiences of bullying and wondered whether he was reluctant to reveal this information to me, as an unfamiliar female adult. When I further explored Michael’s sense of safety in the school and whether this was something he had felt throughout his schooling career, he said that he had been bullied in his final year of primary school. Subsequently, Michael’s sense of safety in school was important to how he felt about education more generally, having once felt under threat. He described how he felt at that time, stating:

“Because (.) I was top of my CLASS in year SIX

Erm, people didn't LIKE IT/ cos they wanted to be top of the class

So they used to bully me/ and say I was a GEEK and stuff like that

And then I started losing friends BECAUSE of that"

"So I just-/ I found it HARD at FIRST

Because OBVIOUSLY there was no one to hang AROUND with"

(Michael)

Interestingly, Michael strongly attributes his experience around bullying to peers being jealous of him for being at the top of the class, resulting in him losing friends. However, Michael shows some reservation in discussing the details of the bullying he experienced in primary school with me, and his narrative remains vague, although he expressed that it was a hard time because he had nobody to socialise with. In the context of this history, we better understand why feeling safe is a theme in Michael's views on education.

#### 5.8 Learning from others' perceptions and experiences

Junior presented himself as a boy who has redeemed himself and has turned things around from being 'popular' and "the BADDEST guy in the year", heralded amongst his peers for his challenging behaviour in school, to being studious and academically focused. His narrative focused on his transition from being "the BIG guy" after realising that he had earned himself a reputation which meant he was often blamed for things he sometimes had not done and he was given harsher punishments than his peers:

"they'll get off lightly

But then I'll get DETENTION/ and stuff like that

'Cos I was-/ I had the most EXCLUSIONS/ in my GROUP"

(Junior)

Junior earned notoriety through challenging behaviour and receiving exclusions which gave him status among his peers and a reputation among teachers, but also meant that he was often blamed when incidents occurred. This narrative highlights Junior's perceptions of fairness and injustice in school and his attribution of experiences of prejudice to his reputation. Junior also reflected on his disliking of being labelled and not given a chance by some teachers (i.e. being refused entry into classes) as motivations to change his behaviour and peer group, as well as:

"I WANTED to be known/ as, like, a GOOD PERSON

And to get HIGHER GRADES"

(Junior)

Joseph's narrative implies that his experiences of being stereotyped and treated like a scapegoat are racialised as he described that he got in more trouble when with a group of majority Black peers than White peers:

"Like, there was a lot of BLACK BOYS in our FORM

So we was all one big GROUP/ yeah

Um, so/ whenever something happened

We would ALL get in trouble for it"

(Joseph)

Joseph gave several examples of this in his narratives, reflecting the issue's poignancy for him. Again, his feelings are nuanced as he uses the emotive filler 'um' in this quote. His narrative sheds light on the cultural context of the school as well as his perception of such incidents as repeated occurrences by using the conjunction 'whenever'. That Joseph is not singled out among a peer group of many black boys implies that he blends well with them and may not be easily identifiable by teachers as different to the other Black boys in the room; he superficially fits in. Both narratives indicate that some boys are aware of how their behaviour is perceived by teachers in relation to whom they associate with and work to change these perceptions by changing their behaviour or their peer group as both boys later described.

Junior's narrative introduced the idea that some boys vicariously learn from the negative experiences of their peers and through observing the outcomes of certain behaviours, they are motivated to ensure that they do not suffer the same fate:

"I saw, like/ people-

Like, certain PEOPLE who I used to, like/ STAY WITH

And, like/ JAM WITH

They was, like/ they wasn't in the SCHOOL no more

And then I realised/ they got KICKED OUT of SCHOOL

And, like/ that changed my PERSPECTIVE

Cos, like/ what happen if that was ME/ in THAT situation

I got kicked out/ nowhere to go

No one would WANT a boy/ that's got kicked out of school"

(Junior)



Junior's observations of his friends being permanently excluded from school is enough for him to reflect on his own trajectory and take a new perspective on his situation to change his behaviour. His ability to envisage the future and anticipate rejection by others if he was excluded is a deterrent from pursuing the lifestyle he had embarked on. This narrative suggests that knowing others whom have experienced exclusion can be reinforcing of more positive attitudes towards school engagement, behaviour and attainment.

### 5.9 Attainment and peer group turning points

Joseph, Michael, Nigel, Shaun and Junior all talked about their peer groups having changed in secondary school, as they became aware of the impact of their social group on their education and perceived this turning point to occur between year 7 and year 9. They acknowledged that peers had negatively affected their education in the earlier years and that this prompted them to consider making new friends who were more academically inclined, as Joseph's narrative demonstrates:

“at the START of SECONDARY SCHOOL/ they used to, like-

The people I used to hang around with/ used to MUCK  
AROUND a LOT

And, like (.) / NOT TAKE SCHOOL SERIOUSLY

But as I-/ from YEAR NINE UPWARDS/ I got-

I sort of like made NEW FRIENDS

Um, like (.) / they're LESS DISTRACTING towards SCHOOL  
(..)”

(Joseph)

Joseph also alluded to the systemic organisation of the school in impacting upon his peer relationships, how they changed and the impact that this had on his ability to focus in class. The opportunities that streaming lessons provided in terms of being able to mix and learn alongside other peers was also described:

“And (.) the friends that I was friends with BEFORE/ are the ones that used to MUCK ABOUT/ a lot

We was put in the same FORM TOGETHER”

“But AS we got put into SETS/ as we went UP through school

Um (..) we-/ we got to MIX/ with the REST of the YEAR

So then/ I found, erm, when I wasn't WITH my friends

I learnt MORE/ sort of

And they was less DISTRACTING”

(Joseph)

Joseph's narrative highlights that school systems can affect how pupils interact with one another and impact upon classroom dynamics, by assigning them to classes. It is also significant that Joseph refers to the transition through the schooling years as well as the structural organisation of classes. His reference to temporality implicates developmental changes in adolescence that occur in parallel to school transitions. Developmental maturity might have impacted on Joseph's learning ability and his subsequent perceptions of the peer group as being less distracting.

For Chris and Nigel, the turning points to focus more on their education came towards the end of year nine in the context of approaching the end of school.

Here, they discuss their thoughts at that time which prompted them to work harder in school:

“erm, around the end of year NINE

I was just like/ FORGET what everyone else THINKS of me

I'm ME (.) erm (.)/ then that's when I started being

A bit more STRONGER/ in my MENTALITY”

(Nigel)

“I THINK it was kind of, like,

The middle and the END of, kind of, year NINE”

“then I realised that I was getting

Like, CLOSER to leaving SCHOOL

And obviously, you have to THINK ABOUT

What you're gonna do AFTER school (.)

So, like (.)/ that was mainly IT”

(Chris)

Nigel's transition occurs in parallel with his reframing of the importance of others' perceptions of him and his self acceptance. He sees himself as developing strength in character, which relates to his development and maturity through adolescence. Chris associated his turning point with becoming more mature and thinking about his future beyond the school institution, rather than with a difference in peer group.

### 5.10 Teachers, mothers and siblings as buffers

Some boys were made aware of the impact of their peers on their academic performance and behaviour by particular teachers and took their advice on board, which prompted them to consider changing their peer group and making other friends:

“And IT DID OPEN my eyes a lot  
It DID/ like, it rang be-/ it rang a couple bells/ in my head  
Because he said/ the people you HANG AROUND with  
Are not of your calibre/ when it comes to-  
When it comes to education  
Don't let them bring you down”

(Shaun)

“TEACHERS have told me  
The GROUPS that you hang around with  
Makes our judgement DIFFERENT  
So I THOUGHT ABOUT/ those sort of things  
So that's why I've got-  
I have MANY groups of friends”

(Joseph)

Joseph and Shaun's narrative convey the significance of teachers noticing boys' potential and being explicit about how they are being perceived. The teachers were able to highlight the impact that friends were having on their

behaviour, education and the impression that this left others with and their advice was considered and acted on by the boys.

Some boys talked about the influence that their mothers had on their friendships and their decisions to engage in social activities with them. In Michael's narrative, he presents his thoughts about whether to join a group of friends to "roam around the streets drinking" or go with another group of friends to the park:

"I THOUGHT about it-

I thought what would happen

Would my mum ALLOW me to do THIS?

Would my mum think it's RIGHT?

And then I decided to go with my FRIENDS

To the town PARK"

"I have a lot of RESPECT for my mum

If my mum SAYS something/ then (.) I have to DO IT"

(Michael)

An important part of Michael's decision-making is his consideration of his mother's approval of the activity; she appears to have a significant role in his life and has a strong voice to which he adheres out of respect. Michael emphasises 'allow' to describe his mother's influence in his social activities and so appears still seeking of her permission to do things outside of school. Whilst he is given the opportunity to go out, Michael's inner voice reflects his mother's counsel and is an inhibitory process which allows him to be thoughtful about his actions and consider the consequences. In so doing, Michael's behaviour is presented as deliberate and intentional and not as

risk-seeking as typically associated with the adolescent developmental period.

Two boys in the study mentioned the involvement of their older brothers and sisters in talking to them about current social affairs and matters that may affect them in terms of peer influences. They spoke about learning from their siblings' experiences through observing their outcomes, as well as the direct consolation and advice that siblings provided them with, and that the information they provided was different to that offered elsewhere:

“my BROTHER as well/ and my sister-

They told me about how-

‘Cos they’re a bit YOUNGER

So they, like, KNOW about CERTAIN THINGS”

A bit more up-to-date/ if you want

They can tell you about, erm

What’s HAPPENING at the moment

What to avoid/ what to NOT avoid”

“Like, my brother does INFLUENCE ME”

(Nigel)

Nigel’s narrative highlights the significance of siblings in providing additional information to the boys that is different to that provided by school or parents. Siblings are considered to offer a unique perspective as they are closer in age to the boys and are perceived to have a better understanding of the current social context and pressures. Therefore, they can advise them on how to manage situations with the insider-knowledge that they have accrued through their own life experiences and, as well as parents, they can provide an additional buffer to peer influences.

## Chapter 6: Managing Peer Relationships

This chapter addresses research question 2: How do the boys manage their peer relationships? Participants' narratives about their school lives and experiences around feeling 'pressured' by people in school constituted the bases on which answers to this research question could be formed. The key themes are presented in this chapter although supplementary findings are presented in Appendix 10 (see p.231-235 for elaborations on the themes and additional findings relating to research question 2).

The boys' narratives not only indicated that they have to be strategic in their management of peer relationships but also suggest that their peer groups are differentiated.

### 6.1 Negotiating and performing multiple identities among differentiated peer groups

Two of the boys in the study indicated intentional negotiation of their identities within different contexts in the school environment, through their narratives, and these boys were very aware of how they performed and were perceived by others. The boys purposefully created characters for themselves and occupied different positions to different ends:

“Well some of my friends/ think I'm DUMB

'Cos I act out/ at, like, break times and lunch times

But MOST OF THEM/ IN MY CLASS

They ask me for ADVICE

So I think they know the score”

(Luke)

“Sometimes I have to/ act differently around different people  
Like, I know/ when I’m around my friends  
I would NOT be talking/ like THIS  
I would be/ probably be SWEARING  
And talking SLANG/ in front of/ some of the friends-  
Especially the ones/ that don’t-  
Aren’t AS GOOD at education”

“I HAVE TO ACT/ a bit more SERIOUS  
If I’m around the OLDER ONES  
‘Cos sometimes/ they treat me like I’M THEIR AGE”

(Shaun)

Luke’s narrative suggests that his behaviour differs within and outside the classroom so his peers have different perceptions of him, depending on the context in which they socialise. He appears complacent with the attribution of ‘dumb’ at break times due to his acting out, whilst the language he uses in his narrative is also suggestive of some pride in being considered by classmates as someone to refer to for advice and that this is perhaps an alternative side of himself that he is comfortable to show among his classmates. Shaun’s narrative further illustrates his understanding and conceptualisation of ways of being with different peer groups and his emphasis and stress on ‘HAVE TO ACT’ suggests that he conforms to expectations for ways of being.

These quotes highlight that some boys’ peer groups are differentiated and do not contain only those who are academically focused and successful. The boys did not comment on any negative experiences associated with doing this, but spoke very generally about traversing groups and their norms as



something quite natural. When probed for an understanding of their motivations, they did not explain what led them to change their behaviour in such ways but expressed that they thought that it was okay to do this.

Shaun and Luke suggested that acting skills facilitated their ability to adapt, switch language codes and their behaviours between peer groups and different social contexts in school, and saw this as a strength which could be helpful to them in the future:

“My acting skills/ helps me out with that/ A LOT (.)

Because, erm (.) ac-

‘Cos when you’re an actor

It helps with a lot of THINGS

Helps with presenting/ speaking/ eye contact

And all those things”

(Shaun)

Shaun refers to his acting skills benefitting his social relationships as well as his presenting skills in academic tasks. His narrative implies that boys adopt certain behaviours and ways of speaking in order that they achieve but are also relatable to their peers.

Junior described managing his social relationships as “juggling” between two public identities, one to his ‘bad’ peers and the other to his new group of academically focused friends. Here, he gives an example of denying his studying in the library to a peer, in front of the ‘bad’ peer group, and his later response:

“Ah, are you COMING LIBRARY?

I'll be like/ are you MAD?

I don't GO LIBRARY

And they'd be like/ you was in there TODAY-

I'm like/ NAH I WASN'T/ you must be DREAMING”

“RUN to her the NEXT DAY/ or like, a minute later and say

Ah, yeah/ don't watch that/ I'll come library tomorrow innit?

[laughs] And I have to cover my tracks/ like that AGAIN (.)

So it was kinda like jog-/ JUGGLING/ yeah”

(Junior)

Junior's narratives conveys his intentions to keep his studying a secret from his peers with whom he had acquired status for being the 'baddest' and his denial of his studious activities indicates the social constraints of the group or how he perceived them, that he could not be honest about being in the library. Junior's description of his experience as being like 'juggling' reinforces the idea that public identities are sometimes oppositional and place great demands on individuals to keep up with managing them. This is not an easy strategy to maintain and takes time and skill. Junior later said that he eventually told his peers that he was going to study more and not hang around with them, and this decision was reinforced by seeing his academic success and gaining kudos from other peers for being hard working in class.

## 6.2 Strategic self-presentation

Most boys denied identifying with experiences of being pressured into anything by their peers and their perceptions of peer pressure and being influenced by it is likely to have impacted upon their views about school and how they engage with their peers and education.

### *6.2.1 Masking thoughts and feelings*

Shaun presented himself as a reflective boy who observed the dynamics of the peer group and how people behaved and expected others to behave, and that his understanding of these social processes allowed him to be cognisant of his own behaviour within the peer group. In relation to his thoughts around peer pressure, Shaun explains how he responds in such social contexts:

“They’ll make you feel that way/ and try and pressure you/  
sometimes

And those type of people/ I’ve learnt to like-

THEY think I’m friends with them

But I actually certain-/ I DISLIKE those type of people

But I just-/ I would still talk to them/ if they talk to me

I wouldn’t BE RUDE/ to them

Because I don’t like them”

“I step back from it/ and stand UP to them/ sometimes

And just IGNORE THEM/ at points

Because they-/ they don’t-/ they don’t understand

That everyone’s equal to them”

(Shaun)

Shaun's narrative presents his ability to reflect and become meta to the social situation, to observe others and act accordingly. He manages his relationships with people he does not like by being civil and not stirring trouble, as he later expresses "I don't want enemies". Shaun is avoidant of social tension and would rather act friendly to people than show his dislike for them, therefore, conceals his true feelings. His several false starts in the second quote appear to indicate that his views about equality are strong and emotionally evocative for him which reinforces his justification for being courteous towards people he dislikes.

Shaun further demonstrates that he is able to control others' impressions of him by masking his feelings. Shaun uses masking to 'save face' and preserve his peers' perceptions of him that he has worked hard to build:

"People RARELY see me upset/ I'm RARELY-

Like, I'm always smiling/ but sometimes, under the smiles

I'm STRESSED/ so it seems, erm (.)

'Cos I'm always-/ I'm thinking AHEAD, so (.)

Things aren't-/ I don't think things are said

In a NEGATIVE way-

(Shaun)

Shaun hides his upset and stress from others and this indicates that he finds it difficult to show his emotions to others. Shaun works hard to manage public perceptions, even if it means internalising his thoughts and emotions. His narrative suggests that he is guarded and orchestrates his public identity very carefully in order to avoid conflict and appear sociable and happy.

### *6.2.2 Using physical appearance as resistance*

Some boys' physical appearance and development can be used to their advantage in automatically presenting them as hegemonic, in terms of having an athletic build and being tall and strong. This can also be used strategically, as one boy appealed to his masculinity in his narrative and drew on his physical attributes to help him resist pressures of the peer group:

"I'm bigger than-/ I'm taller than most of the people/ in my  
YEAR

So they probably think that I'm more-/ I'm physically  
[indistinguishable]

More physically CAPABLE than them

So if they try and PUSH ME/ they think I won't MOVE

And, like-/ so I just/ use that to my ADVANTAGE

When people try and peer pressure me into stuff"

(Luke)

Luke's narrative offers the view that an alternative way of managing peer relationships and influences is to use one's natural resources such as physical attributes to provide or give the impression of resistance. Luke is aware of his physical size in relation to his peers and sees this as an advantage which he readily uses to help him manage pressurising situations.

### 6.3 Separation and distancing as resistance

Two of the boys in the study portrayed themselves as active in preventing undesirable peer influences by not keeping company with pupils that advocated and engaged in certain behaviours (i.e. smoking and gang

activity). These boys were aware of the impact that peers could have on their education and future and used distancing and separation as strategies to manage these influences:

“people that-/ that don’t-/ aren’t interested in education/ and things like that

I try not to-/ I try SEPARATE MYSELF with THEM

Or if they encourage-/ if they do bad stuff/ like smoking/ or encourage other people to smoke

I try keep a DISTANCE from them

‘Cos I don’t wanna get pulled into them-/ the-/ THEIR WAYS”

(Joseph)

Joseph’s narrative suggests that he attempts to use separation strategies to help him manage peer influences, although he does not say whether his attempts are successful. His language implies that he recognises that he is vulnerable to being led by his peers into do things as he describes not wanting to be “pulled” into their ways and depicts him as being potentially passive in this regard, in the presence of strong influences. Consequently, the best way for Joseph not to engage in “bad stuff” with peers is to try to distance and separate himself altogether from their company.

#### 6.4 Managing social time

All of the boys in this study referred to the efforts that they made in relation to studying and completing school work and homework in order to achieve and attain. However, only three boys (Junior, Shaun and Michael) raised the issue of sacrifices needing to be made in order to maintain their high grades:

“But, like, I say to them/ I’d rather get my education

Like, SORTED/ and DONE WITH

And, like, play around AFTER”

(Junior)

“education is, there’s nothing wrong with it

And (.) I did have to-/ you do have to

Give up a lot of social time/ sometimes/ FOR education

But (.) that’s the sacrifice/ you’re gonna have to make”

(Shaun)

Junior and Shaun presented themselves as sociable and having an interest in spending time with their friends outside of school but not at the expense of their educational duties. Shaun’s narrative highlights his acceptance of the social sacrifice he makes and his expression of this in second-person voice suggests he views this as a generalised expectation and acceptance of the state of affairs in order for pupils to be successful. In so doing, he depersonalises this experience, which perhaps, may be a further demonstration of his masking of his true feelings and about having to make sacrifices, especially, given that he is a boy who is very interested in popularity and maintaining his social prestige.

Several boys in the study spontaneously made reference to the fact that their mothers knew their close friends, that they also knew their friends’ mothers and that their friends’ parents knew their parents. This social network helped to manage and almost police the boys’ social time and activities as mothers knew where the boys were and who they were spending time with. Michael’s narrative demonstrates this well:

“And we’d go round (.) / USUALLY MY HOUSE

We’ll go round / play games

My Mum would cook us food / and everything

And yeah / we’ll just have a good time

Round MY HOUSE”

(Michael)

Michael presents his mother as having a key role in creating the ambiance and comfort for his friends to enjoy themselves at his house and in creating an appealing environment, his mother is able to supervise her son’s activities and those of his friends. Michael’s emphasis on the location being at his house further suggests that his friends are welcome and that his mother’s involvement in his social time is not perceived negatively, or, necessarily as an effort to police his relationships and activities.



## **Chapter 7: The Impact of Family Narratives**

The narratives that help to provide an answer to research question 3, how do family narratives and relationships impact on the boys' views about school and their attainment?, were co-constructed when participants answered where their views about education came from. Whilst boys made references to family members' influences at different points throughout the interviews, they all identified that family members had been influential in shaping their views on education. The key themes are presented in this chapter although supplementary findings are presented in Appendix 10 (see p. 236-239 for elaborations on the themes and additional findings relating to research question 3).

Several boys in the study shared personal family narratives with me. Whilst boys were not specifically asked for this, they constructed the retelling of their family narratives to demonstrate what impact this had had on them, their motivations to be successful and live up to or surpass expectations. These family narratives not only served to ground the boys' values and morals and highlight the importance that family members hold for them. However, they also espoused their understandings of and appreciation for their families' racialised experiences and their own racial identities, particularly, when they drew on their grandparents' experiences as significant narratives to them.

### **7.1 Family members as role models**

In response to the second interview question, Joseph immediately introduced his grandfather as a significant role model to him and constructed him as a "very smart MAN" who gained a scholarship "to the best University in the Caribbean" before coming to England. Whilst Joseph retells this story in second person narrative, he emphasises the struggles and contentions around his grandfather as he tells me that "People didn't expect him to be clever/ because he wasn't from ENGLAND" and that:

“Most people from the Caribbean  
That DIDN'T have an education  
Didn't really DO WELL/ when they came to England  
But because he was educated/ he (.) he had  
Quite a chance-/ even though people-  
The odds were stacked against him  
He still had a chance  
And he ended up/ having a house  
Better than most people/ who were BORN in the country”

(Joseph)

Joseph goes on to describe that his grandfather was wise with the money he earned from the job he did because he had had a good education, and he invested it in order to accrue possessions which gave him status. He said that, “I LOOKED UP to my GRANDDAD” and that, “I would like to BE like him”. Joseph's grandfather's achievements are inspiring to him and through this narrative he demonstrates that he comes from a resilient, intelligent and atypical family background as he draws comparisons with other Caribbean people of his grandfather's time. Whilst Joseph does not frame his grandfather as privileged, he certainly talks about him having had chances to be successful, and that education provided him with opportunities, although his experiences were racialised.

Joseph further talks about his grandmother teaching him about Christianity, and his father being interested in documentaries, and that having both influences allowed him to become objective in his views and form his own opinions. Joseph not only learns from successes, but describes that his father “wasn't really the BRIGHTEST in SCHOOL” and that holding him as a role model meant that:

“... I think IF HE WAS-/ if he paid ATTENTION  
A bit more IN SCHOOL/ I think  
He would, he would HAVE/ MORE ALTERNATIVE THINGS  
TO DO/ so he would have an easier-  
An easier LIFE/ so I think looking up to my DAD  
THAT shows me/ that education is important”

(Joseph)

Joseph’s views about the importance of education are balanced by his father’s experiences of not having alternative jobs to do in order to develop himself and earn more money because of his difficulties engaging with school. His family narratives, particularly, those of other male members, have shown Joseph both sides of the coin and has allowed him to form his own opinion on the significance of education and where he feels it will take him, and consequently, he strives for academic achievement.

## 7.2 Various learning through family experiences

Nigel presented the experiences of his grandparents as having encountered and fought against racism and talked about them telling him their stories that gave balanced representations of life, consisting of both successes and failures:

“a lot of STORIES have been told  
From, like/ GRANDPARENTS  
About how it’s been hard/ erm, fighting RACISM-  
Stuff like that/ erm, ALSO

They ALSO tell you about how their life was successful

But they tell me about/ also how they FAILED in life (..)

A lot of the time/ I think about it

In my head, like/ I'm not gonna DO that-

(Nigel)

Nigel's narrative suggests empathy and appreciation for his grandparents' history and he is clear about what impact their narratives have had on him. Nigel uses his grandparents' racialised experiences, learns from their failures and vows to not do the same.

Nigel further constructs his family narratives as complex and influential to his thinking about academic endeavours. He presents himself as receptive to his family members' advice, based on their own experiences and the lessons they have learned from life, and clearly values their roles in reinforcing his motivation. Nigel does not deny the difficulties his family have been through but uses them to give him impetus to be successful. It is in his acceptance of the challenges experienced that he finds his own strength:

“Others in my FAMILY/ they've gone through THAT ROUTE

But then/ it hasn't really worked OUT/ that WELL

My brother has gone to jail/ whatever

But, erm (.) / they almost INFLUENCE YOU

To try your HARDEST in school

'Cos that's, like/ what YOU NEED

To be SUCCESSFUL in life”

“my mum might say stuff

Like (.) YOUR BROTHER done that/ THIS HAPPENED

Or we might tell stories

Then they'll give you-

A LOT of the time/ I get talked to

About how (.) EDUCATION is beneficial

In becoming SUCCESSFUL (..)

(Nigel)

Nigel draws particularly on his brother's narrative to present his view of the negative trajectory associated with falling out of education. For Nigel, having reminders of his brother's actions and outcomes are helpful. His rationalising of the importance of education in achieving success in life is juxtaposed with his brother's narrative. He, therefore, learns vicariously through family members' life experiences, as indeed other boys in the study purported.

Michael shared his experiences around being talked to by his mother about other family members' academic achievements and grades, including his parents' as well as extended family members (e.g. cousins):

“like, my MUM said

If you want to do something like THAT/ in the FUTURE

Or you wanna get a high paid job/ or go ABROAD for a job

And things like that

You have to DO WELL in SCHOOL-

And that's what got my MIND focused”

(Michael)

Michael's mother capitalises on family successes to present to Michael the possibilities for him to do the same and this is both enticing and helpful in supporting him to focus his mind on achieving.

