Introduction

This paper reflects on some of the findings of a research project funded by a small British Academy grant. Best understood as a series of microstudies, it investigated whether it is possible to develop social capital for working class students in order to assist them in constructing ambitious educational, social and occupational trajectories. In other words, is it possible to reduce these students’ extra-classroom social disadvantage, with particular reference to university attendance, and at the same time neutralise the relative advantage possessed by their middle class peers?

But the data from over 50 interviews also suggested that parents at two independent schools, in different parts of England, were in effect operating a managed model of social reproduction to ensure that appropriate ambitions emerged in their children. To explain the iterative accumulation of ambition which appeared to be occurring, I developed a notion of aspirational identity and applied it to a variety of contexts (Riddell, 2007b and 2008, and a forthcoming book1).

This paper focuses on a comparison between the various ways the interviewed parents described their children, on the one hand, and how admissions tutors at two ‘prestigious’ universities – one Oxbridge and one other Russell group – described the ‘academic potential’ they say they seek in candidates for admission, on the other. The two sets of descriptions are quite close, and if considered as potential self-narratives for the students, make the development from one into the other comparatively easy for their schools.

I argue that the parental descriptions constitute an entitlement narrative which is a key part of forming aspirational identity, and find similar narratives used elsewhere – for example, in parenting chat rooms and guides. If these

1 Aspiration, Identity and Self-Belief: snapshots of social structure Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books
findings were to be replicated, this would have consequences for the way we help ‘aspirant’ working class students construct their self-narratives.

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The research project

The principal questions for the research were:

- how do middle class parents use their social capital to support their strategising, and construct ‘life projects’ for their children (Ball, 2003);
- is there a practical or structural possibility of developing analogous resources for children from working class backgrounds;
- do current Government policies, strategies and programmes make the development of such resources possible;
- could schools have a role in their development?

Interviews were held with:

- **Parents and staff at two independent schools** in different parts of England: a co-educational school of about 700 pupils in the south west and a boys’ school with about 1500 on roll in the north west. The focus of questioning for staff was on the motivational work undertaken with young people in the schools – how they raise aspirations and help form them, if they do. The focus for parents was on the development of aspiration, with whom this was discussed, and the use of external support (i.e. family, friends or acquaintances, websites, other information services).
- **Senior central government officials** in the DfES (now the DCFS and BIS), H.M. Treasury and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (now the DCLG). The focus was on which policies were concerned with reducing educational disadvantage, how they were arrived at, what their key ‘drivers’ were, and the potential role of social capital formation.
- **Local and other coordinators of national programmes**. These included a geographical spread of coordinators of the former Excellence in Cities gifted and talented strand, staff in the former National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (then at Warwick University), and regional staff in AimHigher. The focus for these interviews was the
mechanisms employed in each to raise, and most importantly, sustain 'higher' aspirations, once raised.

- **Admissions tutors and staff** at two Russell Group and one post-92 universities. The focus here was on their advertised criteria for undergraduate admission, the processes for determining whether potential students met them, how places were offered, and how they responded to students with 'academic potential' who may not present as suitable.

- **Staff, clients and ex-clients** from national and community-based organisations dealing with ‘hard to reach’ groups of young people. The focus of questioning was about what seemed to work, the nature of aspiration for ‘clients’ and how or whether these could be changed, raised and sustained; the potential role of social capital.

The accumulating data from these interviews were then used to inform critical readings of national policy documentation. Although many of the interviews were conducted in 2005 and 2006, the pace of the reformulation of national policy has required later re-interviews. And, although it is not relevant to this paper, it only proved to be possible to interview groups of ‘disengaged’ students over the summer of 2009.

**The notion of aspirational identity**

The model of social reproduction of the parents with children in independent schools is managed in the sense that the reported discussions about appropriate aspirations at home, which included a prestigious university, exactly mirrored those taking place in school, where there was a ‘drip feed process’ in place for progression to university admission. This term was used by one of the heads of sixth form to denote the sequence of micromanaged steps from getting the right GCSEs, through choice of A Level, writing the UCAS personal statement, and doing well at interview, to finally getting in.

Moreover, the choice by parents of independent school itself pre-selects peer groups in and out of school, even for non-boarding establishments, which are most likely to share similar aspirations. The families’ social lives were spent with more people like them – social contacts would be with GPs, other professionals and managers. And their wider social networks, or ‘weak ties’, drawn on for such matters as checking out the advice of the school or arranging work experience, included, at their most developed, friends in Rothschild’s or acquaintances who were Cambridge professors.

In developing the notion of aspirational identity to help interpret the implications of the data for the personal development of young people, I have drawn on both Bourdieu’s notion of habitus and the cyclical, iterative models of learning developed by Andrew Pollard and colleagues at various times, that give rise to the notion of epistemic identity.

The notion of habitus was developed by Bourdieu to describe ‘embodied dispositions’, that is the dynamic mental framework we all carry, which has been formed by previous social experience of all kinds, and which in turn frames and interprets new experiences, helping us decide what needs to be
done. It is discussed in many places (see Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Crucially, habitus itself is changed by progressive encounters, and in turn reframes and re-interprets subsequent ones. Similarly, Pollard's notion of epistemic identity (see Pollard with Filer, 1996; Pollard and Triggs, 2000) embodies the idea that a person carries their accumulated learning experiences, strategies and resources from one social learning experience to another. Here, learning outcomes are maximised