Some boys were less descriptive about family narratives and the impact that family members had on their views about education, although they did identify them as sources of influence but in less direct or overt ways:

“seeing what mum and dad do

And how THEY'VE got their good grades

And my COUSIN that's graduated from university

So it's made me wanna be like THAT”

(Luke)

“EXPERIENCE/ like, what our PARENTS

Have TOLD US/ like, and like/ yeah

We'll see them come in TIRED every day

And, like, yeah/ that then-

That MOTIVATES ME/ so then I don't wanna COME IN  
TIRED

I wanna come in REFRESHED/ and at least STILL EARN  
some money

Yeah/ without me working ALL DAY”

“...I should, like/ GET my GCSEs

'Cos then that will get me, like-

Like, my mum told me/ she wished she got BETTER GCSEs

Like, it would have got her a BETTER JOB in life/ NOW”

(Junior)

Whilst Luke talks about wanting to emulate other family members' achievements, Junior describes observing his parents' fatigue from working long hours and not having the jobs they could have had due to not attaining higher grades in school. Both boys reflect on these family experiences as influential to them, to have or avoid the same; they see education as important given their observations of other people's outcomes. Luke wants to follow the path that others have carved out for him, whilst Junior wants to create a new narrative within his family and both are strong bases for the boys' academic focus and motivations.

## Chapter 8: Performing Identities in Narrative Co-construction

The answers to research question 4, how do the boys perform their identities as they co-construct their narratives during interviews?, were generated through the boys' narrative forms that they held consistently throughout the interviews, and through the analysis of the language they used to present themselves, their ideas and world views within their co-constructed narratives. Whilst the boys performed their identities independently of one another in their interviews there were some similarities between them. Due to the word limitations of this thesis, it is not possible to engage with a more detailed examination of the individual boys and what their narratives did to reveal about their identities. Hence, the more general findings will be discussed (see Appendix 10, p.240-245 for elaborations on the themes and additional findings relating to research question 4).

### 8.1 Speech and language style

The boys in this study all used similar vernacular which incorporated some street slang with proper English and two of the boys (Shaun and Luke) identified that they would usually speak slang with their friends rather than how they chose to speak in the interviews. The language that they use to present their ideas and narratives helps to reinforce their identities as working-class boys who are able to adapt the language and codes that they use to represent themselves in different contexts. In the interviews, their use of both proper English and vernacular aligned with urban street slang and indigenous colloquialisms serve to represent them as typical adolescents who fit in with their environment, as part of working class and African Caribbean ethnic groups. However, their ability to switch between and combine the two demonstrates their adaptability and flexibility and further represents their agency in their manipulation of how people perceive them and their identities as part of a wider construction and performance of self.



## 8.2 Opposing labels and stereotypes

### *8.2.1 Pupil typologies*

Three of the boys denied that they, personally, or their friends fell into pupil typologies such as 'geek' and 'nerd' and carefully constructed their identities in opposition to these labels, as the following quotes demonstrate:

"They- they're STEREOTYPED as GEEKS

Yeah/ I was FRIENDS WITH-/ well a couple of them

I was friends with a couple of them

But then they're always talking about

The SAME THINGS/ and I wasn't very interested

In what they were interested in

Like GAMES-/ I'm NOT REALLY-

I LIKE CERTAIN GAMES/ but I don't really play

Them, sort of/ GEEKY GAMES/ if you would say

Yeah they play them sorts/ and I'm not INTERESTED in them

So I prefer stuff like FOOTBALL games"

(Joseph)

"people on the OUTSIDE looking IN-

They'll be, like/ AH, he's a NERD

Or something like THAT/ but I'm NOT-

I'm just, like (.) / education is KEY/ FOR ME"

(Nigel)

Here, the boys make reference to labels such as geek and nerd which hold connotations of being hard working and smart but not necessarily being cool or popular. Whilst Joseph is very careful to emphasise that he was only friends with a couple of people who were stereotyped as geeks, his rejection of this label for himself is demonstrated in his assertion that he had different interests to them, for example, he liked football games rather than geeky games. Joseph attempts to construct himself as hegemonically masculine and not geeky by declaring his interest in and preference for football. Nigel emphatically denies that he is a nerd and reframes his social positioning by espousing his educational values as independent of what others think and very personal to himself.

### *8.2.2 Resisting racial stereotypes*

Two of the boys in the study displayed their strength of character and motivations to be successful by describing their efforts to defy and resist stereotypes of Black boys, and in so doing, prove people wrong. They expressed the stereotypes that they fought to resist and showed an understanding of racial tensions and issues in education, as Nigel's narrative about perceptions that people hold of Black pupils highlights:

“BLACK PUPILS, MAINLY/ like,

Thinking about the BAD SIDE

Whereas I know there's a LOT of good/ Black people

But the MEDIA/ and most of the schools have been  
PREJUDICED/ and will DISCRIMINATE like that

Because THEY'LL think / AH this person, like/ he's from  
THEM”

(Nigel)

“In SOME STATISTICS/ they say that BLACK BOYS are gonna, erm-

They GENERALLY fall BEHIND/ so I don't wanna be part of another STATISTIC

So I try as hard-/ as MUCH as I CAN”

“Like, THAT'S what makes me WANNA DO WELL

If people, like, EXPECT BAD from me

It makes me wanna do BETTER

To rub it in their face”

(Joseph)

Joseph's narrative suggests that he is a passionate boy who is able to use negative expectations to give him impetus in his academic endeavours and motivations to achieve. Although highly aware of them, he is not accepting of stereotypes. Joseph, like Shaun, is keen to leave an impression on people to show them that their expectations will be exceeded and that they are able to attain highly in spite of the discourse around Black underachievement. These boys want to be an example and see themselves as bucking the trends, to demystify the prominent discourses. Furthermore, that all the boys in this study consented to their involvement highlights their willingness to present a different picture to that often painted by research and educational attainment statistics, that some African Caribbean boys can and do attain well.

### 8.3 Performing and espousing masculinity

Some boys constructed their identities around hegemonic masculinity and presented themselves as popular, sporting and cool. Four boys (Chris, Nigel, Shaun and Luke) talked about being in football teams and Chris and Nigel were also involved in martial arts. They highlighted their achievements and

involvement in these physical hobbies, and this further reinforced their performances of masculinity, in the context of being interviewed by a female researcher. Some boys emphasised their sportiness and just how successful they were at being hegemonic as well as academic, as the following quotes show:

“like/ you’re OVER-averagely STRONG/ obviously  
‘Cos, like/ you have to do/ like, TRAINING and stuff”  
“I’m, like, better at-/ I’m better at SPORTS now  
I was GOOD at sports ANYWAY”

(Chris)

“Like- like, cos, I’m in, erm/ SCHOOL PRODUCTIONS  
Dance-/ street dance shows (.) / school football team  
I was in the school basketball team as well  
So (.) I do a lot of things/ where I get RECOGNISED for”

(Shaun)

These quotes highlight that for some boys in the study, being sporty and hegemonic is as important as being successful in education. All the boys included themselves in clubs within and outside of school that related to sport or martial arts, although two boys also spoke about their involvement in performing arts. This reflected their efforts to maintain an outward image of being hegemonic and keep them linked to their peer groups.

The boys were deliberate in their descriptions of recreational activities and their language functioned to project their masculinity and subscription to

proper ways of doing boy, whilst still maintaining their position as high-attaining and interested in academia. These boys are able to simultaneously occupy multiple identity positions, carefully balancing between hegemonic masculinity and high-attainment, popularity, prestige and coolness, and do not see these stances as antithetical but complimentary, and the ultimate goal is to “have it all”, as Shaun describes:

“Because there’s always the STEREOTYPE of  
If YOU’RE COOL and POPULAR/ then  
You’re NEVER SMART and recognised in LESSONS  
But if you’re SMART/ you’re never recognised  
In PHYSICAL STUFF/ and being POPULAR  
So what I WANTED TO DO/ was become popular  
Cool and smart/ at the same time  
So I had EVERYTHING going for me”

(Shaun)

#### 8.4 Pride in ethnic identity

Two of the boys espoused their ethnic and cultural identities in constructing their narratives around their views about education and where they thought they came from. In so doing, they highlight their pride in and appreciation for their cultural backgrounds and present themselves as having strong senses of ethnic identity, which they are comfortable to share with me during interviews:

“As a BLACK CARIBBEAN GUY/ like, we kind of know  
MORALS

So, like, yeah/ brought up with MORALS”

“I’M PROUD of my SKIN COLOUR

Like, I wouldn’t want to CHANGE IT”

(Junior)

“We learnt about/ HOW there was SEPARATION/ between  
black and white people

And how there were SLAVES

So that had a BIG IMPACT/ in my HEAD

Um, so I thought-/ AND IN-

All of them IDOLS/ they left-/ they ALWAYS HAD, like  
SPECIAL QUOTES

Or (.) they-/ they said something that they leave BEHIND

Like, their PHRASE/ like, MALCOLM X said

The future BELONGS to those/ that prefer-/ PREPARE for it  
TODAY

So I kind of THOUGHT about my future MORE”

(Joseph)

Junior’s reference to his upbringing teaching him morals and his expression of pride in his skin colour demonstrates his security in himself as an African Caribbean boy. Joseph’s recollections of Black History Month teachings and the impression they left on him, and that he idolises famous Black figures of

the past and can recite their quotes, represents his conviction in his ethnic identity. Both boys highlight their background and its importance to them as African Caribbean boys growing up in this society.

## **Chapter 9: Reflections on the Methodology**

Answers to research question 5: How does the narrative interview method impact on the narratives produced and on how boys and the researcher feel about the research and reflect on the process? were developed through engaging with the researcher's and pupils' reflections. The key themes are presented in this chapter although supplementary findings are presented in Appendix 10 (see p. 246-252 for elaborations on the themes and additional findings relating to research question 5).

The process of conducting the narrative interview was initially difficult to manage having to record field notes whilst employing active listening in order to follow up on the information given and generate immanent questions. I was nervous to begin with and uncertain about how the boys would engage with me and the questions. However, through practice, the process became easier and I felt more relaxed about my role and multi-tasking.

Initially, I wondered whether my recording some of the boys' phrases and expressions could have an impact on the fluidity of the interview and make me appear less attentive to what the boys said. However, I reflected that breaking eye contact with the boys in order to write might have made them feel less pressurised or nervous by the interview. Some boys might have found the interview rather intense had I maintained eye contact throughout and could have made them feel uncomfortable.

### **9.1 Interview approach**

Most participants appeared comfortable with the aide memoire questions and did not struggle to answer them. The approach allowed me to address the power imbalance between the pupils and I, and by positioning them as 'experts' in their lives, the boys did not feel under pressure to give perfect answers or ones they felt I was seeking. The boys' use of language suggested that the majority felt relaxed and could speak freely about the experiences they selected to share and the views they chose to espouse, as Joseph's comments demonstrate:



“the EXPERIENCE of it was NICE

Um, it- it was easy to TALK TO YOU/ erm, like

There was no PRESSURE on me/ to have to SAY anything

Um, I was OPEN to say what I LIKED

Um (..)/ yeah (.) it was sort of/ EASY-GOING-

Easy to speak about-/ nothing, like/ UNCOMFORTABLE to speak about”

(Joseph)

Joseph reports a positive interview experience brought on by him feeling comfortable to say anything and at ease to talk. That the interview questions were not intrusive or too ambiguous and that the boys were in control of what they wanted to share with me meant that they could be confident about what they were saying and could clearly convey the messages they wanted hearing. The fluidity, spontaneity, temporality and adaptability of their narratives could be reported verbatim and therefore the boys' voices could be represented with dignity, offering the research authenticity.

The data generated by the interview were not purely evoked by my own agenda as a researcher, as the structure of the open-ended questions in the aide memoires allowed the boys to interpret and respond according to their understanding of the question and how much or little they wanted to share. However, I realise that the amount of information given about a particular topic was partially steered by my immanent questions, following up on issues I thought were interesting and relevant to my research questions, although some of the data was unexpected and I did not anticipate that many of the boys' experiences would be so similar. Having no prior assumptions about the detail or content of the narratives I would obtain allowed me to be open to explore the various avenues that boys took in their narratives. Making verbatim fieldwork notes allowed me to hold the contents of the boys'

narrative in mind and sequentially explore the themes and issues that they raised, probing them for further information until the boys felt that they had nothing more to say on the matter. This encouraged elaboration, producing richer more detailed narratives, and allowed a better understanding of the boys' experiences in analyses.

This interview method is less restricting and more freeing of life stories than structured interviews and encourages researchers to engage with the emotional impact of narratives and on sense-making. The richer picture and insight that the non-judgemental narrative interview affords allows a relationship to be built between the interviewee and interviewer which, in turn, adds to the quality of narratives produced.

## 9.2 Effects of methodology on researcher

Analyses of pupils' narratives were labour-intensive and lengthy processes which, at times, was overwhelming. On several occasions I became stuck in my analyses and was confused by the complexities of the process given my lack of experience with the method. However, seeking guidance in research meetings with my supervisors helped me to see the data more clearly and from different perspectives, which opened up the narratives to new meanings. It was difficult to divorce myself from certain interpretations of the data given my subjectivity and position as the interviewer and analyst, although my field work notes and reflections helped me to interrogate my assumptions. My interpretations were challenged by my supervisors and research colleagues and I found this difficult but helpful in developing my self-awareness to be reflexive and transparent about my analytical conclusions.

My reflections supported my ability to accept and reject pieces of information that the boys shared and my own assumptions or feelings about the narratives. It was difficult dealing with the boys' contradictions in their speech and complexity of the information they shared and also omitted, although my engagement with my emotions and reflections on the interviews supported me in doing this.

In completing this study I feel more competent as an Educational Psychologist practitioner and researcher, having enhanced my active listening skills, interpersonal communication, interpretive skills, analytical thinking and practice by engaging with this methodology. This research encouraged me to engage in reflexive practice and interrogate my own thoughts, feelings and assumptions and to unpick some of the challenges associated with interviewing and explore the dynamics within the context. Looking at the breadth and depth of data gathered in this study, I am hopeful that I have managed to capture the boys' voices and experiences in an authentic way that preserves their identities and personalities and that the readers of this research may also find them as smart, skilful, interesting and endearing as I have.

### 9.3 Impact of rapport

The majority of boys gave similar narratives in both interviews although their narratives were generally more elaborate on the second occasion. This was anticipated due to the rapport built between us after the first interviews, and reflected the impact that rapport can have on individuals' openness to reveal personal information. This finding was also representative of narratives, as they reflect temporality, subjectivity and context in the organisation and communication of information.

Nigel expressed what he thought about the first interview and shared his reflections on the process:

“After the FIRST interview/ I started thinking about

When I was in year seven and eight

And how I've CHANGED-

I mainly thought about THAT (.)

And I ALSO thought about the PRESSURES of school-

School life CHANGES/ DRAMATICALLY

From year to year/ and from PRIMARY school to  
SECONDARY school”

(Nigel)

Nigel's narrative highlights that the narrative interview can leave an impression on the interviewee that enables them to think about and engage further with their past experiences and reflect on their lives. This might impact on the boys' views and the meanings that they ascribe to their experiences, as the interview prompts them to be conscious of issues that may have been unconscious and interrogate their interpretations through the re-authoring, reconstructing and retelling of their experiences in the second interview.

The interviews conducted with Chris were, I felt, less successful than the others, and I was struck by how uncomfortable I felt when he responded by giving very brief, sometimes unrelated answers and laughed in unexpected places. I felt that I could not relate very well to him. However, whilst reflecting on the first interview, I wondered whether the questions were perceived as too personal and he did not want to share details of his life with me, a stranger. I also wondered how he felt about talking to a female about boy matters and whether this could have contributed to his discomfort and presentation of guardedness about sharing his experiences.

My emotional experiences prompted me to consider the dynamics of our rapport within the interview. That I was not able to understand Chris' sense of humour and the confusion that I felt about his laughter, might have led me to feel frustrated about my inability to understand him and his perspectives, which could have been reflected in my micro facial expressions and tone of responses. Admittedly, at times I felt bored by the lack of narrative content in Chris' interview and I sensed that this might have echoed his experience of the process.

Adolescents may be less accustomed to being asked questions that expect them to be able to remember, reflect and make sense of their past experiences and some could feel put on the spot by this novel way of communicating in free-flow, where the adult listens intently and does not interrupt or impose. Chris' reticence in responding to the interview questions threw up for me that not all pupils may interpret the research as applicable to them or may be invested in it, in spite of consenting to their involvement.

#### 9.4 Effects of interviews on participants

Three of the other boys in the study appeared to gain something positive from their involvement and reflected on the impact that being interviewed had had on them. Nigel and Junior felt that being interviewed reminded them of their past experiences and:

“Remember something/ maybe NEGATIVE/ that I could have  
BUILT ON

So now that I've TALKED about it/ it probably will STICK IN  
MY HEAD

Which helps me BUILD on that”

(Nigel)

“it's changed, like/ the OUTLOOK on life

Like, it's made me reflect MORE on what I did in the PAST

And how I am NOW”

(Junior)

“YEAH I've SEEN-/ like, it's made me think about

What's happening NOW/ in school life and things like that

It's made me see-/ like, it's made me proper THINK about it  
Instead of just RUSHING OVER IT/ like I USUALLY would"

(Michael)

Both boys make reference to the narrative interview's ability to make the unconscious conscious so that individuals can become more aware of their thoughts, feelings and interpretations of their past experiences, and how they have developed over time. In so doing, Nigel considers that talking about the issues in the interview makes him more mindful and he can take into account things he needs to improve on and work towards this. Similarly, Junior believes that reflecting on his past has implications for his perspective on the future and has enabled a change in 'the' outlook on life, which is a depersonalisation and generalisation of the experience of being a narrative interviewee. Whereas, Michael thought that the interview allowed him to think carefully about his current schooling experiences.

Nigel goes on to describe that the interview addressed issues for him to discuss that he would not usually engage with and that through being questioned, he learned things about himself:

"Erm, I think it was GOOD because (.)

I almost OPENED UP to things I wouldn't USUALLY

I talk a lot more than-/ I probably wouldn't TALK about this  
stuff

But you almost HAVE to think about it/ due to the  
QUESTIONS

So it almost makes you/ REALISE YOURSELF/ cos, like

PROBABLY when I finish this-/ I will just THINK BACK/ on  
some of the stuff/ I was SAYING (..)

It's almost like SELF-REALISATION"

““You get to UNDERSTAND YOURSELF a lot more

You get to (..) LEARN from it”

(Nigel)

This demonstrates the potential for narrative research to do much more than gather data but provide beneficial intervention. Whilst the boys' co-construction of their narratives performed their identities, it is apparent that for some boys, their identities can be further reinforced by this process as they espouse their personal views and experiences, and better understand who they are. The quotes highlight the capability of this research to catalyse a change in participants' academic focus and motivation for educational attainment:

“just like IMPROVE on stuff ACADEMICALLY

But it hasn't had a MASSIVE impact

Cos it's only an INTERVIEW at the end of the day

But it STILL reminds you of things

That you need to IMPROVE on”

(Shaun)

“Er, it gave me more, like/ a FOCUS IMPACT

So it gave me more like a FOCUS of ACHIEVING

To, like, go to UNIVERSITY/ or even COLLEGE and that/ yeah”

(Junior)

My response to hearing the boys' reflections was one of pleasant surprise and I felt a great sense of achievement. My pride in this research was enhanced when I learned how it had affected the boys in positive ways, enabling them to be more focused, assertive and assured in the knowledge and understanding of themselves and their future directions.



## **Chapter 10: Discussion**

### **10.1 Summary of findings and links to existing literature**

This thesis aimed to offer a counter-narrative to existing literature that investigates the relative underachievement of African Caribbean boys and the dominant discourse that peer influences are largely negative for this group and contribute to pupils' undermining their academic ability. The thesis intended to present the complexities in the schooling experiences of some high-attaining African Caribbean boys and offer insight from the boys' perspectives, thereby, giving this often marginalised group a voice. Finally, it aimed to offer a reflexive account of engaging with the narratives to provide transparency to the analytical process and to facilitate a discussion about its use with young people.

Seven high-attaining African Caribbean boys were interviewed twice using a narrative interview methodology (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000) to explore their educational and peer experiences, their friendships and educational values. Interviews also explored how boys managed their peer relationships and the impact of their family narratives on their educational values. Interview narratives were analysed using a structural linguistic approach (Gee, 1991) in order to answer the research questions proposed. The analytical procedure allowed the researcher to identify themes within the narratives and engage with the language participants' used to share their experiences, which highlighted their intentions and motivations behind the narratives, the emotional impact of their experiences and their performances of identity.

This chapter summarises the themes in participants' narratives and draws on existing literature and psychological theories to facilitate an understanding of the data. It also discusses how the present study fits within the literature and what it adds to current understandings of the experiences of high-attaining African Caribbean boys.

This thesis generated many themes in relation to the pupils' perceptions of peer influences and the impact they perceived that their experiences with their peers had on them and their educational attainment. The breadth and

depth of the findings is testament to the opportunities that narrative methodology provides to research in presenting the scope and complexity of human experience that is not limited by the researcher's or theoretical perspective adopted. The following sections discuss the findings and their significance in relation to each research question (RQ).

RQ1. Do 14-15 year old boys who are attaining well (i.e. they have achieved level 7+ in their English, Mathematics and Science Key Stage 3 SATs attainment tests) consider that their experiences and relationships with their peers impact upon their education? If so, how and how do the boys feel about this?

The boys answered this question in many ways, through considering and sharing their experiences with their peers with me and reflecting on the subjective impact that these had. Whilst boys were reticent to discuss the emotional effect of some experiences with me, an understanding of their affect was developed through the exploration of language they used to talk about their experiences. In addition, their false starts, repetitions, omission of information and the depersonalisation of experiences when talking about issues around peer pressure and bullying served to divorce them from the emotional connotations of the event and thereby presented the psychological and affective impact on them as being difficult and enduring.

#### *Purposeful friendship selection*

One influential theory of peer influences is the homophily theory, that peer group members share similar characteristics and behaviours (Ryan, 2001; Kiuru, Burk, Laursen, Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 2010; Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011) and this thesis found evidence to support this. The data suggested that boys' purposeful selection of friends was important in the development of pro-education behaviours supporting attainment. Consistent with previous

research (Berndt & Keefe, 1995), engagement, motivation and attainment were considerations borne for the boys in their selection of peers to be friends with, and close friends were considered to be working at similar attainment levels to the boys.

The boys in this study recognised the need for peer support and felt that by associating with potentially successful people they would boost their own chances of being successful, because of their friends' encouragement. This complements research showing that friends can offer social support that reinforces their perceptions of opportunity and educational expectations (Wall, Covell & Macintyre, 1999). However, in contrast to other research (Ryan, 2001) the findings here indicate that boys do not only maintain friendships with peers who are high-attaining, but also with pupils who are less academically successful.

#### *Difficulties with secondary transition*

This thesis found that some boys experienced adjustment to the new peer cultures in secondary school as very difficult. Nigel was so concerned about his safety in relation to his peers in year seven that he did not want to go to school. This highlights the emotional impact of some social experiences after secondary transition, and in keeping with the literature (Cotterell, 2007), the narratives provided evidence that insecurities in peer relationships can make pupils reluctant to attend school and affect their educational participation.

Boys reported that peers provided reassurance and protection when it was needed, most helpfully after transition to secondary school. The attention and receptiveness of peers to pupils' emotional states in conversations are helpful interactions (Salzberger-Wittenberg, Henry & Osborne, 1992) which may alleviate negative emotions and could promote attention, concentration and learning. Perceived social support appeared to buffer some adolescents from stressful events as individuals are then more likely to perceive themselves as being safe and secure (Bojanowska & Zalewska, 2011).

### *Peers' impact on educational values*

Whilst research has shown that peers can influence pupils' educational values and aspirations (Robertson & Symons, 2003), most boys in this study said that their friends had little bearing on their educational values, which they felt were shaped more by their families. However, their narratives described cultural practices between friends (i.e. competing for grades and providing support with home work), which suggest that educational values were held mutually between them so were likely to be reinforced. It may be that for some African Caribbean boys to achieve parents need to instil academic values and relationships need to be fostered with peers that support these values by being similarly oriented. Such discrepancy between individuals' expressed perceptions and their reporting of events highlights the ability for narrative to uncover information that is held unconsciously by individuals (Bell, 2002), as boys did not appear to consider or be aware of peers' reinforcement of their educational values although the content of their narratives revealed this.

Boys' narratives suggested that they considered their own efficacy, choices and outcomes in relation to their peers' and family members' experiences and that this experiential learning developed their expectations and actions for the future. The meanings that they ascribed to their experiences around attainment success, the impact that family members and teachers had on their views about who they had the potential to be, and their observations of models whom they wished to differentiate themselves from all appeared to contribute towards their constructions of themselves and their identities. In their study, Perry and Vance (2010) found no link between peer perceptions and occupational possible selves for 14 year old urban Black pupils and suggested that perceptions of teacher support may be more salient than perceptions of peer attitudes towards education (Ibid., p.264). The findings of this thesis complement this assertion, as boys' narratives implied they received greater reinforcement from teachers and family members with regards to their educational values and goals than peers.

### *Emotional and practical support*

This thesis provided evidence that some boys can and do communicate negative emotional states (i.e. stress and anger) to their friends and draw on social support. This can allow individuals to cope with challenges in adolescence, which has positive implications for mental health (Herman-Stabl, Stemmler & Peterson, 1995; Hampel & Peterman, 2005). This finding provides evidence for the debate generated by some research which suggests that boys tend to self-disclose less (Maccoby, 1990) and be less relational in their friendships than girls (Cross & Madson, 1997). It may be that the boys in this study had particular interdependent friendships and were more prosocial, perhaps, due to identity and personality factors as well as their social capital, and their friends' accessibility. In addition, some boys were motivated to provide practical support to friends and gave them advice about remaining engaged with education. A study by Rose and Asher (2004) found that children's help-giving behaviours were linked to the quality of their friendships. It may be that the boys in this study perceived they had qualitatively good relationships with their peers and thus engaged in encouraging positive attitudes and academically-oriented behaviours in their friends.

### *Modelling and competition*

In contrast to the dominant discourses that peers in adolescence influence individuals to engage in deviant and anti-school behaviours (Cullingford & Morrison, 2006; Bottrell, 2009) and that, particularly for Black boys, peers impact negatively on educational attainment, this thesis found that boys reported being motivated and inspired by their friends. Peers provided models for appropriate classroom behaviour as well as academic engagement. Some narratives conveyed boys' sense of obligation to be role models to other young Black people which could reflect their ethnic and cultural values as well as social capital. Consequently, some boys appeared to possess 'bridging' social capital (Holland, Reynold & Weller, 2007), which is concerned with having a sense of community, 'civic engagement' (Ibid., p.

112) and belonging, and through their achievements worked to inspire other pupils. From their desire to set good examples for other Black pupils to follow, the boys appeared to gain further motivation to achieve success and get ahead in education.

Most boys presented with a confidence about themselves as individuals and in their own abilities which may further be protective against peer influences (Connor, 1994). The findings here also suggested that the internalisation of negative attributions based on peer comparison can be detrimental to some individuals' confidence and esteem, particularly if individuals do not feel competent (Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2005). However, most boys behaved in ways that were complicit with hegemonic masculinity by competing against their peers for the highest grades. Therefore, some pupils are motivated by their peers through social comparison (Ibid.), and oriented towards performance goals, as has been suggested elsewhere (Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006), whilst others were resistant to engaging in such practices which might mask failure at occupying hegemonic masculinity.

The nuances in the boys' narratives highlight the differences between individuals' perceptions of what is helpful for them in their relationships with peers (e.g. competition or comradeship) and how these perceptions can affect their confidence, esteem and educational attainment. The narratives provided evidence that the experiences related to these African Caribbean boys' identities are racialised and gendered. Furthermore, the ways in which they perform their masculinities within the educational context affects their peer relationships (Wright, Weekes, McGlaughlin & Webb, 1998) and their educational performance.

### *Social interactions and status implications*

Peer distractions and popularity are important considerations for some boys in this study which implicate boys' status within their peer groups as affecting their educational performance and motivations to be successful. Some

research has identified that pupils' attainment is adversely affected by distractibility and peer distractions which contributes to their inability to concentrate on classroom tasks (Blatchford, Edmonds & Martin, 2003; Sargeant, 2012). Consistent with this, some boys in this study shared experiences of pupils causing distractions and negatively impacting upon their learning. However, boys' ability to recognise these effects and manage their peer interactions demonstrates maturity and their self-monitoring.

Some boys found acquiring and maintaining popularity very difficult and experienced some failure at hegemony but assured themselves that popularity and peer recognition would come later if they continued to attain and be successful in education, thereby, maintaining their self-esteem and confidence. Cognitive reframing is a complex strategy increasingly used in adolescence to help individuals regulate their emotions (Carr, 2011) and individuals may develop beliefs and affirmations that they use in order to help them focus on the future. Further, reframing might deflect any negative feelings about boys' social statuses and masculinities in order to help them manage and accept their positions in school.

For some boys, having social status and being popular is just as important as acquiring good grades. Negotiating between 'class clown' behaviour in order to preserve reputations as popular and entertaining whilst focusing on class work is difficult to manage and requires great skill and resources. "Having it all" appeared to be possible for some boys who are academically able, talented, hard-working and have social capital. Common among the boys' narratives was an orientation towards the future and a willingness to put in the effort to achieve success and social status.

Physical attractiveness and sporting ability are linked to the balance being achieved between popularity and attainment (Smith, Cowie & Blades, 2002; Francis, Skelton & Read, 2010). The boys' engagement and investment in sporting activities as well as education may have allowed them to traverse the traditional antithetical concepts of popularity and high-achieving. Further, involvement in sport may help them to develop hegemonically masculine

physiques that help to reinforce their physical attractiveness and popularity amongst girls as well as boys.

### *Perceived peer pressure and bullying*

Black pupils' resistance to being labelled as 'acting white' and their efforts to undermine their academic achievements because of this has been documented in some literature (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ford et al., 2008). Whilst this thesis did not find evidence to support the 'acting white' theory this may be reflective of the social context and composition of the school that the boys attended. The size and ethnic diversity of the school, and ethos of achievement developed within it and pupils' integration may have reduced the possible constraints for pupils' ways of being. However, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to suggest the extent to which these factors played a role in the relationships forged between peers and their abilities to negotiate their social behaviours.

Michael openly shared his experience of having been bullied whilst the other boys denied they had been subjected to bullying. However, some boys talked about having had some experience of being socially excluded. Although social exclusion could be argued to be a more subtle form of bullying (Naylor, Cowie & Rey, 2001), it was not perceived to be and boys managed their emotions in response by developing their talents (e.g. at football) in order to become socially included. They also turned to parents to help them positively reappraise their situation. This 'positive reappraisal' involves the reframing of a negative event so that it is considered less negative (Reijntjes, Stegge & Terwogt, 2006). This strategy might be useful for some boys in helping them to manage negative emotions in response to social exclusion, particularly, if they experience depressive symptoms (Reijntjes et al., 2006).



### *Learning from others' perceptions and experiences*

Some boys implicated peers with poor educational and social outcomes as modelling educational disengagement and disaffection. However, boys were able to learn from their friends' negative experiences and made decisions for their own lives based on this vicarious learning. This fits existing literature implicating the role of peers in vicarious acquisition of information concerning social skills and behaviour (Reijntjes et al., 2006). However, the data here suggests that observing peer anti-school behaviours and their outcomes can serve to deter some pupils from engaging in the same behaviours rather than promote copying.

Earlier research has highlighted that some teachers stereotype and discriminate against African Caribbean pupils (Thomas, Caldwell, Faison & Jackson, 2009) and that their low expectations and communication of their attitudes towards pupils can affect pupils' esteem and contribute to their academic performance (Foster, 1992). Boys in this study had clear ideas of how teachers perceived them, as has been demonstrated in other studies (see Tickle et al., 2006). From the boys' narratives, teachers sometimes explicitly discussed their perceptions of them in relation to their peer associates and this suggests that some teachers are aware of their perceptions of African Caribbean boys. The boys then acted in ways to change their teachers' perceptions which included distancing from friends who were considered as lower achieving and Black. This study adds to the literature which highlights that African Caribbean pupils perceive teachers to respond to their behaviours with more severe reprimands than they give to other pupils.

### *Attainment and peer group turning points*

All the boys experienced turning points within their educational career where their attainment level had dropped temporarily, which most of them attributed to the influence of their peers in distracting them. However, it is interesting to note that the boys perceived this dip to occur between year seven and the

beginning of year nine, when Key Stage 3 SATs exams are expected to take place. Some pupils in year eight have been found to drift away from learning and have decreased motivation due to developmental immaturity and lack of perceiving that this is a significant year (Demetriou, Goalen & Rudduck, 2000) whereas, in year nine, pupils are forced to make choices about subject options and are encouraged to consider their future. The input of the school and parents at this time may be crucial in countering the effects of the peer group and orienting pupils more towards learning and attainment, and may augment boys' own maturity and subjective future orientation.

There are three possible explanations for how the boys engage with turning points in the early secondary school years. First, the early years of secondary school might not be taken seriously by some boys and the tendency to be disruptive in class can have adverse effects on their engagement and understanding of lesson content and subsequent achievement. In addition, the novelty of year seven and social risks and excitement associated with it might overshadow learning (Demetriou et al., 2000), and this was reflected in boys' narratives about secondary school being unsafe in year seven and those which linked their declining academic performance to peer distractions during this time.

Second, the ways in which the boys think about the school-leaving age is likely to have impacted on the boys' future time perspective (i.e. their orientation to the future and setting of motivational goals to attain qualifications). This is likely to have an impact on their subsequent determination, persistence through challenges and positive views of school, as has been shown elsewhere (de Bilde, Vansteenkiste & Lens, 2011; Lens, Paixão, Herrera & Grobler, 2012). De Bilde et al.'s (2011) study concluded that 'when foreseeing the future consequences of one's present behaviour, one seems to be better able to manage and plan one's study time and to stay more focused on the task at hand' (ibid. p. 340) and the boys' narratives supported this contention. In addition, cognitive developmental theory suggests that individuals are better able to use and apply strategies for learning and develop metacognition in later adolescence (Smith, Cowie &

Blades, 2002), which may facilitate their ability to attend to information and understand and complete school work in order to produce changes in their educational attainment.

Third, Joseph's narrative implicated the organisation of the school as having an impact on his friendships and access to other pupils from whom he was able to learn. This suggests that how schools organise pupils into classes and manage pupils' movement between them impact on the availability of peers and subcultures with which they can associate (Thrupp, Lauder & Robinson, 2002). It is therefore important to consider school structures and their implications for peer relations. The narratives in this study fit with other research literature that finds that school organisation, along with peer group influences and parental input impacts on pupils' academic achievement (Robertson & Symons, 2003).

#### *Teachers, mothers and siblings as buffers*

There is evidence that it is not the case that in adolescence, the influence of the family declines and is overridden by the influence of peers but that there is a more complex story. The findings in this thesis showed that the boys maintained strong family ties and were motivated to meet high family expectations and make members proud of them and this fits with existing literature (Rhamie & Hallam, 2002; Hébert, Pagnani & Hammond, 2009). It may be that for some African Caribbean boys to be educationally successful, the support, monitoring and interest of the family needs to be salient. Whilst the findings here do not underestimate the strong influence that peers have on individuals, it positions the participants here as empowered by social and personal resources to combat them, and further indicates that peer influences can be positive (Robertson & Symons, 2003) as well as negative (Urda & Schoenfelder, 2006).

It may be that peer influences are harder to resist and more enticing in the absence of positive role models at home and supportive relationships (Cullingford & Morrison, 2006), and that parents, siblings and teachers are

important buffers to the appeal of behaviours endorsed by the peer group. The finding that siblings were useful sources of information and support for boys has been documented in the literature (Holland et al., 2007) and suggests that siblings may play an important role in the adjustment of adolescents in secondary school. Siblings, as well as parents, were sometimes important providers of resources for social capital. Although sibling influences are often overlooked, this thesis and other studies suggest that their involvement is beneficial to individuals' social-emotional development and behaviour and should be explored further in research (Recchia & Howe, 2009).

The support of family members is linked to adolescents' schooling experiences, their perceived opportunity in education (i.e. access to opportunities to advance) and their anticipation of success (Wall, Covell & MacIntyre, 1999). Wall et al. (1999) found that adolescent boys' perceptions of opportunity were linked to family support. This suggests that for some boys, family support plays the most significant role in their perceptions of what is possible in terms of academic achievement, which consequently impacts on their expectations and attainment. Furthermore, a meta-analysis of studies investigating the relationship between social support and well-being found that family support was highly associated with adolescents' well-being and that teacher support was linked to well-being which might be explained by the greater stability in family and teacher relationships than peer relationships (Chu, Saucier & Hafner, 2010). As adolescents undergo developmental changes that can affect peer acceptance and rejection, and school structures impact on opportunities to socialise, friendships may be less stable (Hardy, Bukowski & Sippola, 2002) than relationships formed with adults. The findings in this thesis suggest that boys were well-supported by their families and received some support from teachers. This is likely to have promoted their perceptions that high educational attainment was achievable and their general well-being might have been promoted and buffered by the actual and perceived social support offered to them to enable them to meet their potential. This explanation is in keeping with the findings of other studies (Łuszczynska and Cieślak, 2005; Bojanowska & Zalewska, 2011).

## RQ2. How do the boys manage their peer relationships?

The thesis findings run counter to the literature (see Ryan, 2000, 2001; Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011) in that the boys associate with differentiated rather than homogeneous peer groups. This study highlighted that some high-attaining African Caribbean boys are able to make and maintain friendships with peers who are academically driven and successful as well as with those who are less motivated and successful. In addition, they appear to strike a balance between spending time with different types of peer groups and managing their different demands in clever ways, thereby preserving their popularity, prestige, respect and reputation, alongside their academic achievements. The boys can and do occupy positions within different groups and strategically navigate between them by conforming to conventions such as language codes and behaviour at different times and carefully negotiating and performing multiple identities in school. The boys were aware of, and sensitive to, group differences and strategically adapted their behaviour to fit in with their peers and be socially included.

A task of adolescence is achieving independence from parents whilst being able to maintain relatedness to them (Allen, McElhaney & Marsh, 2007). However, parental attachment could explain the boys' autonomy and resourcefulness in managing and maintaining their peer relationships and social statuses. Allen et al. (2007) showed that adolescents who had secure parental attachments were better able to call on their best friends for emotional support and their attachment security was positively correlated with their quality of peer relationships and popularity, and negatively correlated with negative peer pressure. Most boys in this study reported that their mothers supported them in managing peer interactions and discussed peer relationships with them. This is suggestive of the boys having secure attachments, as indeed their narratives around managing peer pressure, acquiring popularity and being able to seek emotional support from their friends also reflect.

Adolescents use self-presentation strategies to manage others' perceptions of them (Carr, 2011) and the boys in this study relied on the development and use of different strategies and their available resources in order successfully to manage their relationships. This also facilitated their management of teacher perceptions (as academically achieving) and peer perceptions (as relatable and popular). Junior's description of this process as 'juggling' represents the complexities and effort that the management of peer relationships and public perceptions entail. The finding that pupils negotiate different public identities and social positions in different contexts has been noted elsewhere. Reynolds (2004, p.13) describes Caribbean young people as 'carving out multiple ethnic identities that are not fixed into a specific location. Instead identities are fluid, temporal, flexible, and can change and modify according to time, location and audience'. The African Caribbean boys in this study worked very hard to project social images and control public perceptions of them.

Individuals who are autonomous perceive events as more challenging than stressful and use adaptive coping strategies rather than avoidance to manage stressful situations (Weinstein & Ryan, 2011). As such, the boys in this study who said they did not experience peer pressure demonstrate resilience through their appraisal of situations and the meanings they ascribe to them. However, boys who used avoidance strategies such as masking their feelings and distancing and separating from particular peers, could be suggested to present with lower levels of individual autonomy, and could require support to develop coping skills to deal with peer pressure.

RQ3. How do family narratives impact on the boys' views about school and their attainment?

The boys' narratives of their family experiences and their impact on their educational values were generated spontaneously through the narrative interview. This highlights the advantage of the methodological approach of allowing participants to narrate their experiences in the context of an

interview agenda that is 'open to development and change' (Hollway & Jefferson, 2008, p.302).

Boys' narratives highlighted the close kinship bonds they maintained with immediate and extended family members and that grandparents were role models for them. Through the sharing of their family narratives the boys co-constructed their identities in rich narratives of triumph over racism, hard-working ethic, academic orientation and resulting achievement. These narratives were also used to frame their own identities as shaped by their families' experiences and espoused their racial and cultural understandings and allegiances. Family narratives embody the cultural norms, expectations and values of preceding generations and the long-established oral traditions of African and Caribbean people through slavery (Jackson & Cothran, 2003) maintained a sense of history by passing down tales of significant events. This thesis showed that these oral traditions are being maintained in some African Caribbean families in the UK and that they can provide grounding for some young people, reinforcing their ethnic identities and moral stances (Edwards et al., 2003; Reynolds, 2004; Holland et al., 2007).

The boys' family narratives and their narratives about the support, advice and inspiration that family members provided suggests that individuals utilised their own and their families' social and emotional capital. The narratives provided some support for the idea that some African Caribbean families use both 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital to maintain kinship ties (even with non-relatives) and act with a sense of collective good by acting as role models and reinforcing ethnic identities (Reynolds, 2004). A finding consistent with previous research (see Reay, 2000; Wright et al., 2010) was that parents, mothers in particular, were actively involved in conversations with their sons about their academic aspirations, specifically, whose success to emulate (i.e. family members) and whose academic trajectory to avoid following. This implicates some parents in orienting pupils to achievement, even in adolescence, and provides a rationale for schools to collaborate more with parents to raise and sustain the attainment of African Caribbean pupils. Although, 'the impact of parental involvement arises from parental values and

educational aspirations... these are exhibited continuously through parental enthusiasm and positive parenting style' (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003, p.35). Consequently, interventions may be usefully targeted towards developing parents' values and educational aspirations rather than encouraging practical involvement in school activities per se.

RQ4. How do the boys perform their identities as they co-construct their narratives during interviews?

The boys used language to 'other' their peers and the ways in which they described past events and their social activities not only espoused their identities but also allowed multiple performances and constructions of identity within the interview contexts. Behaviours and characteristics linked to identity and their discrepancies were further reflected in boys' questionnaire data (Appendix 4, p. 174). All the boys in this study were involved in extra-curricular activities (e.g. football and martial arts) which served to validate and perform hegemonic masculinities. Researchers suggest pupils who are most popular, engage in the most 'valued and visible school activities' (Kinney, 1993, p.23) and have higher self-esteem than those who do not participate in such activities. Boys were conscious of the social labels ascribed to their peers (e.g. 'geeks') and their awareness of these labels is likely to have contributed to the development and management of their social identities.

Most boys said that peers had little bearing on their educational values, and sought to present themselves as autonomous and to emphasise their resistance to being influenced by their peers in this way. This, along with examples of their engagement in hegemonic activities (e.g. football and martial arts) served to emphasise their masculinity to me and the readers of this thesis. Their careful selection of events to share and their descriptions of them served to present the boys as agentic, insightful and reflective. Their performances of self were contextualised in the interview interactions between them as adolescent boys, and I, an adult female researcher. The



different frames of reference between the boys and I threw up some challenges in terms of understanding the language that they used at times, but also their experiences as male pupils. These were addressed through probing for further information in the interviews and seeking a shared understanding of terms used and the meanings ascribed to events.

The experiences that participants share in narrative interviews serve to represent their identities and the expression or omission of emotions within narratives reflects one's 'sense of self' (Horrocks & Callahan, 2006). Horrocks and Callahan (2006) showed that tensions can arise when trying to maintain a representation of self and expressing emotion within an organisation. This might explain why boys were reticent in their expression of emotions during interviews, as the school environment could have constrained their emotional expressions if they wanted to maintain an 'image'.

The narratives produced in this thesis suggested that boys were aware of racial stereotypes and worked hard to prove them wrong and to maintain a status as respectable which is indicative of resilience and social capital (Wright et al., 2003). Negative stereotypes and low expectations actually motivated them, giving them impetus to achieve and surpass expectations. It may be that these African Caribbean boys had high self-esteem or feelings of self worth, a finding reflected in existing literature (Tomlin & Olusola, 2010), which gave them self-confidence and a belief that they could succeed. Further, having a strong sense of racial identity and being able to identify with a group can protect pupils against discrimination and help them to focus on their achievement goals (Byfield, 2008; Chavous et al., 2003). The boys' affiliation with community groups and clubs might have promoted a sense of belonging, identity and self-efficacy, contributing towards their academic success by giving them resources to reject negative stereotypes (Whiting, 2009) and raise their confidence in achieving.

The narratives that boys sustained helped to espouse their beliefs and assumptions about achievement and the actions that were necessary to achieve success. Further, the world views implicit within them created a context for their racialised and gendered identities. Participants' narratives

appeared consistent with the theory of scholar identity proposed by Whiting (2009) as they conveyed their perceptions that they were talented and intelligent, but also that they made social sacrifices for achievement and valued academia more than peer affiliation. This suggests that the theory may ring true for some African Caribbean boys in the UK but further research is needed to ascertain to what extent this might be the case and also has to fit within theories of multiple identities since racialised and gendered identities were also important in this study.

RQ5. How does the narrative interview method impact on the narratives produced and on how boys and the researcher feel about the research and reflect on the process?

The narrative interview allowed participants to author, develop and tell their experiences in ways that could have been stifled by traditional question-answer interviews. The process of developing rapport between the researcher and boys was facilitated by repeating the interviews, thereby, giving participants the opportunity to delve deeper into their recollections and sense-making of past events and develop their own insight into their developmental, social and academic trajectories. The method provided insight into the boys' use of language to perform their identities in interviews and afforded the research an authentic account of the complexities of boys' social experiences, producing captivating data that, perhaps, other research methods may not have. Interviews allowed boys to talk openly about their experiences and gave them opportunities to raise issues they thought relevant. In addition, analyses were data-driven rather than theoretically-driven so provided possibilities for new understandings of the complex issues raised in interviews.

The boys used linguistic markers that suggested self-awareness and honesty about their experiences. For example, the use of first-person singular pronouns (I, me, my) has been shown to be reflective of openness and ownership of one's experiences, which is suggestive of appropriate emotional processing of negative events (Newman, Pennebaker, Berry & Richards,

2003; Weinstein & Hodgins, 2009). However, Nigel's narrative about his experiences of 'rushing' was constructed using second-person pronouns (e.g. you), and this dissociation indicates that he was defensive about the event and that the emotional experience is not fully processed. The narrative methodology therefore gave insight into the emotional impact of the boys' experiences on them and further interrogation could help to identify issues for which the boys require support.

Whilst the narrative interview was uncomfortable for one individual, most boys reported a positive experience and through the rapport built with the researcher were able to express intricate narratives demonstrating their agency and resourcefulness. This finding highlighted that the research relationship is important in enabling the empowering of participants and connectedness and that this is built over time (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry highlighted some of the complexities in these boys' experiences and sense-making. This is an advantage to the approach as well as a challenge, as analysing and making sense of complex multiple and multi-layered narratives is time-consuming and effortful, and it can be difficult to critically interrogate data when the researcher has been involved in their co-construction and become immersed in them. The process of engaging with my own reflections added transparency to the research process, offering readers an insight into the emotional aspects of engaging with narratives and also demonstrated best practice in research.

Whilst I felt that the practice of interviewing and analysing using a narrative approach developed my skills in active listening, interpreting and understanding narratives as a co-construction of experiences and their meanings, the boys reported that their involvement had impacted upon their educational focus. This supports the view that narratives can transform people's behaviours, understandings and views of themselves (Atkinson, 1998; Tillmann-Healy, 2001). The structural linguistic narrative approach thus did not only meet expectations as a useful methodology but, in addition and unexpectedly, had some intervention effects on the participants. It also

provided a clear procedure for narrative analysis which was helpful given my lack of experience with the methodology.

## 10.2 Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated that some African Caribbean boys in the UK perceive that they experience peer influences in secondary education, which can be both positive and negative, in relation to academic achievement. Further, dips in pupils' academic performance over the early years of secondary education and social difficulties associated with transition suggest that school interventions could be targeted to supporting some high-attaining African Caribbean pupils at this time. However, some boys draw on a number of complex strategies and resources to help them maintain high attainment at this time, and the experiences of their families, to help them stay focused on their education. They also draw on self-presentation skills to perform a range of identities among differentiated peer groups. This research has merely scratched the surface in presenting the challenges that some African Caribbean boys face in being both high-attaining and respected members of their masculine peer groups. However, the findings suggest that narrative is a helpful tool in listening with non-judgement to provide deeper understandings of how some of these challenges might be mitigated.

Employing a narrative methodology helped to improve my professional practice in seeking pupil voice and listening and making sense of individuals' narratives and gave me skills and confidence in reflexivity, thus suggesting that EPs should engage in narrative research to present the voices of marginalised groups and develop professional skills. It is hoped that this narrative study might offer the academic literature new food for thought and that Educational Psychologists might embrace this methodology to help develop their practice and insights into complex educational issues.

## **Chapter 11: Study Implications, Limitations and Possible Directions**

### **For Future Research**

This chapter highlights the implications of the thesis in relation to theory, schools and educational psychology practice and the limitations of the thesis will be explored before a discussion of future research and development.

#### **11.1 Implications**

The implications drawn from this study will be discussed in relation to specific areas of education and practice. The implications for staff and professionals working in schools will be highlighted first before a discussion about the findings' implications for educational psychology practice.

##### *11.11 Learning and teaching*

The findings of this thesis suggest that whilst some pupils find it helpful to work individually and compete for high grades, others might find this rather challenging and might prefer opportunities to work co-operatively with their peers. It is important for schools to consider how to capitalise on peer-mediated learning opportunities whilst developing pupils' independent learning skills. It might be important for teachers to establish learning tasks that encourage pupils to work in pairs and small groups in the early years of secondary education to encourage the development of social skills as well as the chance to learn from peer models.

School and family systems play key roles in pupils' perceptions of racialisation and the processes that impact on their integration in diverse school communities. The pedagogy of educational institutions can impact upon pupils' perceptions of their ethnic identities and social class, and established curriculum topics such as Black History should be responsive to the need for African Caribbean pupils to be inspired by positive Black role models and not be taught as isolated modules, but positive messages about

Black success should be addressed and embedded within a wider, more inclusive curriculum (Demie, 2005). Schools should ensure that curriculum-based learning is flexible, adaptable and sensitive to ethnic groups' histories and needs and engage with innovative and creative practices that endorse positive ethnic identities and respect for diversity.

#### *11.12 Behaviour, safety and attendance*

Some pupils might be socially vulnerable during transition to secondary school and might feel insecure in year seven. This may affect their willingness to engage with and attend school. It is important that secondary schools monitor the attendance of new pupils in year seven as issues around attendance could reflect some social difficulties that pupils might be having. Primary schools could facilitate secondary schools' early identification of pupils who may be vulnerable to peer difficulties, by sharing information and documentation (Topping, 2011) so that consideration can be given to the pastoral needs of new pupils.

Schools need to establish support systems for pupils who may struggle with adjustment to secondary school, which include pupils who are high-attaining (Phelan, Yu & Davidson, 1994). A transition programme that enables pupils to receive appropriate social support (Mizelle, 1999) and facilitates the development of peer relationships through opportunities to engage in peer-assisted learning activities could help to buffer the effects of transition (Topping, 2011) and be devised in co-ordination with Educational Psychologists in schools' planning meetings.

Older peer mentors might be supportive in the transition period (Mizelle, 1999) to not only pupils with identified SEN, but those who are vulnerable, less mature than their age-equivalent peers and even those with a history of high attainment (Harper, 2012). Mentors could help pupils to develop strategies to resist peer influences as, when appropriately matched to mentees, they can promote the development of emotional literacy skills and subsequent problem-solving skills, happiness and learning (O'Hara, 2011). In

addition, there should be opportunities for pupils to discuss issues around friendships, relationships with teachers and academic pressures can be shared within a supportive environment, for example, within pupil-led welfare groups.

### *11.13 Leadership, management and professional development*

There is evidence from this thesis to suggest that setting and streaming practices in schools can impact on pupils' friendships and subsequent behaviour and engagement in education. Leadership teams in schools need to think carefully about how they group pupils, bearing in mind that peers can be influential models for behaviour and whilst high sets may be comprised of academically focused pupils, lower sets may contain those who are less focused and more distractible. It is also important for management to think about how teaching support staff are deployed in order to respond to the needs of groups who may be more challenging and require greater management, differentiation and variation in teaching approaches.

This study highlighted that pupils experienced attainment dips between year 7 and year 10 and that most boys attributed this to their peer group being a distraction for them. Leadership teams in schools could monitor and track when pupils' attainment dips occur in order to apply timely interventions, for example, mentoring, social skills groups and confidence-building interventions, and help pupils to raise their academic performance. Strategies to manage performance dips also ought to include working closely with parents to monitor pupils' attainment, behaviour and friendships.

Schools have a duty to endorse racial equality under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000) so it is important that they address how their expectations and ethos impact on African Caribbean attainment. Schools have an obligation to engage earnestly with professional issues that impede African Caribbean academic success. Teachers' expectations should be addressed through staff development initiatives (Macauley, 2000), for example reflective peer supervisions, as teacher perceptions have

implications for African Caribbean achievement (Callender, 1997) and although perhaps unconscious, their biases can be identified by some pupils.

Schools are obligated to inclusive practice and critical reflection on the unwritten social rules in school can support these efforts. Further, institutions must be open to reviewing their policies around bullying and inclusion on regular bases, with the support of local authority representatives (e.g. EPs) and be active in the promotion of a collective ethos of achievement and an environment conducive to all pupils achieving their potential. This warrants a closer look at the culture of schools, especially in relation to the current target-driven market, and the emotional and social well-being of different pupil groups rather than just attainment as markers for successful education.

#### *11.14 School interventions*

Schools and families ought to be aware of pupils' difficulties in managing peer relations and expectations to be academically successful. Both systems need to collaboratively support pupils to develop their resilience and recognise their potential and help them to plan and orient towards future goals. Further, schools should be more aware of the stress that some high-attaining boys experience in relation to maintaining their attainment and should offer additional support when necessary. Educational psychologists and school counsellors may be well-placed to support schools in devising a programme of intervention based on the Cognitive Behaviour Therapy model.

Because narrative inquiry is able to offer insight into pupils' perceptions of peer and other relationships, and uncover identities, the approach can be used to bring unconscious issues to consciousness and facilitate individuals' capacity to manage challenges. The narrative interview and associated techniques could be used as an intervention to help support pupils' understandings of their experiences with their peers and help them to focus on the future, as part of a larger whole-school programme, i.e. Social Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL), which could be supported by EPs and school counsellors. Narrative methods such as writing life stories, creating



artwork that is representative of one's self and engaging in identity work through Tree of Life narratives (Ncube, 2006) may support the development of positive self-concepts and, subsequently, confidence and self-esteem, which may buffer against negative social influences.

The inclusion of African Caribbean boys in extra-curricular activities (e.g. sport and performing arts clubs) and programmes that recognise and reward their achievements (i.e. Gifted and Talented initiatives) ought to be considered as interventions to promote and raise their self-esteem, confidence and skills.

### *11.15 Implications for EP practice*

This thesis highlighted that some African Caribbean boys are resourceful, motivated and successful in education. It is important to be mindful of the complexity in African Caribbean boys' experiences when working with them, as there may be many factors which impact upon their educational experiences and attainment, other than their cognitive abilities. Peer relationships and relationships with teachers could be explored in interviews with pupils and may shed light on other issues e.g. masculinity and identity.

As routine EP practice, we should explore cultural and family narratives around educational achievement, as these can be important in maintaining behaviours and attitudes towards education. EPs should be aware of individuals who may be academically achieving but at risk, and enquire about pupils who may be socially vulnerable or at risk of internalising pressures to achieve and stress during school planning meetings. The focus should not only be on pupils who have identified SEN. In addition, EPs could offer preventative group interventions for pupils and training for staff around peer influences, helping the identification of strategies and how they can be most usefully applied to allow pupils to become positively assertive and oriented towards future goals.

Educational Psychologists are well-placed to facilitate the reflexive practice of teachers in peer consultation groups and help them interrogate their assumptions to become more sensitive and egalitarian practitioners. This kind of systemic work could be very helpful in exploring some issues that teaching staff may feel uncertain about raising but in the context of supportive peer groups might be able to untangle some complex beliefs that they might hold about certain groups in school.

Educational Psychologists can develop their own practice by engaging with narrative approaches in work with individuals and groups, and learn more about individuals' experiences, perceptions and belief systems that underlie their behaviour. We can promote narrative ways of working in schools and emphasise the benefits of this to staff and pupils as these approaches develop autonomy, encourage self-awareness and can catalyse changes in perceptions and behaviour. EPs can train staff to deliver specific programmes or workshops using the principals of narrative or choose to apply the approaches themselves in casework. The therapeutic benefits of this mean that EPs would not only be able to gather information for assessment but simultaneously provide intervention. Consequently, this is a cost-effective and efficient way of working.

This thesis argues for future researchers to engage with narratives to offer more insightful research on pupils' experiences and perceptions of peer group influences in school. Moreover, research with young people ought to engage more with narrative approaches in order to better capture and reflect pupils' voices as school life is complex and narratives have the potential to represent these complexities. EPs in training can advocate pupil voice through pioneering narrative research with under-represented groups and engaging with such methodologies can enhance professional practice skills (e.g. reflexivity). Narrative methods have a place on the Educational Psychology Doctoral course and should be taught as part of the educational programme as they are central to systemic approaches and appreciative inquiry. They also helpfully address power imbalances and contextual factors in research.

## 11.2 Study limitations

The study limitations relate to the methodology used in that the narratives co-constructed by participants in interviews are done so in reference to the researcher, their assumptions and interests. As such, inevitably, the process of interviewing and the data gathered is affected by the researcher. Decisions taken to open up and develop certain narratives in interviews are placed with the researcher so although participants were free to raise issues of relevance to them and their experiences, the narratives produced were guided by the aide memoire questions and the researcher's follow-up questions. Had even broader questions been asked in interviews and more open research questions proposed, perhaps, the data obtained would have included a wider range of issues. For example, boys' relationships with girls and teachers, as well as the school context and what that meant for boys were discussions that were missing from the data. In addition, there is a gap in the research pertaining to other aspects of school life i.e. achievement in a broader sense other than attainment and engagement. Participants' thoughts about inclusion in groups under Gifted and Talented schemes and sporting or performance-related clubs are also areas which could have been further explored, perhaps, if different questions had been asked in interviews.

The structuralist linguistic approach to narrative analysis assumes a position of over-interpretation which emphasises sense-making in people's narratives, and thus, the linguistic devices used to structure them are all assumed to be functional and have significant meaning. This includes pauses, repetitions and false-starts. However, it could be argued that some interpretations made of certain pauses, false-starts and repetitions were given undue weighting and much was read into these as reflecting emotional affect, although this might have just reflected some participants' need for time to plan their narratives and remember their experiences.

Memory skills are implicated in the ability to generate narratives, as well as insight and reflexive skills, and thus the methodology used here might not be appropriate for all research participants, as Chris' experience confirmed. There are also ethical implications in encouraging participants to open up

about past experiences that they might not have wanted to remember and share, although being an Educational Psychologist meant that the researcher was sensitive to boys' emotional states throughout the interviews and would have provided appropriate support or directed school staff attention to any issues of concern for the boys. It is likely that participants may not have shared as much of the negative experiences that they had had with peers or teachers due to the relationship with the researcher being new. However, adults who have established relationships with pupils might be able to access more personal and evocative experiences.

Whilst Gee's (1991) stanzas, strophes and parts are useful concepts with which to organise the data, the structuring of transcriptions according to these linguistic tools contain some degree of subjectivity, depending on how the researcher has listened to the audio and grouped lines together. Therefore, analysis contains some bias and a useful credibility check would have been to give transcripts to other researchers to structure into stanzas, strophes and parts and seeing how they would have presented the data, as this ultimately affects the meanings made of them.

Whilst the narratives presented in this thesis cannot be verified as 'truths' the coherence of the narratives co-constructed in interviews could argue for plausibility. Further, this thesis adopts the perspective that the narratives shared represent participants' perceptions of reality and are therefore meaningful and valid.

There is difficulty in transferring and applying the findings to a wider community than those researched as the small sample and narrative approach used to study pupils' perceptions of peer influences does not allow generalisation of the findings. However, a strength of the research is that it focused on a particular context in which the findings are relevant and implications can be usefully drawn and subsequent recommendations made.

The time and word count limitations of the thesis had implications for the depth and transparency of the analyses of individual narratives and my presentation of individual cases, which might have been able to engage the reader and research community in a more complex debate around African

Caribbean achievement. The research could have been strengthened by having more time and greater practice at analysis and critical engagement with other experts in the narrative research field. Greater involvement in research focus groups could have further interrogated and scrutinised my analytical practices and increased my engagement with my emotional responses to the boys' narratives and the research process in my reflections. If more time was allowed between the first and second interviews there could have been more opportunity to probe the boys' reflections on being engaged in the research and this could have offered a richer picture of the impact of the interviews on the boys.

Observations of the boys could have offered comments on the impact of school factors on peer influences. Including girls in the study could have shed light on their perceptions of high-attaining African Caribbean boys and their peer relationships. In addition, having a larger sample of pupils from different schools might have given the research more credence and uncovered more issues that would have been helpful to the debate.

### 11.3 Future research

Future research could revisit the boys in this study in one year to see whether there have been any long-term effects from their involvement in the research. Adjustments to the thesis methodology could be made in order to produce richer narratives and more rounded data (i.e. using other people's perspectives and tools to facilitate narrative generation), for example, using visual support in interviews (e.g. timelines, photographic elicitation etc).

Future studies could use a larger sample from different schools to see if there are differences in experiences between individuals and between schools and to comment on contemporaneous masculinities and pupils' educational values. The study could also be replicated with boys of various racial and cultural backgrounds to ascertain whether the schooling and social experiences of African Caribbean boys are unique and/or racialised.

Future research could employ an ethnographic method to immerse the researcher in the school context in order to make helpful comments on the culture and ethos values of the school and how boys navigate between peer groups. Observation data could thus provide some triangulation to the results, making them more trustworthy. Teachers, parents and siblings could also be interviewed to ascertain their involvement in and perceptions of peer relationships, as the boys in this study perceived them as significant in their ability to manage their friendships. Future research might consider replicating this study with underachieving boys in order to capitalise on the potential of the approach to provide intervention and help some underachieving boys to re-author their histories, reflect on their experiences and orient them to more positive and successful futures.

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## **Appendix 1: Parent Consent Form**

Department of Psychology and Human Development  
Institute of Education, University of London  
20 Bedford Way  
London  
WC1H 0AL

23<sup>rd</sup> January 2012

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Tracy Robinson and I am a second year Trainee Educational Psychologist doing a research project (Thesis) as part of my Educational Psychology Doctorate. I am currently working in your son's school as a link Educational Psychologist and the school has shown some interest in being involved with my study.

I am a first-born Caribbean lady who is very interested in the experiences of high-achieving Caribbean boys in Secondary schools, particularly in regard to the influence of friends. A lot of the literature in existence talks about Black boys' underachievement, although we know that many boys are actually achieving comparable to other ethnic groups, and in some cases exceeding. Some research has highlighted that friends can have an impact upon Black boys' school performance. I am curious to find out from boys that are doing particularly well what their experiences of friends are and how they manage to get by in school and achieve. I think it is very important to highlight the achievement of African Caribbean boys as well as advocate their voice in research, as we often find that these boys are not directly asked for their views or experiences. It is hoped that this research will be beneficial in shedding light on how boys experience friendships in school and what impact these friendships have on their academic performance, for example, whether they find that some friendships are more helpful than others, or in fact, a hindrance.

I would like to invite your son to become involved in this important study. With yours and your son's agreement, involvement in this research will entail me carrying out two interviews with him, talking about his experiences with other pupils in school, what his friendship group thinks of as being important to them and how he feels about their ideas. Each interview will last approximately 1 hour and will consist of several very broad questions relating to your son's experiences of friends and their influences at school. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions; this is not a test. The interviews are using a specific approach called Narrative Analysis, which gets people to talk about their experiences as stories, and then analyses how these stories are told, for example, how it begins and ends, what the general message is, and it can also reveal a little about the narrator's (i.e. your son's) personality, outlook and perspective on this topic. This analytical approach is considered to be a potentially useful way of discovering how some boys manage to resist peer pressures and do well in school.

This interview will take place on the school site, at a time that is mutually agreeable with your son, yourself and the school. The interviews will be audio recorded using a digital Dictaphone and the data will be stored securely and confidentially, with only myself having access to it. Your son's name or any identifiable data will not be used in the report and his identity will be kept anonymous.

As your son is under the age of 18, I will require your consent for him to participate in this interview with me. If you are interested in your son becoming a part of this research but are unsure about signing your consent straight away, I will be arranging a meeting in the school soon in order to hold an open session for parents who might need more information which will provide you with the opportunity to meet me in person and ask any questions you might have. You will have the opportunity to sign your consent at that meeting, if you do not want to sign now. The details of this meeting will be forwarded on to you by school once the date has been arranged. If, however, you feel you are able to give your consent without further information, please could you sign the slip below and I would ask that your son returns this slip to school as soon as possible. The dates of individual interviews will be arranged via the school and you will be notified of the proposed times.

If you do not consent to your son participating, please could you let the school know via your son. Please send a message to the Deputy Headteacher in the school and he will be able to inform me. Otherwise, you will receive notification of the parents meeting shortly with an invitation to attend.

I would be most grateful for your interest and support in helping me to advocate on the behalf of academically successful African Caribbean boys in an effort to add to the wealth of research currently available and begin to better understand their experiences and what further support, if any, they might need in school.

Yours sincerely,



Tracy Robinson  
Trainee Educational Psychologist (DEdPsy)

---

**CONSENT SLIP (to be returned)**

"I, hereby, consent to my son, \_\_\_\_\_ (name), participating in the Doctoral Thesis research study titled, "Exploring the narratives of African Caribbean high-attaining boys: Perceived peer influences in education" by Trainee Educational Psychologist, Tracy Robinson. I understand that my son will be interviewed about his experiences in school with regards to other pupils. I consent to my son's answers being recorded for later analysis by the researcher (Tracy Robinson) on a digital Dictaphone and that this data will be securely and confidentially stored, with access only granted to the researcher.

I understand that my son has the right to withdraw from the interview at any time and for any reason and that his answers will remain completely anonymous in the final written Thesis report. I trust that my son's data will be treated with respect and that the researcher will comply with the ethical guidelines stipulated by the Institute of Education, British Psychological Society and Division of Education and Child Psychology governing bodies."

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please detach this slip and return to the Deputy Headteacher in the school. Thank you very much!**

## **Appendix 2: Pupil Consent Form**

Department of Psychology and Human Development  
Institute of Education, University of London  
20 Bedford Way  
London  
WC1H 0AL

23<sup>rd</sup> January 2012

Dear Pupil,

My name is Tracy Robinson and I am a second year Trainee Educational Psychologist doing a research project (Thesis) as part of my Educational Psychology Doctoral degree. I am a first-born Caribbean lady who is very interested in the experiences of high-achieving Caribbean boys in Secondary schools, particularly in regard to the influences of friends. A lot of the literature in existence talks about Black boys' underachievement, although we know that many boys are actually achieving comparable to other ethnic groups, and in some cases exceeding. Some research has highlighted that friends can have an impact upon Black boys' school performance. I am curious to find out from boys such as yourself, that are doing particularly well, what your experiences of friends are and how you manage to get by in school and achieve.

I would like to invite you to be an interviewee for my study, which means that you will be interviewed twice about your experiences in relation to other pupils in school, what your friendship group thinks of as being important to them and how you feel about their ideas. Each interview will last approximately 1 hour and will consist of several very broad questions relating to your experiences of friends and the culture of your social group in school. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions; this is not a test. You are encouraged to be as open and as honest as possible, as I want to learn as much about this topic as possible from you. You are the expert here.

The interviews will take place on the school site, at a time that is suitable for you and school, which will need to be arranged. The interviews will be audio recorded using a digital Dictaphone and the data will be stored securely and confidentially, with only myself having access to it. Your name or any other identifiable data will not be used in the final written report and your identity will be completely anonymous.

As you are under the age of 18, I will require consent from your parent/guardian for you to participate in this interview with me, as well as your own consent to being interviewed. Please could you sign the slip below and return this slip to the Deputy Headteacher at the school, along with the consent slip signed by your parent as soon as possible. If you agree now and begin to change your mind during the interview, you have the right to withdraw at any time.

I am arranging to meet with parents who need more information about my study to give them an opportunity to ask any questions and to meet with me in person. The date of the meeting will be arranged soon, so if your parents do not wish to consent yet, they may be able to decide at that meeting and sign a form there. You may also attend if you too would like some more information.

If you agree to be a participant, you will be contributing towards an innovative research area that I hope will begin to change some preconceptions that people may have about African Caribbean boys' academic achievement.

If you or your parents do not wish for you to participate, please could you let the Deputy Headteacher know as soon as possible and he will inform me.

If you have any questions or queries, please contact the Deputy Headteacher and he will be able to contact me so that I can get in touch. I really hope that you are interested in being a part of this and I hopefully look forward to meeting you soon.

Yours sincerely,



Tracy Robinson  
Trainee Educational Psychologist (DEdPsy)

---

**CONSENT SLIP (to be returned)**

"I, hereby, consent to participating in the Doctoral Thesis research study titled "Exploring the narratives of African Caribbean high-attaining boys: Perceived peer influences in education", by Trainee Educational Psychologist, Tracy Robinson. I understand that I will be interviewed about my experiences in school with regards to other pupils and that my answers will be recorded for later analysis by the researcher (Tracy Robinson) on a digital Dictaphone and that this data will be securely and confidentially stored, with access only granted to the researcher.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time and for any reason and that my answers will remain completely anonymous in the final Thesis report. I trust that my data will be treated with respect and that the researcher will comply with the ethical guidelines stipulated by the Institute of Education, British Psychological Society and Division of Education and Child Psychology governing bodies."

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please detach this slip and return to the Deputy Headteacher as soon as possible.**

**Thank you very much!**

### Appendix 3: Research Participant Questionnaire

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Research Participant Number : \_\_\_\_\_

#### Participant Questionnaire

1. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How long have you been attending this school? \_\_\_\_\_ years

3. Do you have free school meals?

Yes  No

4. How would you label your ethnic background?

\_\_\_\_\_

5. Do you have any siblings?

Yes  No  (If no, please move on to question 4)

If yes, how many? \_\_\_\_\_

Please tick which one relates to your birth order in the family:

First child  Middle child  Last child

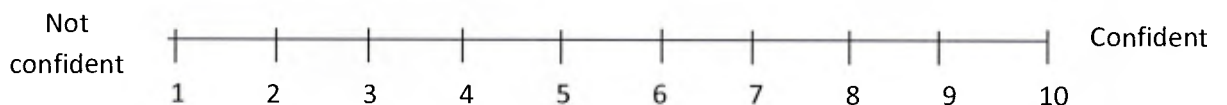
6. How would you describe yourself? Tick all that you think apply

Hardworking	<input type="checkbox"/>	Focused	<input type="checkbox"/>	Mature	<input type="checkbox"/>
Weak	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unpopular	<input type="checkbox"/>	Lazy	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sensitive	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strong	<input type="checkbox"/>	Immature	<input type="checkbox"/>
Popular	<input type="checkbox"/>	Hard	<input type="checkbox"/>	Distractible	<input type="checkbox"/>

7. What would you like to do as a future career?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. On the scale below, please indicate how confident you are that you will achieve your career goal. Circle the number that best represents your confidence.



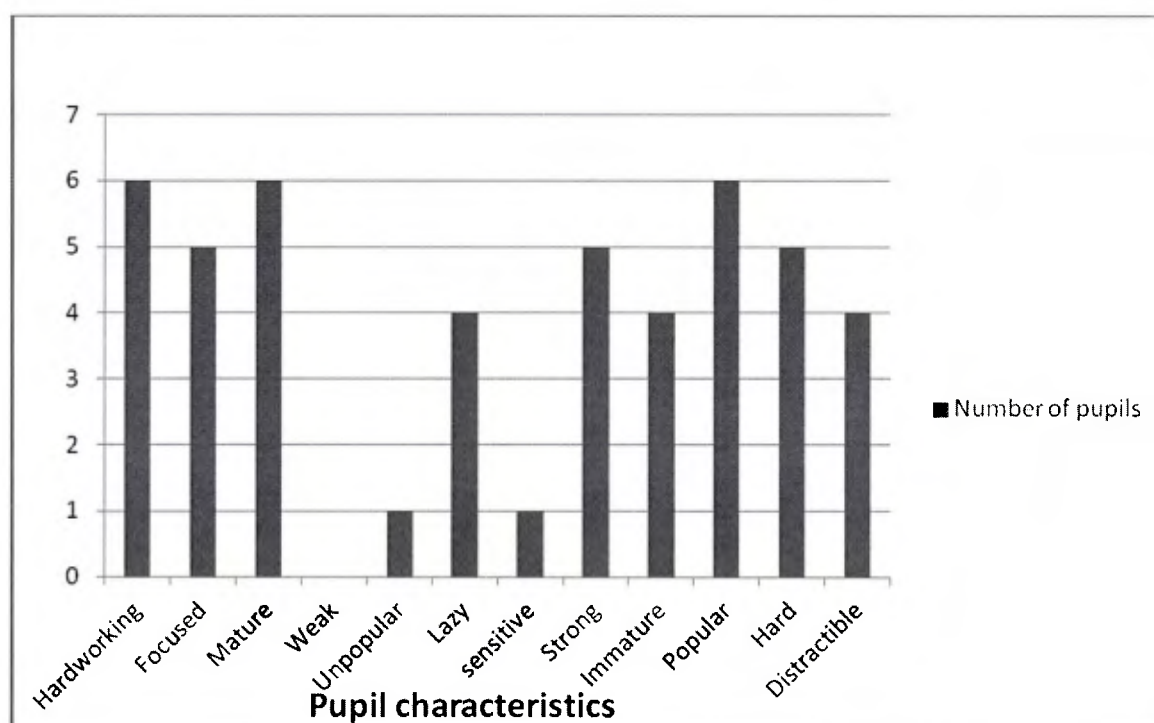
Thank you very much!

## Appendix 4: Research Participant Questionnaire Results

### Questionnaire Summary Results

6 out of 7 boys completed the initial questionnaire. The following is a summary of these results:

1. 50% of the boys are aged 14 and 50% of boys are aged 15
2. All the boys have been attending their current school for over 3 years.
3. Only one boy of the 6 has entitlement to free school meals.
4. 4 out of 6 boys described their ethnic background as Afro-Caribbean, 1 boy described it as Jamaican and the other, Jamaican, Irish and Montserratian.
5. All of the boys have siblings: 1 boy has 1 sibling, 2 boys have 2 siblings; 1 boy has 3 siblings and 2 boys have 5 siblings.  
Only one of the boys is a first-born child, 1 boy is a middle child and 4 boys are last in birth order.
6. Figure 1: Number of pupils who responded that certain characteristics apply to them



7. One pupil stated they wanted a career in sports. One pupil would like a career in sports or arts. One pupil wants a career in Science. One pupil wants a professional or medical career. Two pupils stated they wanted to work in the arts or be a professional.
8. 100% of pupils rated their confidence in achieving their career goals as 8 out of 10.

## **Appendix 5: Reflective Account of Initial Meeting with Research Participants**

### **Reflective diary – Initial meeting with the boys (04/05/12)**

I had a 50 minute initial meeting with 6 of the 7 the boys who will be involved in my research. The last boy was absent from school on the day. It was an informal meeting in which I thought it would be useful to talk about why I am interested in learning about African Caribbean boys' schooling experiences, on a personal note and also to highlight the professional call for research to represent their voices and subjective experiences. It was also an opportunity to discuss what was required of their involvement, confidentiality and anonymity issues as well as measures that would have to be taken in the event that a disclosure during the interview was considered a concern with regards to child protection.

As I spoke to the boys and gave them information about what current research suggests, I noticed their interest begin to grow and they wanted to know more. Their curiosity and interest in the subject had suddenly grew and they became more animated in their questioning and wanted to probe for my own views and experiences, which I was happy to share, whilst being cautious not to say too much that might influence them. In sharing brief stories about my own history, where I was born, my professional and research journeys I felt that I was building a relationship with the boys, planting the foundations on which mutual respect and identification could be built. I viewed this as an important starting point in helping the boys to feel relaxed and comfortable to talk to me and share their personal experiences during the interviews. After all, how could I expect them to share their personal experiences with me if I was not prepared to do the same? I wanted to position the power as balanced between the researcher and narrator.

The boys asked questions about the interview process and enquired what would happen to their data. I sensed some cynicism when one of them asked "So once you've finished your research, miss, then what? Who is going to know and hear about it?" I too had had similar thoughts in my conceptualisation of the research, and it resonated with my own concerns about whether others would see it as being worthwhile and an important read that should be made public knowledge. My answer took a practical approach, and I told the boys that the thesis would be published in my university library, and that if up to a good standard would be considered for wider publishing and may well be in the public eye, but that I would also be presenting the findings back to school and may make some recommendations on their basis. I sought to bring some reassurance to both the boys and myself about the importance of the study and what it could mean to communities, schools and EP practice when I said "We'll aim high". The boys fell silent and nodded in agreement.

My impressions of the boys were, in honesty, that they are a good well-mannered bunch, full of character and charm. They asked intelligent questions, showed an increasing investment in the study the more we talked, and often used humour to share thoughts that they felt might be 'silly'. A few of the boys looked around the room at their peers before tentatively asking questions, as if judging whether or not

to persist with a line of enquiry that might appear ridiculous to others, although with my encouragement they did speak and all appeared to grow in confidence when asking me questions. I believe my relaxed approach to the meeting, use of humour and openness when answering questions helped them to feel more confident in this environment and reduced any anxieties they might have felt on entering the room. This sparked my interest, as what I had done was create a social environment in which peer influences could be played out, although I was not intending to formally analyse the context and interactions within it.

I asked the boys in the group what they thought they might like to do in the future, for their career. In the group, all but one boy stated that they would like to do something sports-related, and the other said "Anything that makes me money". The interesting thing to note is that on the individual questionnaires I asked them to complete before leaving, there was much more of a variety in their answers to that question, and whilst only 3 boys suggested a sports-related career, two of them also considered doing something in a professional field, and the others certainly indicated that they would like to have professional jobs. So was peer influence alive and present in the room when I asked that question to the group? I think the boys' personal answers reflect that this was the case. Whilst the boys may have been socially influenced to give a particular answer, they were aware that their personal views differed and perhaps felt more comfortable to disclose them individually on paper, for whatever reason. Being aware of this situation confirmed to me that undertaking individual interviews could offer a more reliable and insightful picture into the meaning attached to peer group influences by the boys and tap into their own awareness or lack of when it happens. In approaching this research with a focus group methodology, I might be able to observe peer influences and make comments, but this study aims to say more about how *they* perceive it and what they means to and for them, and as such the research question is better answered by individual interviews.

After meeting the boys, my passion and interest in my research has reached new heights. I feel more invested in it than I ever have before, and am devoted to not only making their voices heard, but understood. Whilst I am excited about the possibilities, I also acknowledge my fears in representing them in ways they would agree, and not skewing the data unnecessarily with my own assumptions and beliefs. I am left to reflect on the weight of the duty I have to them as boys I wish others to know about and the ethical practice I am bound to adhere to within the narrative inquiry framework, and ask myself the question, how do I do this well and fairly?



## **Appendix 6: Interview Reflections**

### **Joseph Interview 1 Reflections**

My impressions of Joseph's narrative are that, firstly, he has a positive and well-established attitude towards education. He talks confidently about school being important both for future endeavours as well as personal reasons i.e. gaining 'power' and making him a "better role model". The idea of power is introduced very early on and I wonder what he thinks power will do for him. He sees education as power and this suggests he wants to get ahead of others, be in control and a person of significance with the ability to influence others rather than be influenced. It appears that Joseph sees education as serving several functions for him as well as enables him to support others.

Joseph talked about the influences on his own attitudes and views about education as coming from several sources – his immediate family, extended family members, black role models (famous people), friends and religion. He sees his grandfather as a good role model as he looked up to him because of his academic achievements. This appears to have reinforced his own ideas about what is possible in education and has spurred him to aim for the same. Joseph identified that his family were supportive of his education and that his religious beliefs or understandings has facilitated his sense of agency and autonomy in making his "own opinions and views". He also refers to the media and his interest in documentaries and public figures that have also shaped his ideas about education and achievement.

Joseph constructs his identity as both racialised and gendered. He draws on generational, African Caribbean narratives to reinforce the values and attitudes he has developed about education. I can visualise Joseph being sat down for talks by extended family members and imparting their stories to him, painting a rich picture of his own heritage and reinforcing the sense of identity he has developed. Joseph handles his family narratives with responsibility and maturity and the significance of this is noteworthy. In essence, Joseph's life story aims to continue and add to the richness of his family's historical experiences. He does not want to let his family down or fail to live up to expectations.

Interestingly, Joseph highlights his father's narrative of somewhat failure in education as a significant influence on him. He learns from his father's experience of schooling that if you don't pay attention in school, you won't achieve all that you are capable of. The tendency for Joseph to highlight male figures as influential does not go unnoticed. For him, male roles models are important and he identifies with them. He positions himself strongly as a masculine subject and conforms or subscribes to hegemony – speaking about the importance of sport to him.

In Joseph's construction of his friends he talks about having long-term friends from his early years, as well as those he has separated from and states that his group of friends have changed over time. Joseph expresses emotion in his narrative about essentially being judged as guilty by association with the wrong group of friends. I am forced to empathise with this experience as he constructs this narrative with such

conviction, clarity and emotion that I can't help but feeling somewhat sorry for him. The narrative makes me feel that Joseph has experienced injustice and I am left wondering whether this experience is racialised. Joseph conveys that he learns from this experience that he needs to separate from such company if he is to be accepted and respected by significant figures i.e. teachers. As such, adults in authority positions are influential. He cares about what they think of him.

Joseph reinforces his sense of agency by talking to me about choosing to be friends with "smart people". This strategy shows an awareness of how friends can impact on him and that he actively tried to surround himself with peers who strive for achievement. He talks about the human nature to follow others and in so doing creates an identity for himself that suggests he is impressionable and can be led by others. It is this self-awareness that provokes him to seek out and select positive, high-achieving peers as his friends.

Joseph naturally introduces ideas around peer group typologies i.e. 'geeks', 'nerds' and bad people and aligns 'geeks' with a negative perception. He again refers to power and status in his constructions of the peer group and also explicitly refers to coolness. He positions being cool and popular in opposition to being smart and aligns himself with being smart rather than cool or popular. Joseph shuns hegemony when he tells me that he is unable to relate with others who are too competitive; this does not seem to appeal to him. Instead, he talks about going at his "own pace" and thereby rejects forces that might sway him. Here, he makes a case for presenting himself as an independent and confident person who is autonomous.

Joseph constructs his own identity as a helpful person, supportive to others. He tries to convince me that he is a people-person and can get along with any sort of person. He cares about his education and he also cares about his friends. Joseph is quite considerate and careful about the language he uses to describe his peers and I wonder how significant his idea about the unfairness of being judged is to him, and whether this is, in part, influenced by religious teachings.

I think that Joseph and I built a good rapport throughout the interview. The interview appeared comfortable and free-flowing and I felt that I had gained Joseph's trust. He appeared open and willing to share his experiences with me and I felt that with every narrative there were several points he was trying to convey about himself. I did not doubt that he took his participation in my study seriously and saw it as worthwhile.

Joseph drew me into his constructions of his experiences and convinced me of his journey thus far. I was left feeling that Joseph not only understands where he is coming from in terms of his rich cultural background and family history but also that he knows where he is going and has a sense of direction. Joseph was a good narrator who readily had experiences he wanted to share with me. The rapport we built is reflected in his ability and want to tell me about some of the less positive experiences he had had.

I found myself relating to Joseph when he talked about his own personal desire to prove people wrong, and this ambition made him work harder and gave him impetus. I, too, experienced teachers having low expectation of me in certain subjects

because I was bored in lessons and did not apply myself as I was not being stimulated. However, knowing my predicted grades and having teachers doubt my ability gave me fuel to motivate me to succeed and prove them wrong. It appears that in some cases, when one has enough self-belief, internal locus of control and competency, negative or low expectations from others can actually work to motivate people to work harder and do better, although the conditions under which this manifests as a positive experience in the long-term are exclusive.

## Luke Interview 1 Reflections

Luke struck me as a tall boy with hegemonic masculine features. He had an athletic build, yet spoke quieter than I expected and appeared somewhat shy or perhaps nervous. It might have been a quiet confidence that I sensed but I was more convinced that Luke had a cynicism and apathy about the interview that made me feel less confident about the interview myself. These projections and the air of awkwardness in the room are likely to have impacted upon the interview process and the richness of the data gathered.

Luke's interview was harder to conduct than the first. I needed to prompt him much more with questions as his answers tended to be brief and were composed with less narrative style than Joseph's. I felt that Luke was perhaps more guarded about his experiences and did not convey much emotion. I wondered whether he wanted to be here with me or if he saw this interview as something he was told to do rather than being fully invested in it. This raised the issue about my sampling method; that in asking the school to identify the boys, although participants were given the opportunity not to take part, meant that perhaps he was swayed into becoming involved by authority figures, including his parents.

Luke identified that the older he gets the lazier he is becoming and needs motivation to come to school. This suggests a waning interest in education, although, he could identify that getting good grades could lead to money when older. It was interesting that Luke did not refer to career prospects or self-fulfilment in other terms, but money. This reflects the consumerist interest that he has, rather than career ambition and therefore places the emphasis on outcome rather than process. Luke's world view is further reinforced when he says that he focuses on what he is doing now. He is the type of character that lives in the present rather than considers the future – could this have partially explained why his narratives of past experiences were then so sparse?

Luke identified that there are several sources of influence on his views about education and it was interesting to note that he firstly lists teachers, then his parents and cousins. I am curious about this, as it appears that teachers are very significant to him and I am left wondering if there are particular teachers whom have been influential, how and to what extent? I would like to explore this more in the second interview and prompt him for specific examples and narratives around this.

Luke's construction of himself included strong hegemonic themes: athleticism, being 'hot-headed', physical appearance and socialising. He affirms his masculinity by talking to me about football and his athleticism and states that his interest in these things helped him – to integrate, be included and accepted into the new school? Gained him friends and status? Gained him confidence and respect? I would like to explore this further with him in the second interview.

Luke constructs himself as being a sociable boy both within school and outside the institution. He says he affiliates with a "big" group of friends of both genders and mixed ethnicities. This intends to persuade me that he is, in fact, one of the popular boys and in with the crowd. Although by inclusion in this study he is a high-attaining

boy, he manages to retain popularity, peer favour and status and has an active social life outside of school, which appears important to him.

I am intrigued by Luke's statement that having friends makes him "more comfortable in school" and wonder whether he has experienced having few (or no) friends and feeling uncomfortable. Luke's narrative begins when he started this school after transferring from another out of borough school and I ask myself, why does he start here? What are his experiences of school and friends prior to this transition? When he started this school he says he was quiet and now he constructs himself as popular and well-liked. He talks to his friends about "how to act around the teacher" and therefore positions himself as a vicarious learner who hopes to gain strategies that help him navigate his way smoothly through the school system and curry favour or at least tow the line with teachers.

Luke makes statements about his character that are interesting to me. He calls himself "hot-headed" and says that friends are people to talk to when he is angry. Yet, the contradiction arises when he says that he is "calm" and doesn't want to cause trouble. For me, this represents instability and perhaps his grappling with regulating his own emotions. The fact that he draws on friends to talk to when angry perhaps suggests he has difficulties calming himself and social support helps him manage his emotions. Friends, for Luke, also offer practical support in terms of helping him with revision and understanding school work as well as provide recreation and interest for him at break times.

Luke's narratives present the complexity of his social experience of school as he introduces the idea of positioning himself one way with a certain group of friends and then another with an alternative group. He talks about being focused in class and hard-working, yet says that he can be his "true self" with his friends outside of the class. He appears to have this dual identity that helps him to navigate between achievement and popularity. Luke tells me that he shares his reports with his friends and presents this as regular practice but I am left wondering what function this serves for him. In addition, what are his reasons for not sharing his reports with two male friends who are underachieving?

Luke is very aware of his social positioning and own power within his group of friends. He indicates that his hegemonic masculinity, i.e. his physical build, is a resource to him that he is able to use in order to get out of socially pressurising situations. Luke tells me that he has friends who are in gangs but that he does not feel pressured to go with them and is confident enough to say he will not go. However, he indicates that his word is not enough and that he uses his physical appearance to assert himself when he stands up tall and makes himself bigger. Size therefore equates to power and confidence.

### Nigel Interview 1 Reflections

Nigel's narrative is the first so far to have conveyed an experience of secondary school transfer being scary and unsafe. I was intrigued to note that he began his narrative at this point and realised very quickly that this transition was very significant for him as he describes year 7 as his hardest year.

Nigel told me that initially he missed primary school and when he moved here he began to learn about crime and cultural norms such as 'rushing' which depicted him as scared and worried about his safety. I wondered whether Nigel felt psychologically ready for the transition to secondary as I developed a growing sense of his vulnerability at the time and could almost picture him as a deer caught in the headlights when he started secondary. The way Nigel expresses his emotions around the transition and his use of language suggests almost a poetic loss of innocence, which reminded me of John Betjeman's works in 'Songs of innocence'. I could visualise a timid boy, probably small in stature, who was initially lost and overwhelmed by the difference in setting, people and behaviour he encountered in this school. The imagery leaves me with the questions, is the transition from year 6 to year 7 key in terms of setting up helpful friendships? Do psychological needs change in regards to the purposes friends serve for the boys over time?

Nigel identifies peers as a source of emotional support early on in his narrative. He also views them as protective in some ways as he says it "helps with people to look out for you" and so friends can buffer the fear associated with transition and change and make things easier.

Nigel talks about his experience of getting detentions in the past but said that his mother helped him to refocus. It appears that, for Nigel, the need to live up to his parents' expectations was greater than the need to follow friends. For Nigel, the parent relationship is a significant one and he implies that it is more influential than peer relationships.

Nigel echoes Shaun's narrative by talking about 'recognition' early on. I wonder how recognition manifests among boys' peer groups and would like to explore this with the boys in the second interviews. Furthermore, what function does recognition play in these boys' lives? Does it meet psychological needs of feeling noticed and therefore loved or feeling significant in some way, and serving a purpose?

Nigel identifies avoidance as a strategy he uses to stay out of trouble, veering away from "bad stuff". He tells me that smart friends have an influence on him, but I wonder whether ones that he avoids are also influential in some way. It appears that negative models help to deter Nigel from making the wrong decisions and not working hard in school.

Nigel shares with me some of his family narratives and this is significant as he constructs his identity firmly in his family culture and this is explicitly racialised. He tells me about his grandparents' fight against racism and this historical narrative tells me something about his background – he comes from fighters, they are strong and can resist external pressures, regardless of how fierce and damaging. For Nigel, perhaps hearing stories of his family's fight against racist experiences gives him

strength and motivation to also push through any experiences regarding prejudice, labelling or teasing. I am left wondering whether he has experienced such things. Nigel's world view is constructed in the sharing of his family narratives as work ethic is espoused as important. His parents' success also reinforces his motivation to do well.

Nigel briefly mentions football as well as his involvement in clubs. However, this is less emphasised as significant to his construction of his identity to me. The recurring theme of involvement in extra-curricular activities or non-academic interests in school in all the participants' narratives, I feel, is significant. I wonder what their involvement in these activities do psychologically and practically for them? do they create more friends and therefore reinforce a sense of belonging but also give them a sense of responsibility?

Nigel lists sports as important but family as number 1. He is a boy who looks to the future as he says he "aspires high" and he appears confident that he can and will achieve. Nigel's optimism here is clear to see, but it is not a naive optimism, he is confident because he knows that working hard will lead to this inevitable outcome.

Nigel's constructions of the functions friends serve for him are interesting. He uses language I would not typically equate with hegemonic male speech. His adjectives are emotive and somewhat soft or feminine. This description leaves me questioning his sense of masculine identity. He says that having friends can give you power and back-up which suggests that he is a boy who feels he needs physical as well as emotional support from his friends. He is a boy who needs strengthening – does that make him weak by default? Is this weakness of character or in reference to brute strength as implicated in hegemonic masculinity?

Nigel's narratives leave me with the sense that popularity, for him, is not as important as his education and that he chooses friends who are also hardworking and "have the same mentality". I find it interesting that his family knows his friends' families and I wonder whether this link and connection with other parents is a way of vetting, monitoring or policing the company that sons keep. Nigel's parents are actively involved in his social life and are aware of who his friends are. Their influence on who Nigel chooses to be friends with might be significant.

It is interesting to note that Nigel ends the interview with some recommendations to take forward to the school. He draws on his own experiences to suggest that pupils need more rewards to keep them motivated and interested in school. He said that if they are "not picked for certain things" then they can switch off. Through this, I sensed some frustration with the system as it is and assumed that Nigel himself had experienced not being 'picked' for things. This raises the 'unfairness' theme again. Although, Nigel does not only see rewards as being things like trips, but for him, being given responsibility i.e. becoming student counsellor, would also be rewarding. Nigel reinforces his own self-concept as a responsible boy who would like others to look up to him, and also to be given a position that earns him power. This suggests that Nigel does not currently have the status he wants and sees teacher recognition as the tool to achieve it, rather than peer accolade or popularity. Adults are key figures for Nigel and he both respects them and tries to please them.

## Junior Interview 2 Reflections

Junior's narratives were consistent with those given in his first interview. I find him very interesting and he strikes me as being different to the other boys in the study. Junior started his narrative, positioning himself as the youngest in the year and I wondered how this information conveyed to me a sense of perhaps his vulnerability on secondary school transfer and might also have reflected some personal sense of his own immaturity and perhaps readiness for the change.

Similar to the other boys, Junior talked about having friends from primary school that moved up to secondary with him. This recurring theme appears important to the boys, that they already have existing friends to align themselves with once they start school, making them feel more comfortable in the new setting. I wonder about the implications for developmental theory in Junior's narrative; he positions his narrative starting point "When I was young" and makes references to growing up and maturing. Are boys' experiences mediated by their maturity, developmental stage and is it that there comes a point where boys become more aware of social influences and the risks and develop their own sense of autonomy and personal agency? For Junior, he feels that being popular made it easy for him to change and for those changes to be accepted by his peers. This suggests that he was in a position of power and that once that status had been earned, it provided a platform for him and made things easier. Is it the case that once acquired, popularity becomes a tool for these boys? Junior said that others would listen to him. I wonder if his 'change' or turnaround in behaviour had any noticeable impact on the other boys in the group. Did *he* become the influential person that others wanted to follow, for his positive shift?

Junior spoke about his experience of choosing friends who "have potential for life". This idea about being selective about whom to associate with is important and echoed throughout all the narratives thus far.

Junior's told experience conveys a plot that suggests a fall in with the wrong crowd and gradual decent into trouble in school and retribution, but then a significant turning point and shift in mindset, which then led to positive change and redemption. Junior comes from a point of reference where he has experienced both being popular, largely for his involvement in trouble, and being part of a popular group in which his behaviour earned him high status. He earned himself a reputation for being the most excluded boy and this earned him social kudos. I want to know more about the specifics of the turning point for Junior, as he talks about his mother's significance here and not wanting to disappoint her. For Junior, the respect for his mother outweighs his desires to receive accolade from his peers for his behaviour. I wonder also about the relationships he has with teachers, and what his experience was of trying to change their perceptions of him.

I am interested in Junior's experiences regarding witnessing bullying as no other pupil has risen this so overtly. He talks about teasing and name-calling and I wonder if that at all relates to pupils' academic performance.



Junior draws on his parents' life experience to help him aim for better in school. In this way, he learns vicariously that not fulfilling your potential in school can make things difficult for you in the future. He also talks about his Nan and the significance of her. The involvement and value of extended family members, particularly, grandparents, is a recurring theme in the boys' narratives and I wonder to what extent *their* narratives have impacted on the boys' world views. It was interesting to hear that Junior's apparent morals and respect notions come from his family culture, and this is related to his racial identity and its formation. Junior also implies that teachers can be effective in supporting boys' schooling behaviours and this is echoed in some of the other boys' narratives.

Junior's reflections about having to "juggle" his personas between different groups were very intriguing. Junior could not appear to be studying and preferred others to think that he was in detention, but why? I am still left with an unclear sense of why some boys respond this way, and I think I need to tap in more to the emotional impact of friends in order to better understand this phenomena. However, it appears that there is some difficulty for the boys in explaining what exactly catalyses this way of thinking and responding.

Junior, like some of the other participants, talks about wanting to be the cleverest and so this leads to the impression that some of these boys have developed a sense of competition. This marries well with the literature on masculinity and reinforces the idea of hegemony. Perhaps by starting off with earning popularity, favour and respect by being troublesome reinforces views of the boys' masculine identities which then, once the shift towards pro-school behaviours occur, means that this aspect of their identity is not called into question. None of the boys have mentioned any sort of threat or experience of homophobic labelling, and perhaps their trajectory has allowed them to bypass this. This needs to be considered in more depth and explored further.

In summary, Junior's narrative was very interesting and rather unique. Aesthetically, Junior did not strike me as a typical studious, high-achieving boy. His language was straightforward and he used slang like some of the other boys, but he carried himself with a sort of 'cool pose' that has been identified with the literature. Whilst Junior does not subscribe to prescribed typologies such as 'geek' or 'nerd' his academic ideals are aligned with a positive outlook on school and work ethic. Junior does his version of boy by projecting his masculinity in typical ways, whilst internally holding onto traditionally anti-masculine beliefs about school. I wonder about his need for actively positioning himself in this way and whether he would be able to express this to me.

### Chris Interview 1 Reflections

Chris' narrative has no clearly defined starting point. He begins quite generally with a summarising statement of his experience of schooling thus far, stating that it's been "quite normal". This, is an interesting evaluation, considering what is 'normal'? How does he define this? It appears that this description goes some way to represent his view that his experiences have not been out of the ordinary and in many respects are similar to others'.

Chris tells me that he has been in trouble before but that he has not found it hard in school. I am left to wonder what he is referring to when he says 'it'; is he speaking about his coping and adjustment to schoolwork demands, social life or other things?

Chris does little in the beginning to define who he is to me, in terms of character and uses quite general language which again could indicate that he positions himself alongside his peers, rather than the central figure in his narrative. He uses the term 'you' to position his views and experiences as generic, e.g. "as you mature, you find it easier to do work". Chris' narrative supports developmental theory as he makes sense of his ease in school through developing in maturity, becoming "taller, smarter and stronger". Chris indicates that he went through a period of transition from being 'reckless' to not so much in Year 7 and 8.

Chris subscribes to hegemonic ideals as he identifies the most significant change for him has been becoming better at sports whilst also acknowledging that he has become better at other subjects. For Chris, however, sports are important and his betterment in this area means something to him. Being sporty might be quite central to Chris' construction of his identity. He also speaks about his involvement in martial arts outside of school. His interest in such a sport reflects his masculinity, but also serves to indicate that he can be self-disciplined and tutored. I am intrigued about Chris' interest in martial arts – when, why and how did he get into this sport? What were his motivations?

It was positive to hear that Chris has not experienced bullying or been a bully. I wonder why this was raised when it was, and what the significance is. Has Chris witnessed bullying?

Chris says he has five good friends who are all in the same classes and are like him, even speaking the same. He says that most of his friends are Turkish and I am curious by this. He says that they are all welcoming and not bad to anyone. I wonder about his description of them as being 'welcoming' – is this a reflection of how he felt when forming friends with them, that there were welcoming to him? I am left with many questions from this narrative. I wonder what his friendships were like prior to moving to the school, whether or not they have changed during the course of his attendance and stayed the same.

Chris has high respect for his friends and says he looks up to them. He reinforces his masculine identity by talking competitively about wanting to be the best, outdo his friends and also exceed teachers' expectations of him. The theme of competition has been prevalent throughout the boys' narratives and appears to help to motivate and spur them on to achieve and aim for better.

There is some shared experience of wanting to prove teachers wrong or exceed their expectations. This calls into question what expectations teachers hold of these boys, and why they might be interpreted as less negative than the boys would like. However, something about these boys and how they interpret teachers' views of them actually helps them to push for better. I wonder what allows this resilience and buffers them from self-fulfilling prophecy effects. Could it be their esteem, confidence, competence and positive self-concepts? Or perhaps something more external such as the support of guiding, important role models such as parents and extended family members?

It was interesting to note Chris' mention of technology and the significance of this in helping him to communicate with his friends and support his education in terms of group revision via Skype. I interpret this to represent Chris' resourcefulness and motivations, not only to be academically focused but to *include* his friends in this. Chris likes to engage in shared experiences e.g. sporting groups, group revision etc. I interpret Chris' narrative as representing a character who not only enjoys social company but perhaps in some way might need this support. I wonder about Chris' sense of agency and autonomy and whether without his group of friends he would be able to access the curriculum so readily and study to the same effect on his own.

The theme of involvement in extra-curricular activities is recurring throughout participants' narratives. Is this coincidence or does this represent a strategic decision that not only serves the function of keeping the boys occupied in safe and socially-acceptable ways but also links them in with other peers and enhances their sense of belonging and relatedness to others? Does their group membership indicate their social competency or conversely, their social needs? Perhaps, a bit of both!

Whilst Chris was able to engage with all the questions proposed to him, he did not produce the quality of narratives that other boys were able to, until we began to talk about technology's impact upon his friendships. Until this point, I have to say, I found the interview stilted and quite boring. It was particularly awkward when he laughed unexpectedly and I could not understand why, nor did he attempt to explain why. When he left the room, I felt a little frustrated that I didn't appear to connect with him as I did the others, and wondered what his data would be able to offer the research, given its limited narrative content. Could I have given away signs of disinterest through my facial expressions and was this a transference of boredom? As he did not seem very interested in answering my questions fully.

Chris rarely positioned himself as the central subject in his narratives and I wondered whether this reflected lack of confidence or uncertainty about his identity. There are a few things that should be explored in the next interview but it would also be helpful to capture Chris' more personalised voice. Is he naturally guarded? Was he shy in the interview or perhaps just less expressive than the other boys? It would be helpful to try to explore his feelings around certain experiences which might be better ascertained by prompting a more chronological account which may then be probed for affect.

## Michael Interview 2 Reflections

Michael began his school life narrative stating that things are calm for him at the moment, suggesting that things have not always been 'calm' for him in school. He describes that he was working above his peers in terms of his academic performance in primary school and that he started well in year 7 but that he began to drift away from school work after meeting a group of peers that he aspired to be like. He states that he wanted what they had and that they acquired things without working for them. I am left wondering what things he is referring to; material goods or social status, perhaps.

Michael, like some of the other participants makes a link between the friends he hung around with and his declining academic performance. His narrative reflects that his interest in academia waned and he became more interested in going out and socialising with his peers. I am left wondering why this change occurred in year 7 and whether boys are more susceptible to negative peer influences at this time. However, Michael shares his view that his family members and acquiring new friends who were more academically focused helped him to get in the right 'mindset'. His mother, in particular, appears to be a source of information and advice regarding staying on the right path. That Michael's mother reminds him of his other family members' achievements and how they managed to attain well helps Michael to focus more on his educational goals and be less concerned about his friendships and socialising at the risk of his education. Michael describes the transition to becoming more focused on school work than friends as 'hard' and presents some of the challenges in resisting peer pressures.

Michael described his views on school as being influenced by his perception of it as being a safe place and says that he does not get bullied (or he doesn't think so) or see people being bullied. There is a discrepancy in the language he uses here and he appears uncertain about whether he is a victim of bullying or not. This may reflect the subjectivity of what individuals perceive as bullying and how he made sense of this term within the interview context. Michael's choice of words might also reflect a reluctance to disclose issues around bullying with me as an unfamiliar adult to him. I considered that this topic might be emotionally evocative and therefore needed to be handled sensitively and gently probed.

Michael's thoughts around bullying in school was unprompted and made me reflect on the strength of this interview approach in allowing participants to raise issues of significance to them, without being constrained by my agenda. Whilst Michael had not mentioned bullying in the previous interview when I asked about peer pressure, I realised that the language I had used to construct the question may not have lent itself well to such a narrative being constructed. However, Michael had chosen to talk about this now. It is also noteworthy because perhaps having being interviewed a second time gave him an opportunity to think and reflect on his past experiences which might have triggered these earlier memories that he may have sought to forget.

During the interview, I felt the need to probe further about why feeling safe was significant for Michael and his views on education. This opened up a narrative about his primary school experiences of being high-achieving and then rejected by his peers. He constructed his understanding of why this happened with his mother's narrative and explanation that his peers were jealous of him. I think that this helps to validate Michael as not necessarily a boy who is not liked but is treated differently because his peers are not as successful as him. This, I imagine, allows Michael to cope with the treatment he receives from his peers at the time, although I sympathise with him when he describes this as a difficult time when he felt lonely. I wonder what this experience has taught Michael and how it has shaped him and his views of his friends, whether he acknowledges that friendships can be unstable and unreliable. Perhaps interpreting friends as such could mean that Michael is more trusting of adult and family relationships, as he draws on family members as sources of support.

Michael, like some of the other boys, constructs himself as a boy who can be fuelled by competing against others for high grades and seeks to excel his peers' and family members' achievements. This suggests that he subscribes to some aspects of hegemonic masculinity, although he appears to fail at others, for example, in not being popular. Michael appears to understand his limitations as well as his strengths, and plays to them.

Michael's mother is a central character in a few of his narratives and he clearly leans on her for support and assurance. Her involvement in setting up an environment where Michael's friends can come to his house and be catered for suggests that she has some degree of interest and involvement in how he socialises with his peers. She is significant in shaping his attitudes towards education as well as to his friends and she reinforces Michael's resilience. I find it interesting to hear that Michael's parents know his friends' parents and wonder whether this is a means to help supervise friendships and be aware of the kind of influences their children may be exposed to. I remember my mother also being friends with my friends' parents and this allowed me a degree of flexibility and trust from my mother, to go to friends' houses and socialise with them. Only now I wonder whether this was a helpful tactic in order to discreetly police my friendships and maintain some link with my social life. Yet, this was done in an unobtrusive way which allowed me my autonomy and independence. I think that this strategy could be being used by some of the participants' parents as well.

Michael appeared relaxed throughout the interview even when discussing his bullying experience. His narratives highlighted the challenges as well as benefits associated with being a high-attaining African Caribbean boy in an outer London mixed comprehensive school.

## Appendix 7: Worked Example of Levels 1 and 2 Analyses:

### Shaun's School Life Narrative

#### Part 1: Starting out being different

##### Stanza 1: Co-construction of narrative frame

##### Strophe 1 - TR frames the first question around chronology of personal school experiences

1. TR: Ok, so first question
2. We all remember events in our lives/ in different ways
3. And sometimes when we share them/ and talk about our experiences
4. We piece information together/ a bit like a STORY
5. We say/ oh this happened/ then that/ and so on
6. So THINKING ABOUT THAT/ can you tell me
7. What SCHOOL LIFE has been like/ FOR YOU/ UNTIL NOW?

**Comment [T1]:** I'm interested in life events

**Comment [T2]:** What I want is story-like information

**Comment [T3]:** Implies chronology

**Comment [T4]:** Cue that I want a chronology of his school life from his point of view

##### Stanza 2: Shaun seeks clarification of narrative starting point

8. Shaun: From PRIMARY SCHOOL or secondary school?
9. TR: Wherever you'd like to start

**Comment [T5]:** Seeking shared understanding

##### Strophe 2 – Friends' football obsession

##### Stanza 3: Shaun positions himself starting out with a lot of friends

10. Shaun: Well PRIMARY SCHOOL/ I was-/ I feel VERY up and down,  
like

**Comment [T6]:** Why start at Primary?

**Comment [T7]:** Mixed experience

11. It was like sometimes REALLY GOOD/ and sometimes REALLY BAD

**Comment [T8]:** Balanced extremes;  
poetic tone

12. TR: Mmm

13. Shaun: Because, um/ I started off/ in RECEPTION

**Comment [T9]:** Beginning of life story  
of the institution

14. I had a lot of FRIENDS/ and um/ I had the closer ones/

**Comment [T10]:** Right from reception  
he was a popular boy; makes a play for  
masculinity here

15. And just NORMAL friends

**Comment [T11]:** Distinction made  
between close friends and 'normal' friends

Stanza 4: Shaun marks his difference: Lack of knowledge and engagement  
with football

16. And then-/ and then everyone started/ to get obsessed with football

**Comment [T12]:** Double start implies  
emotion

17. TR: Mmm

**Comment [T13]:** Extreme case  
formulation; absolute

**Comment [T14]:** Extremely fanatical

18. Shaun: And at that point/ I didn't play football/ AT ALL

**Comment [T15]:** Marks his difference;  
awareness of difference

19. I didn't know anything ABOUT football

**Comment [T16]:** Absence; wistful

Strophe 3 – Shaun experiences exclusion due to football incompetence

Stanza 5: Shaun is denied access to football by peers: bad player

20. And BECAUSE OF THAT/ they never allowed me to PLAY with THEM

**Comment [T17]:** Causal inference

**Comment [T18]:** Who? Most likely  
other boys

21. Because I was so BAD

**Comment [T19]:** Extreme case  
formulation; denied access and socially  
excluded; failure of hegemonic masculinity

22. TR: Okay

**Comment [T20]:** Negative self-  
evaluation

23. Shaun: And this was like through year one and two

**Comment [T21]:** Implies a long time.  
He uses a filler to step outside the  
narrative

24. I was SO BAD AT IT/ so like, I didn't really-

**Comment [T22]:** Repetition implies emotional significance

#### Stanza 6: Shaun loses friends

25. So I DID LOSE a lot of friends because of that

**Comment [T23]:** Loss = painful

**Comment [T24]:** Causal inference. Bad at football = loss of friends

26. TR: Mmm

27. Shaun: But-/ and then-/ so that was kind of how things were

**Comment [T25]:** Summarises this section of life story for me

28. Through year one and two

#### Stanza 7: Shaun makes new friends

29. And then I met couple more friends

**Comment [T26]:** How did he meet them?

30. And then-/ but when I hit year-

**Comment [T27]:** Brutal description could imply sudden harsh shift

31. Like, when I became, like, year THREE

**Comment [T28]:** Transition through primary years

#### Part 2: Working hard to fit in

#### Strophe 4 – Shaun actively joins in

#### Stanza 8: Shaun begins to develop football interest

32. When I hit/ er, in the JUNIOR school

**Comment [T29]:** Repetition implies emotional significance

33. Um, I started/ um, dedicating myself more to football

**Comment [T30]:** Emotion

**Comment [T31]:** Emotion

34. I started supporting the TEAM, LIVERPOOL

**Comment [T32]:** Suggests time and conscious effort; self; religious connotations; agency & resolution

**Comment [T33]:** The most popular team in the school?

#### Stanza 9: Shaun positions his friend as model for comparison

35. And, 'cos one of my close friends/ was, like, good at football as well

**Comment [T34]:** Significant peer



36. TR: Uhum

37. Shaun: I had to be AS GOOD at football

**Comment [T35]:** Fighting for at least equivalence and comparison with his friends; determination to become high status; could reflect a world view

Stanza 10: Practicing and playing football continually

38. So, I started playing football

**Comment [T36]:** It logically follows then...

39. I started PRACTICING in my living room

**Comment [T37]:** Putting in the effort in private; links with achievement literature; in social setting performance looks natural so others are not aware of work

40. Started playing at break times/ lunchtimes

**Comment [T38]:** Increasing confidence to now play in front of others

41. I just played MORE and MORE

**Comment [T39]:** Emphasis; hard work

Strophe 5 – Shaun's hard work pays off

Stanza 11: Shaun improves and is included

42. And eventually/ they started LETTING me play

**Comment [T40]:** Qualified inclusion

43. 'Cos I improved and PROGRESSED

**Comment [T41]:** Sees that practice leads to results; does this early experience set him up for the future, shaping his approach?

44. TR: Uhum

Stanza 12: Shaun joins his first team

45. Shaun: So then/ when I became- / when I was in year 4

**Comment [T42]:** Clear reference to time

46. I started my FIRST football team

**Comment [T43]:** He has since joined others

47. Which was <sup>1</sup>Latchmore / which I think was in- / was six years AGO

**Comment [T44]:** Apparent precision in time

Stanza 13: Shaun gains respect

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym used to protect identification of pupil

48. I think in 2007 I joined them/ AND from then ON

49. I became A LOT better at football

**Comment [T45]:** Progression since starting first team

50. I became one of the BEST/ and I was RESPECTED a lot MORE and-

**Comment [T46]:** Use of superlative, although still compares himself to others; competition; time and ability travel

51. TR: Uhum

**Comment [T47]:** Respect important and increasing

#### Stanza 14: Shaun is motivated to be better through peer comparison

52. Shaun: But there was STILL-/ even though I WAS very good

**Comment [T48]:** Emphasis to convince me of his skill

53. There was-/ there's always people better than you

**Comment [T49]:** Shift from past tense to infinitive suggests experience may have developed world view

54. TR: Mmm

55. Shaun: And- / and I DID RESPECT THAT

**Comment [T50]:** Double-start emotive

**Comment [T51]:** Accepts positioning

56. But it just made me want to improve/ even more

**Comment [T52]:** Spurs him on; gives impetus; aspiring; improvement repeated therefore important to him

57. TR: Mmm

#### Part 3: Shaun begins to construct his football career and positions himself in the minority

##### Strophe 6 – Shaun experiences inequality

#### Stanza 15: Being played but never chosen for the first team

58. Shaun: And, like, there was like-

**Comment [T53]:** Inclusion as part of team; group membership

59. For the SCHOOL TEAM/ I DID PLAY for the SCHOOL TEAM

**Comment [T54]:** Reference to chronology

**Comment [T55]:** Involvement with school team at first opportunity; motivation

60. In year six/ because that's when the school team starts

**Comment [T56]:** Emotive pause?

61. Um, but I WAS NEVER chosen for the FIRST TEAM

**Comment [T57]:** Extreme case formulation; failure to be chosen

**Comment [T58]:** Not prioritised

Stanza 16: Shaun appeals to expert witness to qualify his perception of unfairness

62. And that's-/ my mum wasn't too happy with that

**Comment [T59]:** Appeal to expert witness; uses identity as a parent's child as a resource; validation

63. Um, because there were players that weren't as GOOD

**Comment [T60]:** Depersonalisation

**Comment [T61]:** Comparison with others

64. But were favoured as...

**Comment [T62]:** Unfairness

Stanza 17: Shaun reflects back to earlier experience of being in racial minority in Primary school

65. In MY primary school/ I was one of the six black boys

**Comment [T63]:** Unfairness is racialised and gendered

66. Out of the hundred and twenty children in the year

**Comment [T64]:** Large school; well-worn narrative; explanation comes easily

67. TR: Mmm

68. Shaun: Um, I think there was only ME and another THREE black boys

**Comment [T65]:** Emotive filler

**Comment [T66]:** Depersonalisation of other boys

69. That were in the SCHOOL TEAM/ out of the six

**Comment [T67]:** Black boys made up a third of the team

Stanza 18: Shaun provides evidence he is not exclusionary in the same way as peers

70. I think the other one, like, I'm still friends with now

**Comment [T68]:** He can make and keep relationships

71. He doesn't play FOOTBALL (.)

**Comment [T69]:** He is not exclusionary

Stanza 19: Shaun's experiences of football inside and outside of school are different

72. So football, the football CAREER was-

**Comment [T70]:** Summarisation; career implying hard work and a journey of progression

73. It wasn't TOO GOOD for the SCHOOL

74. But it was VERY GOOD for my ACTUAL TEAM/ that I played for

**Comment [T71]:** Ask about this in the next interview

Stanza 20: More respect is gained and things improve

75. Because I was RESPECTED a LOT MORE

**Comment [T72]:** Earning respect; respect important to him

76. TR: Uhum

77. Shaun: So, yeah things DID get BETTER

**Comment [T73]:** Summarising statement; things improved

Part 4: Shaun constructs his narrative around football team membership

Strophe 7 – Shaun's determination to practice and improve

Stanza 21: Shaun aligns himself with peers, becoming football obsessed

78. Because football was BASICALLY MY LIFE/ until year three/ four/ five

**Comment [T74]:** Consumed by football; importance and significance

79. And, um (/) / so- so when I hit year 7/ I DID, er, what's the word

**Comment [T75]:** Serious interest over a long period of time

80. I DID try-/ I TRIALLED for the SCHOOL TEAM

**Comment [T76]:** Double start – implies emotion?

81. TR: Uhum

**Comment [T77]:** Again, brutal shift; a significant time

82. Shaun: AND I was STILL OBSESSED with football at this point

**Comment [T78]:** Emphasis of effort

**Comment [T79]:** Had to compete; prove worth/ skill

**Comment [T80]:** Wanted to be included

**Comment [T81]:** Strong adjective now aligns himself with earlier peers

Stanza 22: Shaun succeeds in making the school team and playing

**Comment [T82]:** Suggests no longer 'obsessed'

83. So like, I DID get into the SCHOOL TEAM

**Comment [T83]:** Achieved goal; perseverance

84. And I DID play/ WEEK AFTER WEEK

**Comment [T84]:** Continuity and consistency

Stanza 23: Shaun reflects on and accepts others' perception of his skills as a regular player

85. I was just noticed/ as one of the REGULAR PLAYERS/

**Comment [T85]:** Dissatisfied with others' positioning of him? awareness of how others viewed him

which was ALRIGHT (.)

**Comment [T86]:** Acceptance of positioning

### Strophe 8 – Shaun's football skills and status lead to stubbornness

#### Stanza 24: Shaun reflects on his improvement but also shortcomings

86. And I DID get BETTER/ but the season, um

**Comment [T87]:** Improved so as not to be seen as 'regular'

87. I did IMPROVE/ but, um, I had to learn a lot more

**Comment [T88]:** Improvement echoed throughout narrative

**Comment [T89]:** Agency; motivation; awareness of short-comings

#### Stanza 25: Shaun reflects back on his stubborn attitude

88. Like, I was very NARROW-MINDED/ and, like,

**Comment [T90]:** Suggests how more open-minded; narrow-minded about what?

89. I was-/ I was always in two different minds

**Comment [T91]:** Extreme case formulation; mixed emotions – ambivalence and uncertainty?

90. Because sometimes/ I became stubborn

**Comment [T92]:** Negative evaluation of self; suggests he was not stubborn before

#### Stanza 26: Shaun acknowledges criticism didn't matter as he was so good

91. And I just didn't LISTEN to what people SAID/ and just take it to

**Comment [T93]:** Actively ignored what others said

HEART

**Comment [T94]:** Juxtaposition of not listening but yet taking things others said personally; quite an emotional impact on him; not listening might be defensive - to preserve sense of self and identity?

92. Even though-/ 'cos I-/ at THAT POINT-

93. Cos' I had become VERY VERY GOOD/ at THAT POINT

**Comment [T95]:** Persuasive to convince me of his skill at that time

94. So-/ to the point where CRITICISM didn't MATTER TO ME

**Comment [T96]:** Clarification of positioning

95. TR: Uhum

**Comment [T97]:** Outcomes for self more important than criticism from others

### Strophe 9 – Shaun demonstrates his development through his reflection of an incident with his team manager

Stanza 27: Shaun re-contextualises his narrative frame

96. Shaun: This was just the sort of period of time where-

**Comment [T98]:** Specific reference indicating short-lived time; cuts off speech

97. The START of year seven/ there was a couple of matches

**Comment [T99]:** Reference to chronology, preciseness

**Comment [T100]:** Experienced two games

Stanza 28: Shaun is given straight advice by his football manager

98. And my friend's dad/ which is my manager NOW

**Comment [T101]:** This person is a significant figure but isn't named but given role titles – could this represent his respect for this man? Now he's good enough to be managed

99. One day/ he just told me STRAIGHT

**Comment [T102]:** This was not a recurring thing and happened once

100. You need to start passing/ and stop being so selfish

**Comment [T103]:** He interpreted this as direct honesty, which also might be appreciated

Stanza 29: Shaun disagrees with manager and seeks maternal defence

101. AND I didn't LIKE what he SAID/ at all

**Comment [T104]:** He didn't used to pass the ball; held onto it

**Comment [T105]:** He was not playing as part of a team but played for himself; his needs

102. So I told-/ I was complaining to my MUM

**Comment [T106]:** Took this advice as negative criticism

103. And my mum had a word with him

**Comment [T107]:** Changes from telling to complaining, suggesting he wanted some action from mum rather than just giving her information; Mum is someone he can share things with; Didn't go direct to manager to 'complain' but sought mum's support

104. And was saying/ he was OUT OF ORDER

**Comment [T108]:** Blunt, casual reference could echo the nature of the talk, again perhaps direct and to the point

Stanza 30: Shaun narrative tense switches to present day; he now accepts manager's criticism was right

**Comment [T109]:** Mum defends him putting adult in the wrong, she comes to his defense

105. But even NOW/ when I look BACK ON IT/ he was RIGHT

**Comment [T110]:** Reflective stance now and has reflected on this in past

106. And it was just the fact/ that I didn't want to TAKE the CRITICISM/ at all

**Comment [T111]:** Acknowledgement that his opinion at the time was wrong

**Comment [T112]:** Justification; simplified

**Comment [T113]:** Non-accepting of criticism

107. So-/ and I had to ACCEPT/ that I STILL had a LONG WAY to go/ football-wise

**Comment [T114]:** Resignation

**Comment [T115]:** Not yet accomplished, more to learn about football

108. TR: Mmm

Strophe 10 – Being recognised and standing out

109. So he-/ and then/ I DID-/ my team FOLDED

Stanza 31: Shaun positions and qualifies himself in contrast to his team as good and having high status

110. And I WAS RECOGNISED/ as one of the GOOD players

111. I was one of the BEST/ in my TEAM

112. But MY TEAM/ it wasn't a HIGH LEVEL football team

113. TR: Mmm

114. Shaun: And the league wasn't as high

115. So people LIKE ME/ and a couple OTHERS

116. Would STAND OUT a LOT MORE

117. TR: Mmm

Stanza 32: Shaun signs with new team; he is at his best

118. Shaun: So, um/ my friend's DAD/ I DID MOVE/ to his team

119. And he was the MANAGER

120. And I was AT MY BEST/ at this point

121. So-/ and in year eight/ I joined his team/ signed

Stanza 33: New coach doesn't like Shaun but his manager sees his potential

**Comment [T116]:** Stops himself from saying more about the manager –why?

**Comment [T117]:** Sharp change of subject

**Comment [T118]:** Experienced failure as part of team

**Comment [T119]:** Juxtaposes failure against getting noticed socially which is positive, again balancing; He was socially reinforced

**Comment [T120]:** Associates himself with other good boys, 'good player' identity set apart from team identity

**Comment [T121]:** Now extreme case formulation, reference to high status; others thought he was good - he thinks one of the best; they don't see how good he believes he is

**Comment [T122]:** Ownership; team identity

**Comment [T123]:** Low status team

**Comment [T124]:** Low status league; not as good as which team? the one he's in now?

**Comment [T125]:** Identification with few peers

**Comment [T126]:** They were noticeable amongst the team because the team was not that good

**Comment [T127]:** Emotive

**Comment [T128]:** Connection to friend seems significant; this relationship is important

**Comment [T129]:** Transition to new team

**Comment [T130]:** He has status and authority

**Comment [T131]:** Highest point in football career after move - and maybe other areas? He doesn't specify; fond memory

**Comment [T132]:** Double-start emotive

**Comment [T133]:** Chronology; official team member; commitment

122. And one of the coaches/ a BLACK man/ named <sup>2</sup>Sam

Comment [T134]: There were several

Comment [T135]: Race significant

123. Wasn't too fond of me/ when I started the team

Comment [T136]: Not liked

Comment [T137]: Bad start; indicates relationship got better

124. Like, he DIDN'T WANT ME in the team at all

Comment [T138]: Emotive filler

Comment [T139]: Extreme case formulation; adult rejection and exclusion

125. But my friend's Dad/ saw potential in me

Comment [T140]: He was different

Comment [T141]: Recognised potential; had belief in him

126. TR: Mmm

### Part 5: Limited football opportunities

#### Strophe 11 – Worst year for football

##### Stanza 34: Shaun is denied play in club team

127. Shaun: I was-/ I was rarely played

Comment [T142]: Double-start emotive; given few opportunities

128. And so how this-/ and them/ in THAT YEAR

Comment [T143]: Qualification

Comment [T144]: Chronology

129. Was my WORST YEAR for football/ 'cos I HARDLY PLAYED

Comment [T145]: Extreme case formulation, emotive

Comment [T146]: Negative = didn't play much

130. TR: Mmm

131. Shaun: I was rarely played/ like, in the games

Comment [T147]: Not given opportunities

132. I would get, like/ TEN MINUTES

Comment [T148]: Short time playing

133. So I stopped playing as well

Comment [T149]: Little practice = poor performance

#### Strophe 12 – Shaun's confidence and interests begin to change

##### Stanza 35: Shaun develops confidence playing within school team

<sup>2</sup> Pseudonym to preserve anonymity



134. For the SCHOOL football team/ I didn't play as much
135. I DID PLAY/ but, like/ I was MORE CONFIDENT
136. Like, things HAD CHANGED
137. I was more confident in the school/ than I was OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL
138. TR: Mmm

**Comment [T150]:** Reduction in playing football

**Comment [T151]:** Still part of team

**Comment [T152]:** Confidence in school team grew

**Comment [T153]:** Not confident before

**Comment [T154]:** Repetition significant, emotive; changes in team and football career brought confidence

**Comment [T155]:** Confidence unstable; context-specific to school

Stanza 36 : Shaun's interest in football fades as access to play decreases

139. Shaun: And then/ my interest started to FADE with football/
140. Because I wasn't ENJOYING it/ as, erm/ I wasn't being PLAYED
141. And as, um/ at- at- at- the SAME TIME

**Comment [T156]:** Football interest wanes as confidence in school grows

**Comment [T157]:** Doesn't like being inactive, having sporadic inclusion

**Comment [T158]:** Interest comes from being played, included

**Comment [T159]:** Emotive filler

**Comment [T160]:** Intro to new info

Part 6: Shaun develops interests and talents in performing

Strophe 13 - Shaun begins to extend his interests in year seven

Stanza 37: Shaun starts to like dance and acting

142. If I was to GO BACK/ to year SEVEN
143. At the SAME TIME/ I started liking DANCE/ STREETDANCE
144. TR: Mmm
145. Shaun: So I started DANCING/ and ACTING AS WELL
146. I DID start SINGING at one point
147. BUT, um/ I didn't think it was TOO GOOD

**Comment [T161]:** Past positioning

**Comment [T162]:** New interest begins

**Comment [T163]:** No reference to needing practice / lessons – natural at it?

**Comment [T164]:** No longer singing

**Comment [T165]:** Emotive filler

**Comment [T166]:** Negative personal evaluation

Stanza 38: Shaun refers to sister as a performer: he stops attending performing school

148. 'Cos, er, my sister went to <sup>3</sup>Berthwicks

149. It's a famous school for acting/ dancing and singing

150. I went there for a couple of years/ but I stopped going

**Comment [T167]:** Informs me of high status

**Comment [T168]:** Short time in arts school

**Comment [T169]:** Abrupt; no justification for ceasing

Strophe 14 - Shaun begins to show talent to friends and others

Stanza 39: Shaun discovers he is double-jointed: People are fascinated

151. And I learnt/ 'cos I'm very-/ I was double jointed at the time

152. TR: Mmm

153. Shaun: So (..)/ and once my FRIENDS found out/ I was double jointed

**Comment [T170]:** Ref to learning

**Comment [T171]:** Additional skill/talent; uniqueness; doesn't think still double-jointed

**Comment [T172]:** Emotive long pause

**Comment [T173]:** Peers discovered

154. And (..)/ it was one of those things where/ erm

**Comment [T174]:** Generality

**Comment [T175]:** Emotive filler

155. People were FASCINATED WITH IT

**Comment [T176]:** Positive reception; something wonderful

Stanza 40: He draws a crowd and shows people his talent

156. And I was SHOWING THEM

**Comment [T177]:** Demonstrates to others

157. And people started, like/ CROWDING AROUND

**Comment [T178]:** Gains audience

158. And it was ALMOST LIKE A SHOW type of thing

**Comment [T179]:** Entertainment for others

159. TR: Uhum

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonym

Stanza 41: Shaun is recognised by peers for his talent in dance

160. Shaun: And then/ they started RECOGNISING that me

**Comment [T180]:** Now noticed

161. And CERTAIN OTHER PEOPLE/ could dance AS WELL

**Comment [T181]:** He is part of a particular group; unique

162. TR: Mmm

**Comment [T182]:** Public recognition other skills i.e. dance too

163. Shaun: So as my interest SHRUNK FOR FOOTBALL/ it GREW for DANCE

**Comment [T183]:** Dance interest overtakes football

Strophe 15 – Shaun's skills in dance leads to talent show entries

Stanza 42: Shaun joins first amateur dance group and performs with them

164. And, um/ I DID become part of a dance group

**Comment [T184]:** Emphatic. Joining group implies commitment to dance

165. Which was not really a name/ it was just HOW we'd perform

**Comment [T185]:** Unclear what he means. Suggests the group was not high-status but known somehow

166. Like at the TALENT SHOW/ in YEAR SEVEN

**Comment [T186]:** Reference to chronology; viewed group worthy of entering talent show. Recognition of skill

167. There was a talent show for dance

Stanza 43: He continues to perform in talent shows until now

168. YEAR EIGHT/ Year nine/ and THIS YEAR

**Comment [T187]:** School system endorses recognition of talent on annual basis

169. There's a dance show that I have TODAY

**Comment [T188]:** He is still very much interested in dance; has stuck with this interest

170. TR: MMM

171. Shaun: And so what HAPPENS is that

**Comment [T189]:** Generalisation of what?

Stanza 44: Peer comparison and competition motivates Shaun to improve and be better than his friend

172. |Cos it was one of my FRIENDS/ who was VERY GOOD AT  
DANCE|

**Comment [T190]:** Friend as reference point; recognition of friend's skill

173. |But I wanted to be/ JUST AS GOOD AS HIM/ and better|

**Comment [T191]:** Not enough to match friend but wants to exceed his skill. Competitiveness and hegemony

174. |So I DID IMPROVE/ and became BETTER AT DANCE|

**Comment [T192]:** Causal inference. Peer role model gave impetus for improvement

#### Part 7: Shaun returns narrative focus to experiences around football career

**Comment [T193]:** He can get better when motivated; commitment to cause

#### Strophe 16 – Peer recognition is important

#### Stanza 45: Shaun's interest in football is going: he considers giving up

175. And |my football was-/ my |INTEREST in football was GOING|

**Comment [T194]:** Unfinished sentence

**Comment [T195]:** Focus on football lessened

176. |I thought/ I was gonna' give up FOOTBALL/ at one point|

**Comment [T196]:** Football no longer motivating, interesting, wanted to quit

177. |But then, um/ I- I DECIDED to go/ to my GOOD FRIEND'S TEAM|

**Comment [T197]:** Joins friend's team; aligning with peer group

#### Stanza 46: Being recognised is more important than playing for a better team

178. |Where I was RECOGNISED/ a lot more|

**Comment [T198]:** More recognition in new team; shift positive

179. TR: Uhum

180. Shaun: And |their team WAS BETTER|

**Comment [T199]:** Competitive stance

181. And I felt |being RECOGNISED/ was a LOT MORE IMPORTANT|

**Comment [T200]:** Being recognised in own right more important than status of team

182. So |I DID LEAVE THE TEAM|

**Comment [T201]:** Decision to move teams

#### Stanza 47: Shaun's manager begs him to return to team: He is needed

183. And then |I got a CALL from my manager|

**Comment [T202]:** Manager initiates contact

184. |BEGGING me to COME BACK|

**Comment [T203]:** He was wanted back

185. TR: Uhum

186. Shaun: Like, he FIRST-/ he said/ alright best of LUCK/ I WISH YOU WELL

**Comment [T204]:** Initial reaction to him leaving was acceptance

187. And then I got-/ and then/ my MUM got a call/ the next DAY

**Comment [T205]:** Mum as agent; manager contacted quickly

188. Saying how he needs me/ back in the TEAM

**Comment [T206]:** He was needed as part of the team; implies he had key role

Stanza 48: Shaun stays in team, is played more and enjoys football

189. And I MADE the DECISION to STAY in the TEAM

**Comment [T207]:** Autonomous in his decision-making; feeling needed contributed to him staying

190. And I got PLAYED a lot MORE/ and I'm ENJOYING my FOOTBALL

**Comment [T208]:** More involvement in team

191. And I'm STILL playing football/ for the school/ AND for my TEAM

**Comment [T209]:** Changes tense into present; enjoys football now

**Comment [T210]:** Membership to two groups; long-term commitment to football

Part 8: Shaun develops narrative around talents and gaining popularity

Strophe 17 - Shaun gains recognition and popularity

Stanza 49: Shaun develops narrative around family interest and skills in dance

192. Which is GOOD/ but my INTEREST for DANCE/ kept on GROWING

**Comment [T211]:** Evaluative summary

193. And 'cos my COUSINS/ danced at, like, <sup>4</sup>GINO

**Comment [T212]:** Dance more interesting, whereas football interest plateau

194. He's a famous DANCER/ Got To DANCE

**Comment [T213]:** Family reference

**Comment [T214]:** Cousins shared interest in dance

195. They danced with the likes of THEM

**Comment [T215]:** High-status dancer; well-known

**Comment [T216]:** Cousins were good enough to dance with high-status

Stanza 50: Local facilities for dance are different

<sup>4</sup> Pseudonym

196. |But because they live/ in SOUTH LONDON|

**Comment [T217]:** Cousins live in different area

197. |The facilities aren't the SAME HERE|

**Comment [T218]:** Location impacts upon opportunities

198. TR: Mmm

Stanza 51: Popularity in school is gained through dance and football: He likes

it

199. Shaun: |So I WAS RECOGNISED/ in SCHOOL|

**Comment [T219]:** In-school recognition

200. |Because- because of my DANCE SKILLS|

**Comment [T220]:** Known for dance

201. |I became POPULAR/ because of DANCE and FOOTBALL| (.)

**Comment [T221]:** Popularity in school came from sporting and arts talents

202. So |I was LIKING the POPULARITY a LOT/ at THAT POINT|

**Comment [T222]:** Enjoyed being popular at the time; suggests no longer the case

Strophe 18 – Dance group experiences

Stanza 52: Shaun doesn't have much say in school dance group and group

splits up

203. |But the dance group I was IN/ AT SCHOOL/ wasn't ALL-/ I didn't

**Comment [T223]:** Suggests he was in another group outside of school

(...)|

**Comment [T224]:** False start here; seems somewhat negative

204. |It was a thing where/ there was TWO PEOPLE/ who like CONTROL

**Comment [T225]:** Two key figures

it/ the MOST|

**Comment [T226]:** In charge

205. And |WE WOULDN'T have MUCH SAY/ in what was going on|

**Comment [T227]:** He had little influence; aligns himself with other group-members; shared experience

206. TR: Mmm

207. Shaun: |So we DID EVENTUALLY/ do one last performance/ and

SPLIT UP|

**Comment [T228]:** Causal inference; lack of control and say = group fragmentation

208. TR: Okay

Stanza 53: Shaun receives dance teaching from older peers

209. Shaun: |And, um/ then, er/ |people three years OLDER THAN US|

**Comment [T229]:** Emotive pause x 2

**Comment [T230]:** Older peers

210. |Came and taught US PROPERLY/ how to dance

**Comment [T231]:** Suggests older peers initiated teaching them; he was still among group

211. TR: Mmm

212. Shaun: |We COULD DANCE/ but we was only at a certain level|

**Comment [T232]:** Acknowledgement that they were not as skilled at the time

213. |Where someone would go/ |Oh they're quite good/ for their age|

**Comment [T233]:** Reference to external person

**Comment [T234]:** Awareness of how others might perceive them, good for their age

214. TR: Mmm

Stanza 54: Shaun's dancing improves and he is included in a more developed group

215. Shaun: |But then we got-/ we IMPROVED A LOT|

**Comment [T235]:** Teaching from older peers helped; they got better; he can learn from older peers and use them as models

216. Like, |ME and a COUPLE OTHER people/ |that was in the OLD GROUP/ as well|

**Comment [T236]:** Three of them

**Comment [T237]:** Stuck with peers from old group

217. So |ONCE THEY TAUGHT US/ |we performed with them|

**Comment [T238]:** Once they had learned from peers

218. |OVER and OVER AGAIN/ and GOT BETTER|

**Comment [T239]:** Implies improvement to acceptable standard; inclusion

**Comment [T240]:** Practice helps; develops skills

Strophe 19 – Continued and current involvement with performing arts

Stanza 55: Shaun seeks further development in dance through class attendance

219. |And (.) I DID GO/ in the SUMMER HOLIDAYS/ RECENTLY|

**Comment [T241]:** Outside of school

220. | went to one of GINO'S dance classes|

**Comment [T242]:** Made it to famous dancer's tuition

221. |Which then/ he taught a NEW style of dance|

**Comment [T243]:** Learnt new skills in class

222. Well |it's not NEW/ but it's NOT RECOGNISED|

**Comment [T244]:** Again, reference to recognition. Cares about what people think

223. TR: Uhum

Stanza 56: Shaun has become versatile in dance, singing and acting

224. Shaun: |And it is REALLY GOOD/ and |I've become MORE

**Comment [T245]:** Enjoys new dance

VERSATILE|

**Comment [T246]:** Developed versatility by being part of dance class

225. |With DANCE SINGING/ and NOW/ ACTING as well|

**Comment [T247]:** Inclusion in groups outside of school has had positive effects on other aspects, inc. acting

226. |Because I've chosen it for GCSE/ and |I've been part of PLAYS|

**Comment [T248]:** Acting is chosen subject now

**Comment [T249]:** Has performed

227. TR: Mmm

Part 9: Shaun provides the link between his narratives around football and performing experiences and his academic and social motivations in school

Strophe 20 – Shaun is popular and also focused on education

Stanza 57: Shaun is aware of his popular status amongst the year group

228. Shaun: |So that's-/ so, like/ how this LINKS|

**Comment [T250]:** Explanation for my benefit; establishes links

229. |To how SCHOOL LIFE IS/ is that, um,

**Comment [T251]:** Links past experience with present summary

230. |I would SAY/ I'm QUITE POPULAR|

**Comment [T252]:** He thinks he's popular

231. |Amongst the YEAR group/ |BECAUSE of TALENT|

**Comment [T253]:** With same-age peers in school

**Comment [T254]:** Sees himself as talented which has earned popularity

232. TR: Uhum



233. Shaun: |And ALSO, um-/ like, there's ALWAYS|

**Comment [T255]:** Extreme case formulation

Stanza 58: Shaun makes distinction between himself and friends who stray from education

234. |The FRIENDS GROUP/| where they STRAY from EDUCATION|

**Comment [T256]:** Multiple friends

**Comment [T257]:** Implies they're different to him, but still friends

235. TR: Uhum

236. Shaun: Like, |they STILL play FOOTBALL/ and all that|

**Comment [T258]:** Friends interested in sport

237. But |THEY STRAY FROM EDUCATION|

**Comment [T259]:** Lost interest in education

238. |On to, like/ just, like, going on THE ROAD/ and all that|

**Comment [T260]:** Slang, cultural language of the peer group; indicates more interest in being 'on the road' than in school; doesn't say what they do on the road

239. TR: Mmm

240. Shaun: |So-/ but I've-/ I STUCK with EDUCATION|

**Comment [T261]:** Sees himself as different to them; 'stuck with' implies commitment to education regardless of experience

241. |And preferred to have HIGH GRADES AS WELL|

**Comment [T262]:** Going to school not enough, wants to be high-achiever there too

242. TR: Mmm

Strophe 21 – Shaun endeavours to resist the stereotype: He wants to be popular, cool and smart

Stanza 59: Stereotype awareness: You can't be cool and smart

243. Shaun: |Because there's always the STEREOTYPE of|

**Comment [T263]:** Awareness and acknowledgement of stereotypes

244. |If YOU'RE COOL and POPULAR/ then you're NEVER SMART/ and recognised in LESSONS|

**Comment [T264]:** Coolness and popularity

**Comment [T265]:** Can't be smart and popular at the same time

245. But if you're SMART/ you're never recognised/ in PHYSICAL STUFF/ and being POPULAR

**Comment [T266]:** If smart can't be looked upon by others favourably with regards to...

**Comment [T267]:** Sporting activities and popularity

246. TR: Mmm

Stanza 60: He wants to have everything going for him

247. Shaun: So what I WANTED TO DO/ was become popular/ cool and smart/ at the same time

**Comment [T268]:** Positions himself in opposition to stereotype; resistant

**Comment [T269]:** Tries to prove stereotype false

248. So I had EVERYTHING going for me (...)

**Comment [T270]:** Sees that having all attributes gives him capital

Part 10: Experiences around managing popularity and academic achievement

Strophe 22 – Introduction to academic performance

Stanza 61: TR seeks deeper understanding of how Shaun is able to act against the stereotype

249. TR: Hmm. How do you think you DID that?

**Comment [T271]:** I want to know the process

250. HOW did you do that?

**Comment [T272]:** What is his level of insight?

Stanza 61: I was never stupid

251. Shaun: Because I was, I was NEVER STUPID

**Comment [T273]:** It's possible because he has intellect; sees himself as being smart throughout

252. At like, I was never like NOT VERY SMART/ at one point

**Comment [T274]:** He sees himself as always being smart

253. But I WAS ALWAYS-/ I was ALWAYS/ good at MATHS

**Comment [T275]:** Emphatic about his skills in maths; always been that way

254. TR: Mmm

255. Shaun: But I was- / I wasn't THAT GOOD at ENGLISH

**Comment [T276]:** False start

256. And was OK at SCIENCE/ BUT I just wanted to-

**Comment [T277]:** Recognition that English not strong point

**Comment [T278]:** Science adequate

**Comment [T279]:** Trails off

257. I DID get SMARTER/ but because the POPULARI-

**Comment [T280]:** Does not indicate how he got smarter, as if natural process no additional input

**Comment [T281]:** Implies something negative happened as a result of being popular

Strophe 23 – Response to acquired popularity threatens Shaun's achievement

Stanza 62: Popularity got to my head and I became the class clown

258. In YEAR EIGHT/ I DID get very very VERY popular/ at one point

**Comment [T282]:** Reference to chronology

259. And it GOT TO MY HEAD a little

**Comment [T283]:** Year 8 particular time of great popularity

260. As I was quite young/ it got to my HEAD

**Comment [T284]:** Implies popularity had negative effect- he was very aware of his position among his peers

**Comment [T285]:** Causal inference; got to head because was young/immature

261. So at ONE POINT/ I did become the class CLOWN

**Comment [T286]:** Causal inference. Gains from popularity caused him to play up to audience

262. TR: Mmm

Stanza 63: Class clown persona fails as grades are not sustained

263. Shaun: And it wasn't WORKING for me/ at all

**Comment [T287]:** Being class clown not helpful; negative impact

264. Because the only grade that was/ really sustaining itself

**Comment [T288]:** One subject maintained achievement; others suffered; has experienced underachievement

Stanza 64: Maths grades are sustained as it's not effortful

265. Was my MATHS GRADES/ because I didn't have to put any EFFORT in/ to get a GOOD GRADE

**Comment [T289]:** Achievement continued as not maths work effortful; natural mathematical strength

Stanza 65: Shaun highlights his popularity for being talented although his grades were not the best

266. TR: Mmm

267. SO |even though I was RECOGNISED| at |DANCE ACTING and FOOTBALL|

**Comment [T290]:** Was noticed by others

**Comment [T291]:** Arts and sport; traversing hegemonic boundaries but towing cultural expectations/ stereotypes

268. |My grades were STILL GOOD| but weren't to the best| AT ALL|

**Comment [T292]:** Acknowledges not the best; extreme case formulation; disappointment

269. |So- and-| I just wanted to-| I just wanted to BE SMART|

**Comment [T293]:** Justification for reasoning and behaviour; smart = best grades

270. |And have ALL THOSE ATTRIBUTES| at the SAME TIME|

**Comment [T294]:** Holding achievement and talents as equal

271. TR: Mmm

Part 11: Shaun provides evidence for successfully acquiring popularity and raising academic achievement, thereby, meeting his goal

Strophe 24 – Year nine: Start of GCSEs

Stanza 66: Grades start improving

272. Shaun: So |when I hit| |when I FIRST CAME|

**Comment [T295]:** Violent language – sharp turning point

273. |To [this] SCHOOL| |when I was in YEAR NINE|

**Comment [T296]:** Transition a key time

**Comment [T297]:** Refers to current location

274. |My grades started IMPROVING| a lot MORE|

**Comment [T298]:** Sudden change 3 years in to schooling

**Comment [T299]:** Omission – what led to improvement? Preceding statements suggest intrinsic motivation

275. TR: Mmm

276. Shaun: |AS GCSE DID START|

**Comment [T300]:** Significance of exams

Stanza 67: Shaun settles down in class

277. And |I started SETTLING DOWN MORE| in class|

**Comment [T301]:** GCSEs are serious; now more focused in class

278. |I didn't become| I WOULDN'T SAY| |I'm QUIET|

**Comment [T302]:** Did not change

**Comment [T303]:** Insight into personality; not quiet

Stanza 68: He is known by teachers as talkative but no longer the class clown

279. 'Cos I'm KNOWN amongst the TEACHERS

**Comment [T304]:** Aware of being noticed by teachers

280. As I am TALKATIVE but I'm DEFINITELY

**Comment [T305]:** Talkative character

281. NOT the class clown anymore |

**Comment [T306]:** Certainty in position now as NOT class clown; can be talkative but not class clown

Stanza 69: Shaun shows awareness and care for others' education and the impact his behaviour has on it

282. Because it just DOES DISRUPT/ even people I CARE ABOUT/

**Comment [T307]:** Emphatic – important. Disruption is significant

283. It disrupts THEIR EDUCATION/ as well

**Comment [T308]:** Reference to friendships; description feminised 'care about'

**Comment [T309]:** Reflects on how his behaviour negatively impacts on friends; aware of his own influence

Strophe 25 – Shaun highlights his achievements and current status

Stanza 70: Shaun's interest and skills have been maintained

284. And so it's/ I STILL PLAY/ for the school football team

**Comment [T310]:** Omission

285. And I DID DO/ I'm STILL doing GCSE DRAMA

**Comment [T311]:** Sudden shift – return to topic of football now positioning in the present; able to maintain group membership; work as part of a team

**Comment [T312]:** Emphatic

Stanza 71: Shaun is involved with plays and performances

**Comment [T313]:** Interest in drama grew and is sustained

286. And, um, I was in a recent play/ and had my dance performance

**Comment [T314]:** Example of his involvement in drama

287. I'm in a NEW dance group NOW

**Comment [T315]:** Which? Was this performance a unique experience?

**Comment [T316]:** Change of dance group; group memberships can change

288. TR: Uhum

Stanza 72: Shaun shares that he attained an A in a recent English assessment thereby evidencing he is a high achiever

289. Shaun: And, um/ |'ve recently got a GOOD solid A/ | in my ENGLISH  
/ which is GOOD|

Comment [T317]: High attainment

Comment [T318]: Positive appraisal

Stanza 73: Shaun asserts his goal to have it all has been met since year 9  
and is being maintained

290. So that's how I think/ everything can be GOING for me/ RIGHT  
NOW|

Comment [T319]: Optimism based on previous success; wants to be successful in everything

291. This is NOW/ and |that's been going on/ since Year nine now|

Comment [T320]: High achieving the last 2 years

## **Appendix 8: Example of Level 3 Analysis of Shaun's Narrative**

Table 3: Main clauses in the narrative signalling the main plot of the narrative

=====

### **Stanza 2 (Lines 11, 13 and 14)**

1. It was like sometimes REALLY GOOD, and sometimes REALLY BAD
2. I started off, in RECEPTION
3. I had a lot of FRIENDS

### **Stanzas 4, 5, 6 (Lines 18, 19, 20, 21, 24, 25)**

4. I didn't play football, AT ALL
5. I didn't know anything ABOUT football
6. they never allowed me to PLAY with THEM
7. I was so BAD
8. I was SO BAD AT IT
9. I DID LOSE a lot of friends because of that

### **Stanza 7, 9, 11 (Lines 29, 35, 37, 39, 41, 43)**

10. I met couple more friends
11. one of my close friends, was, like, good at football
12. I had to be AS GOOD at football

13. I started PRACTICING in my living room

14. I just played MORE and MORE

15. I improved and PROGRESSED

**Stanzas 12, 13, 14 (Lines 46, 50, 52, 53, 55, 56)**

16. I started my FIRST football team

17. I became one of the BEST, and I was RESPECTED a lot MORE

18. I WAS very good

19. There was-, there's always people better than you

20. I DID RESPECT THAT

21. it just made me want to improve, even more

---

Level 3 Analysis: Main Narrative Plot

Shaun starts his school life narrative in the reception year and makes it clear that this period was at times really good and at others really bad. He describes that he started out with a lot of friends but was not interested in football and could not play so he was excluded and lost friends. Shaun makes new friends and uses one friend as a model to aspire to. He wanted to be as good as his friend at football and consequently begins to practice at home and develop his football skills. He works hard to be included and become the best and so gains respect from his peers. He acknowledges that people can be better than him but he uses his peers to compete against in order to motivate him to become better.



## Appendix 9: Example of Levels 4 and 5 Analyses of Shaun's Narrative

Table 4: Psychological Subjects in Each Stanza (line numbers are in parentheses)

=====

### Part 1

Stanza 3: *I* (10), *I* (10), *I* (13), *I* (14), *I* (14)

Stanza 4: *I* (18), *I* (19),

Stanza 5: *they* (= peers, 20), *them* (= peers, 20), *I* (21), *I* (24), *I* (24)

Stanza 6: *I* (25)

Stanza 7: *I* (29), *I* (30), *I* (31)

### Part 2

Stanza 8: *I* (32), *I* (33), *I* (34)

Stanza 9: *I* (37)

Stanza 10: *I* (38), *I* (39), *I* (41)

Stanza 11: *they* (42), *I* (43)

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### Level 4 Analysis: Psychological positioning

Shaun's narrative is presented largely from his own psychological positioning and through this we understand his motives, drives and journey to become the pupil that he is today, as well as his identity. He takes us through the poignant events in his early school life and social relationships that indicate that he started out with 'normal' friends, then became excluded because of his lack of interest and skill in football.

Shaun shifts his psychological position in stanza 20 and refers to his peers as 'they'. This serves to demarcate his peers as different to him and position himself in opposition to them. He identifies himself as different right from the start of his narrative and in returning to first person narrative frame he minimises the significance of his peers' behaviour and emphasises his own. He seeks to present just how hard he has worked hard to achieve status and popularity among his peers and let the listener know that this has not been a smooth and trouble-free journey. Shaun has triumphed over peer exclusion and learned how to be included through conforming to his peers' interests and using his peers as models. He is a committed and hard-working individual who learns from his experiences as well as those of others.

Shaun's repetitive use of 'I' positions him as central to his narrative and indicates that he is largely focused on himself as an individual and that he psychologically sets himself apart from his peers. This contradicts his actions described in his narrative which imply that he wants to be similar to his peers in some respects. The juxtaposition between Shaun's self-perception as different to his peers and his seeking for acceptance by conforming to their interests highlights the dissonance between public and private aspects and perceptions of identity.

**Table 5: Focused Material Within Each Stanza of Shaun's narrative**

=====

Part 1

Strophe 1

Stanza 2: # primary school

Strophe 2

Stanza 3: # primary school # very # really good, really bad#  
reception # friends # normal

Stanza 4: # at all # about

Strophe 3

Stanza 5: # because of that, play, them # bad # so bad at it

Stanza 6: # I did lose

Stanza 7: # three

Part 2

Strophe 4

Stanza 8: # junior # team Liverpool

Stanza 9: # as good

Stanza 10: # practicing # more and more

Strophe 5

Stanza 11: # letting # progressed

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**Level 5 Analysis: Focused material / themes in narrative**

Part 1 of Shaun's narrative generates images of Shaun starting in primary school having mixed experiences, firstly, starting out with friends but then becoming excluded and denied access to playing football because he was bad at it. This appears to represent a failure of hegemony and lack of status amongst his peers because his interests and skills are different.

In part 2, Shaun's narrative is focused around him making new friends and developing his interest and skills in football. It is about Shaun's work to redeem himself and his social standing after experiencing social exclusion.

Shaun uses a peer as a source of influence to model good football skills and espouses his desire to be "AS GOOD" as him. Shaun presents his motivations to be included in his peer group through practicing and improving his football skills. He presents his internal drive to compete against his friend and this gives him motivation to improve and be better, by comparing himself to his friend. Shaun later goes on to describe that he was respected a lot more because of his football skills and so we understand that Shaun has worked hard to be included and attain social status and respect. From starting out being different to his peers, he earns his place as someone who now fits in and is accepted. His conformity to his peers' interest, i.e. football, also represents his hard work to achieve hegemony and to be noticed by his peers.

Part 2 of Shaun's narrative and this analysis is evidence of the emergence of the theme 'modelling and competition' in relation to peers' influence on the boys. Other boys' interviews contained narratives about using peers as models to learn from and compete against, thus suggesting it as a key theme across participants' narratives.

Shaun's narrative contains the theme 'performing and espousing masculinity' with reference to how boys' narratives reveal their identities. Shaun is a boy who experienced some failure at hegemony in the earlier years of schooling and worked hard to retrieve it through developing his football skills. Consequently, he became respected and recognised by his peers and eventually gained popularity. His narrative focuses on him developing his football skills and represents both his efforts to be hegemonically masculine and subscribe to ideals held by other boys, as well as to be popular and high status.

## Appendix 10: Supplementary Results from Thesis Chapters

### Chapter 5: Peer Experiences and Impact on Education and Attainment

#### 5.2 Difficulties with secondary transition

Two boys talked about the cultural practices that were prevalent in the school in year seven and implied that peer intimidation was common. Whilst Nigel spoke about his personal experiences around being threatened by peers, Junior reported on witnessing incidences which further provides a cultural context for year seven experiences:

“I DON’T see it/ NOWADAYS

But I used to see it/ when I was in year seven

You SEE people PICK ON OTHER PEOPLE

And that/ yeah”

“Like, if someone asks you for money

You’re supposed to GIVE IT”

(Junior)

Junior highlights intimidation practices in year seven and he uses a second-person narrative tone which serves to generalise the experience leaving the impression that such incidences were commonplace. He expresses that there were held expectations that pupils submit when asked for money and does not offer any evaluative or affective

commentary on this. This could represent his reticence to engage with conversations about the emotional impact of this culture on individuals and himself, but might also reflect his acceptance of this as 'the norm' and therefore something that people just had to learn to cope with. It is interesting to note that Junior feels that these practices have discontinued and this could reflect changing peer culture over time, as well as changing perceptions and adjustment to school life.

### 5.5 Modelling and competition

Michael shared his experiences around following peers and copying their behaviours in school, particularly, in the first year of secondary, and presented his motivations to be like his friends i.e. to gain material things like them. However, he reflected that these behaviours did not have a positive effect on his education and he made the decision to change his peer group realising the impact it was having on his education:

"I WANTED to be LIKE THAT/ so I STARTED

Mi-/ started MISBEHAVING at SCHOOL

Misbehaving at HOME/ to try and get what THEY HAD"

"I found out that my grades were SLIPPING

Because of people I was hanging around with

And then I moved away from them

And I found a NEW bunch of friends

Who I-/ they WEREN'T GEEKS as much/ such to say

But they focused on their WORK as well as other things"

“I think THAT’S the group/ that I needed to be in/ to be able (.) to SUCCEED (..)”

(Michael)

Michael’s narrative conveys his agency in being flexible in terms of his friendships and acknowledges the temporality of peer relationships. He makes a direct link between his group of friends and his dip in academic performance, which prompted him to change his peer group. Michael shows an awareness of social influences and has strategies to minimise their adverse effects i.e. separating from peers who misbehaved and finding new friends who were more academically focused. Michael’s interesting use of ‘found’ to describe his meeting of new friends implies that he engaged in searching for an alternative peer group. His narrative suggests that he does not want friends that are too invested in education at the expense of fun but those that are able to balance between work and play.

Some boys felt that being ‘recognised’ by their peers was important not only for personal reasons but also to support the development of others in terms of being seen as a positive role model for their peers:

“When they say, I’m over-rated/ I take that as a compliment

Compliment because (.) it means that people

Have ACKNOWLEDGED my skill/ and what I do

And how being smart/ at the same time/ IS POSSIBLE

And sets an example/ for younger ones, as well”

(Shaun)

Shaun's narrative indicates that he rejects negative feedback and reframes this to more positive affirmations. Shaun has a sense of responsibility to show younger pupils that it is possible to "have it all" as he later states, and he presents this as a personal mission to acquire this reputation and be a role model.

### 5.6 Social interactions and status implications

In contrast, Michael denied his friends' and his own interest in popularity after narrating his experience of once trying to impress his friends at a party, and failing to maintain his peers' interest soon afterwards. He indicates that being popular in school could contribute to failure and makes reference to seeking it as deferred gratification here:

"The friends that I usually hang around with now

Popularity is just (.) nothing

Because if you THINK about it

You can be popular NOW/ and mess up

Your life in the FUTURE/ whereas,

If you just DO what you need TO DO NOW

When you're OLDER/ popularity will just come  
NATURALLY"

(Michael)

Michael's narrative suggests that he is focused on the present tasks and less concerned about popularity now as this can be distracting and lead to



failure and he views the pursuit of popularity at the expense of his education as futile. However, Michael is invested in popularity and finds the idea appealing, though it is something that can wait for now.

### 5.7 Perceived peer pressure and bullying

Some boys made contradictory or obscure statements in relation to peer pressure and influences, as Joseph's narrative demonstrates:

“Yeah/ no one's ever tried to PRESSURE me to DO anything

OR if they HAVE I just-/ I HAVE quite a STRONG MIND

So I just say NO/ I don't AGREE with it”

(Joseph)

Joseph's narrative lacks clarity about whether he is peer pressured or not, as he initially denies it and then refers to his 'strong mind' as a potential buffer to resist it if it has occurred. This slight contradiction is suggestive of the internal individualised perceptions of peer pressure and that whether and how boys perceive pressure from their friends is an important factor in managing such situations if and when they occur.

### 5.8 Learning from others' perceptions and experiences

In referring to how he felt he was perceived by teachers in relation to his peers, Joseph talked about his experiences of being treated like a

scapegoat by certain teaching staff and getting into trouble for things he had not done because he was associated with a deviant group of boys:

“I was-/ I was associated with THAT group

And I almost got in TROUBLE

And my name’s STILL on the-/ on the COMPUTER

And on THE SYSTEM

Because of something someone else DID

And I didn’t do it at all

So I think it’s about who-/ who you are associated with”

(Joseph)

Joseph shows an awareness of how he is perceived by teachers and is considered as guilty by association. Although he does not directly express his feelings about this incident it is clear from the language he uses that he perceives this as unfair as he says, “I was JUDGED before I was even given a CHANCE”. This experience is clearly evocative for Joseph as demonstrated through two double starts in the quote above. The event is significant enough for it to have had an impact on Joseph and for him to share this experience with me. He later explains that his understanding of how teachers judge his behaviour, based on that of his friends, is reason for him to have a mixture of friends and relationships with different peer groups.

Joseph is responsive to teacher perceptions and advice, in spite of the prejudice he perceives that they hold against him. He is strategic in his approach to friendships and selects them with knowledge of teacher

biases in mind. Associating with many different groups means that he is less able to be pigeon-holed and judged wrongly by associating with one particular group, and that he is able to navigate between groups of friends suggests that he is highly sociable and is skilled at making and maintaining friends with different types of people.

Nigel's account highlights the impact of vicarious learning from the negative experiences of some peers:

“cos if you see how  
People STARTED out/ what they DONE  
And how they turned out/ then you think about-  
You don't WANNA turn out like that”

(Nigel)

Nigel is able to reflect on the experiences and outcomes of his peers and uses them to learn from and deter him from a similar path. He describes his thoughts and hopes to not 'turn out' like that and this implies that he acts on these cognitions and works to avoid negative outcomes by working hard at education.

### 5.9 Attainment and peer group turning points

Some pupils may not think Key Stage 3 education as serious as Key Stage 4 as the progression through secondary school entails increasing expectations and requires greater focus. In addition, for some boys, the turning point might have occurred in parallel with their own developmental maturity and experience of unwanted outcomes, as Michael's narrative conveys:

“TOWARDS YEAR EIGHT/ I had a little HICCUP in  
SCHOOL

Where (.) I started mucking around

And didn't pay-/ PAY enough ATTENTION

To my WORK/ I would say (.)-

I was more INTERESTED in maybe GOING OUT

Or playing games with my friends”

“Then (.) / towards the END of year eight

Beginning of year NINE/ I started parting AWAY

‘Cos I saw that (.) / it wasn't (.) WORKING

And that they- they- they WEREN'T-

It wasn't that they were BRINGING ME DOWN

Or anything/ it's just that-/ that they weren't

A GOOD INFLUENCE to me”

(Michael)

Michael's narrative depicts him as being rather carefree and fun-loving in year 8, when he preferred to socialise rather than invest in school work. However, he makes his decision to part from them in year 9 when he saw this as not working for him. Michael's narrative almost appears defending of his peers and he works to minimise their accountability for his underachievement by denying that they were bringing him down.

However, he acknowledges their part in providing models for behaviour which were influential to him and his agency in being susceptible to their influence and then separating from them implies a growth in independence and maturity.

Chris' consideration of life after school allowed him to focus his attention on academia and his views on the potential impact of peers perhaps meant that he carefully chose his friends with this in mind, and so did not require a change in friends to lead to a change in academic performance, as he stated that:

“Obviously, you LOOK UP to your FRIENDS kinda thing  
(..)

If they were BAD/ maybe you'd, like

Follow them/ kinda thing (.)

From PEER PRESSURE/ kinda thing (.)

So obviously, if your friends are a good example

Then you'll be good as well”

(Chris)

Chris asserts that having friends to set a good example will reflect on you, and he makes a direct link between the type of friends one has and how they will be. For Chris, the character of friends is very important as he places emphasis on their effect on individuals, and so he understands that social influence can be strong and that people aspire to their friends and want to imitate what they do. In being aware of this, and subsequently, selective Chris can avoid risks associated with bad company, and focus on his education.

### 5.10 Teachers, mothers and siblings as buffers

Other boys expressed that they actively sought their mother's advice and consent before going out, and through this conveyed a deep respect for this relationship and trust in their mothers. Nigel's narrative suggests that he is able to ask his mother's opinions on his social activities but will then draw his own conclusion about what to do:

"I don't really-

I hang around with him/ but not as much-

Like, if he told me/ to go to certain places

I'll think about it-/ talk to my MUM about it

Then (.) do whatever"

(Nigel)

## Chapter 6: Managing Peer Relationships

### 6.1 Negotiating and performing multiple identities among differentiated peer groups

Luke refers to performative skills in facilitating his ability to navigate through and adapt to the different social demands within the various contexts in the school environment. He perceived that acting talent gives him the competence to behave differently and present himself appropriately within each context, but particularly, refers to its application within the classroom in order to be perceived as proficient in English:

“Because (.) I don’t show that I can-

That I DO get good grades/ when I’m OUTSIDE the class  
(..)

When I’m talking/ I usually talk (.) SLANG

I don’t, erm, talk English-/ like PROPER ENGLISH to  
them

So they think I’m-/ they think I’ll be FAILING ENGLISH”

“But I’m a good ACTOR/ so I can ACT LIKE I’m posh”

(Luke)

Luke perceives that he can be more natural and himself outside of the classroom, whereas, within it he is more controlled and effortful in presenting himself as properly spoken.

Luke also appeared to compartmentalise his friendships which meant that he could maintain his focus on class work and keep his friends outside of class without compromising his relationship or academic performance:

“Or when we’re in class

I don’t really pay ATTENTION TO THEM

‘Cos I don’t wanna (.) get distracted (.)

So I just (.) turn my head/ the other WAY

I don’t look at them”

(Luke)

Luke gives his friends little attention in class in order to stay focused on his own work and not be distracted, whilst at break times he engages closely with them. Luke did not express any difficulties or objections to him doing this and went on to describe that his friends did not react to his ignoring them in class which perhaps allowed this to be adopted as a successful strategy.

#### 6.4 Separation and distancing as resistance

Nigel’s narrative is very clear in presenting his assertiveness in not hanging around with people in gangs, despite knowing them. He appears less uncertain about his ability to manage peer influences by dissociating with particular people than Joseph:

“I don’t really wanna ASSOCIATE myself with it



Like, I don't hang around with, like/ ANYONE IN GANGS-

I know people in gangs/ but I don't hang around with them"

(Nigel)

#### 6.4 Managing social time

In response to the third aide memoire question, all of the boys expressed an interest in gaming and said that they play games with their friends. However, in addition, two of the boys described that they used technology to facilitate them socialising with their friends as an alternative to being outdoors as well to assist in homework study, as these quotes demonstrate:

"And I get the game/ I play it

Play it with my friends-

It's a good way/ to socialise AS WELL

And, it also/ takes you away from/ being on the road

And doing things/ like that"

(Shaun)

"I don't know, erm (.)/ if you'd call it UNORTHODOX-

It's basically/ we would REVISE ON X-BOX

But, 'cos there's like a CHAT system"

“We use HEADSETS and SPEAK

So we’d all, like/ revise on X-box

And we’d be-/ we might go, like/ FOUR-WAY SKYPE”

(Chris)

Shaun’s narrative suggests that he prefers gaming to being on the roads and therefore he uses this way of socialising with his friends as a preventative measure as well as for recreational enjoyment. In using Skype, a social network software application as well as the X-box games console Chris is able to have revision conferences with friends.

Michael is able to connect with his friends and have their support when completing work at home and will play games with them afterwards:

“maybe we’d go on SKYPE together

Talk/ DO OUR WORK

And then/ maybe play a game/ in the EVENING

If- if we had enough TIME”

(Michael)

This demonstrates Michael’s prioritisation of homework before leisure time, but also highlights his friends’ acceptance of this and similar values and behaviour. His repetition of ‘we’ throughout this narrative reinforces the view that these behaviours are shared as part of the group culture. The peer group is not just concerned with studying but are also keen to socialise and have fun.

## 6.5 Perceiving and appraising peer interactions

The boys had positive views about education and school and some espoused their thoughts about it being a safe place. These perceptions of the environment as being safe and being comfortable would allow the boys the mental capacity to focus on their school work. Joseph did not readily perceive that he was pressured into anything and felt that this allowed him to achieve:

“Yeah/ no one’s ever tried to PRESSURE me to DO anything

OR if they HAVE I just-/ I HAVE quite a STRONG MIND

So I just say NO/ I don’t AGREE with it”

“I think THAT’S THE REASON/ why I DO WELL

Because some people ARE PRESSURED

Like, I go at sort of/ MY OWN PACE”

(Joseph)

Joseph’s narrative suggests that he is empowered to resist peer pressure if and when it occurs, yet he does not think that anyone has pressured him to do anything. It may be how Joseph has interpreted his interactions with peers as perhaps not being pressurising, and this may allow him to be successful as he does not feel pressured, rather than that he is definitely not pressured. That Joseph espouses his autonomy in such a way as ‘I go at sort of my own pace’ is indicative of his cognitive representation of personal agency and control over his educational achievements.

## Chapter 7: The Impact of Family Narratives

### 7.1 Family members as role models

Having his grandparents' narratives in mind keeps Nigel focused on the future and what he wants from life and this has a big impact on his thinking and approach to school:

"I'm gonna (.) almost (.)

Do it for the people that COULDN'T DO IT

Like/ when I'm gonna do EXAMS"

"If I'm able to-/ IF I become-

Get good grades/ then (.) that will basically lead

To me having a good job/ getting money

CHANGE my family/ but also if EVERYONE done that

I think it would change/ basically

The WORLD/ 'cos, erm (.)

EDUCATION is KEY"

(Nigel)

Nigel views his attempts at school achievement and success in life as almost compensating for others who were unable to achieve the same. He perceives himself to have a role in representing others through his achievements and therefore his motivation is sustained by thinking of others when he takes examinations. Nigel sees education as "key" and

the route to a job and money and that this will not only benefit but “change” his family. To Nigel, his family is a strong driving force and motivator for academic achievement and he espouses his world view that everyone should have the same goal, for it would impact upon the world. Although idealistic, Nigel has strong goals and motivations to achieve them.

## 7.2 Vicarious learning through family experiences

As the following extract shows, Michael not only identifies academically successful family members as inspiring but he uses them as competitors to beat in attempt to avoid their teasing:

“It makes ME wanna DO better

TR: Why is that?

Michael: Cos, like/ they’ll take the MICK out of me

If I don’t do as WELL (..)

So yeah (.)/ I want to do BETTER”

Michael acknowledges the pressure he feels to live up to academic achievement standards set by other family members but accepts this as a personal challenge and motivation to not just meet expectations but excel them. His academic endeavours are not only to prove that he is better but also in order to avoid teasing. Michael’s family cultural values regarding education are high and he is not complacent in this by aiming to equal family members’ levels of high attainment but wants to attain greater. Michael not only uses family narratives to provide him with benchmarks

for success but his own competitiveness and feelings around being teased also gives him motivation to work hard.

### 7.3 Intelligence perceived as hereditary

Joseph's narrative suggested that he himself perceives 'intelligence' may be hereditary and so, perhaps, views himself as possessing the natural ability required to make him academically successful:

“...and my mum-

It was-/ I dunno if she INHERITED it-

Her INTELLIGENCE/ from my granddad

But SHE'S QUITE SMART”

(Joseph)

Joseph takes ownership of his family narrative; the triumph over struggle and the hard work undertaken to better oneself and provide for one's family. His sharing of this family narrative not only gives me his historical background and family cultural context but this also helps him to organise his views around a tradition of family values in education and their academic success. In so doing, Joseph subscribes to values already in existence and in aiming to achieve well, like his grandfather, he lives up to family expectations and this gives him more motivation to do well in school. Joseph is a boy who has witnessed the possibilities and benefits of having a good education within his own family and this spurs him on, along with his speculation that he possesses the ability and intelligence to do well.

#### 7.4 Accountability to extended social network

Shaun's academic motivations are not only impacted upon by his family members, but by others he perceives as having a close kin-like connection with. He described the closeness of the relationships he has with his friends' relatives and it is interesting to note that he feels like he is treated like a son by the male family members, and that Shaun later describes that he does not have contact with his own father. Shaun introduces a new idea, here, that adults' negative responses to poor grades can impact on boys' attitudes and approaches to school and education:

"But/ my friend's dad/ his DAD and his uncles

Treat me like their son/ SOMETIMES

Like, like/ his aunties and like-

If we was to get/ a bad grade

They would get like/ very angry at us"

(Shaun)

Shaun raises the issue of accountability, and suggests that he feels not only a sense of duty to please his mother but also his friends' family members, and that his sense of belonging within this other system, an extension of his own family, somehow serves to keep him on track. He is aware of the consequences of underachieving in terms of the responses of the supporting adults around him and does not want to anger them or let them down.

## Chapter 8: Performing Identities in Narrative Co-construction

### 8.2 Opposing labels and stereotypes

#### *8.2.1 Pupil typologies*

Michael is aware of implying his own identity as a geek through associating his friends with the label, and thus, says that he would not call them geeks but highlights their pragmatic efforts to achieve:

“And they were more of-/ I wouldn't say  
That they were GEEKS or anything  
But they DONE THEIR WORK  
When it was meant to be DONE  
And they had fun AT THE SAME TIME”

(Michael)

Some boys spoke about some peers' motivations to acquire popularity and reputations as being cool and their narrative constructions served to 'other' them. Joseph's narrative conveys his thoughts about why some peers aspire to be with particular groups that engage in 'bad' things:

“They might think that BECAUSE they're being BAD  
They're being UNIQUE-  
A lot of people-/ 'cos it gets people TALKING about-  
Like, some people don't like it



Some people might think/ oh that's cool

Like, 'cos it gets people talking

People might, like/ want to be the centre of attention/ all  
the time (.)”

(Joseph)

“There isn't really BAD FRIENDS

They're just there (.) for (.) POPULARITY/ basically (.)

It's like some people look to friends/ just for POPULARITY

So-/ 'cos they can say I know/ this person or that person

They feel they have/ some sort of BACK UP”

(Nigel)

Whilst Joseph expresses his perceptions of peers who engage in bad things and is thoughtful in his suppositions, in his positioning of them (i.e. using 'they' and 'some people'), he presents himself as not similarly inclined or holding the same beliefs. Consequently, Joseph's use of language intended to 'other' his peers enables him to construct himself as a boy who is less interested in peer attention and conformity than some pupils, as indeed Nigel's narrative echoes.

## 8.5 World views on equality

The performative functions of language allowed the boys to co-construct their identities within the interview contexts, and they were consciously demonstrating their self-concepts, values, beliefs and world views through their narratives. Three of the boys' narrative forms espoused their views about equality and justice, and through presenting their own experiences of being labelled and treated with prejudice and their reticence at labelling other peers as geeks, nerds or even 'bad' further reinforced this as a belief that they regarded as significant, that everyone should be treated fairly and not categorised or pigeonholed. That some of the boys maintain friendships with peers who are equally invested in academia as well as those who are less interested demonstrates their attempts not segregate themselves from others, but use their social positioning to help peers who are straying from education.

Joseph's narrative highlights that in some boys' descriptions of their sociability they also imply their views about sameness and difference, and where they stand on issues such as integration and assimilation:

“Like, my friends can link/ to EVERY group of friends

That's like me/ I can hang out with ANY group of friends

Or all different ethnic backgrounds-

I can get along/ with quite a lot of people”

(Joseph)

Joseph presents himself as adaptable, sociable and inclusive and this is suggestive of his ideals being that people should be able to adapt and get on with one another, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, abilities or

interests. Consequently, this narrative espouses his ideas about equality and fairness.

Nigel highlights his views on equality and fairness by presenting his experiences observations around selection for special treats and responsibilities in school, and later he further advocates that narrative interviews and research should occur more frequently in schools as it gives other pupils opportunities to be selected and heard. Nigel identifies the issue of biases in selection for rewards in schools and whilst acknowledging the effects that it can have on individuals, he expresses his own position on the matter:

“I’m doing GOOD in my SUBJECTS

But that LACK OF REWARDING/ or ADMIRATION for the  
GOOD/ sort of work/ that you’re DOING

Has an EFFECT/ ‘cos you’re less motivated

Like, why should I do THIS

When no-one’s even THINKING ABOUT IT

But then/ I think about how it will help me/ in LIFE-

That’s what keeps you GOING”

(Nigel)

Nigel’s switch between first and second-person narrative voice reinforces his views and positioning on the injustices within school, and he expresses them strongly and in a way that demonstrates its resonance

within him. However, he presents himself as able to push through and stay motivated by orienting himself to his future. This future orientation was prevalent in all the boys' narratives as important motivation to endure difficulties with friends, teachers and educational attainment and make the sacrifices associated with academic success.

### 8.6 Self-concepts

In viewing school as an institution by which opportunities were given to support and endorse future success, the boys maintained optimism about the future and an acceptance and resolve to work hard to achieve. Optimism and work ethics are central to the boys' identities and self-concepts, and were demonstrated through their narratives, as these quotes illustrate:

“And I was thinking/ one night, I sat DOWN

And I THOUGHT to myself/ what do I want to BE

When I'm older/ and (.) I thought about it

And I WANT to become an ACCOUNTANT”

“then I REFLECTED on MY grades

And I thought that I WAS passing both what-/ the ones I  
NEEDED TO

But if I want to CONTINUE and get that JOB/ then I ain't  
then-

‘Cos it says in the MEDIA/ that it's hard for peop-/  
TEENAGERS to get a job/ NOWADAYS

So I'll have to be a bit ABOVE/ more PEOPLE

So (.) you have to work HARDER"

(Michael)

Michael's narrative highlights that some boys plan for their futures and have a good idea of what it is they want to achieve, and are able to use those goals to evaluate and assess their likelihood of meeting them given their current educational performance and adapt and put in the effort required.

## Chapter 9: Reflections on the Methodology

### 9.1 Interview approach

As a researcher and an Educational Psychologist in training, accustomed talking with pupils about their education, careful consideration was given to my use of prompts and non-verbal communication. Ultimately, the warm appreciative inquiry approach that was adopted allowed the boys to talk about issues that they may never had discussed before, and offered a safe context for them to express or allude to difficult emotions and experiences with me, as an unfamiliar adult. Having the aide memoires as guides for the structure of the interviews whilst having the flexibility to ask more questions around issues that the boys spontaneously raised gave the opportunity for a richer picture to be illustrated and for depth and clarity to be obtained, which can be lost in more structured and rigid interviews.

The narratives captured by this research give an insightful and 'real-life' account of the boys' experiences of school and their peer relationships with deep exploration of the information that they shared. That this research is able to depict the boys' characters, identities and experiences through their use of language, narrative structure and voice, omissions and contradictions shows the strength in this method and its ability to reveal much more about personal lives than just what people say. This method allowed the data to speak for itself and whilst being honest about my perspective as a researcher, and attempting to interrogate my interpretations, I tried to divorce myself from the existing literature and not impose themes on the boys' narratives allowing them to surface naturally, using the structural linguistic approach to analysis.

### 9.3 Impact of rapport

I anticipated that mine and Chris' mutual discomfort would diminish in the second interview, yet, the second interview with Chris was just as awkward and the information that he shared with me was just as sparse, although I worked harder to prompt him when it was considered appropriate to do so and joined in with his laughter in places to aid the rapport-building process. Hearing Chris' responses to my questions, I did not think that he took the interview seriously and I found this mildly disrespectful and wasteful of our time together. I felt that I did not know much more about Chris after two interviews than I did before meeting him, except what his hobbies and interests were, and this was disappointing and led me to internalise some of this as a personal failure as a researcher. However, on reflection, I considered that Chris' might have been transferring his discomfort with the interview context onto me, and that I might have responded to his by absorbing this discomfort and in so doing felt disconnected to him and his experiences, which created a tension in the relationship and perhaps, a lack of trust and belief. Perhaps, the transference within our interactions perpetuated a cycle of discomfort for the both of us, which affected our communication, comfort and openness, in spite of my best efforts to engage with him as I did the other boys.

My speculations about Chris' discomfort with the interview held some validity as when asked about his thoughts on the process, after the second interview, Chris' response was suggestive of his concerns about the implications and impact of the research on him:

“Er (..) it's kinda WIERD”

“Er (..) I just don't like being RECORDED”

“I feel like it's just gonna HIT me some way

TR: Like it's gonna HIT you some way?

Chris: I mean, like/ later on in LIFE”

(Chris)

Chris was the only boy to describe the interview as 'weird' and to share that he did not like being recorded. Whilst having his voice recorded in the interviews may have caused him to feel somewhat uncomfortable, the obscurity in the comment he makes later, that he felt the interview would 'hit' him later in life, is suggestive that Chris' narratives were stifled by his interpretation of the research and myself, as the researcher, as untrustworthy. His narrative suggests that he had reservations about the research and what would be done with the data, so he ensured minimal impact and consequences by giving subdued answers and being evasive to questioning. Furthermore, Chris' narratives and language suggested that he is less mature than some of the other boys and did not take the research seriously, although, he was the only boy who asked about the other boys' responses in the interviews and whether they said similar things. This might have been suggestive of some investment in the study, although, I felt it was more reflective of his anxiety about what he had said or revealed in comparison to the other boys.

Chris' experience of the interview and my response to his thoughts and feelings about it highlighted that, for some boys, the narrative interview can be daunting and uncomfortable which can cause narratives to close down and result in an unclear picture of the interviewee's experiences being generated by the researcher. Rapport is an important condition of the success of narrative interviewing, particularly, with adolescent participants.



#### 9.4 Effects of interviews on participants

Other boys appeared to find the interviews non-pressuring, positive and a worthwhile experience. One of the boys took the opportunity to express his thoughts about being selected for inclusion in the study and what this meant for him and his friends, and I found his statements even more affirming of this study and its aims to present the unheard voices of high-attaining African Caribbean boys in research:

“they should have MORE stuff LIKE THIS

And not JUST for the SAME PEOPLE/ who get picked every TIME/ for the same THINGS

And, like-/ it was GOOD

Because I’ve never actually HEARD/ of an interview like THIS

But it’s good/ that for RESEARCH/ different PEOPLE are getting PICKED

Cos, like/ some of my OTHER friends as WELL

That you PICKED-/ they probably wouldn’t get PICKED/ for certain things”

“it’s been a good thing (..) yeah”

(Nigel)

Nigel’s appreciation for the study in giving other boys a chance to be selected and identified for inclusion in something exclusive and celebratory of their educational achievements highlights the significance of

my study and the opportunity that being interviewed gave to these boys. This study addresses not only biases and weaknesses in current research, but equality and social justice issues, and is viewed by Nigel as something that should be endorsed more. The views that Nigel espouse here are consistent with his narrative form and strong ideals about injustice in school and not being recognised or rewarded for achievements, so I received these comments with pleasure, feeling that in some small way, having included him in this process might have enabled him to think differently about not being recognised, and that this may enhance his self-esteem, confidence and motivation.

### 9.5 Interview process

That I interviewed the boys twice also impacted upon the narratives told and reported on, as Luke and Shaun suggest here:

Luke: A LOT easier than the FIRST TIME

TR: Yeah?

Luke: Cos I was READY for the QUESTIONS this time

TR: Do you think it was DIFFERENT?

Luke: Yeah/ more to SAY this time

TR: Uhum (..)

Luke: And I had DIFFERENT things to SAY as WELL

“it wouldn’t make too much SENSE REPEATING myself

So I think MOST of the stuff I mentioned

I HAVEN'T mentioned in (.) the PREVIOUS interview”

(Shaun)

“like, the questions were basically the SAME

I think I gave some different ANSWERS/ I'm not sure

Yeah it's ca-/ FINE really (..) no pressure”

(Michael)

The interview process being repeated with the boys offered them a second opportunity to share their experiences and develop or expand on issues that had been raised previously, as well as add new information and raise new issues. Some boys, like Shaun, used the second interview to tell me new things, whilst for Luke, the expectations he held for the second interview made it a more comfortable process for him. Michael did not feel pressured in the interviews and this expression highlighted the ability of the narrative interview to address power imbalances and create a climate of equality between interviewer and interviewee, and further, empower interviewees. The boys' comfort in the process would have likely impacted on the depth and breadth of the narratives told, as well as how they interpreted my role as a researcher and the relationship we developed over both interviews.

Although I considered that interviewing the boys twice was time consuming, particularly, having to transcribe and analyse all the data. The sequential execution and analysis of the interviews allowed me to have a better understanding of the boys and their experiences and engage with my own reflections, feelings and assumptions, before re-interviewing them. Whilst in the majority of the second interviews, I felt that I had

formed a relationship with the boys and was more relaxed about the interview and intrigued by what else they might say, interviewing on a separate occasion might also have been helpful for the boys.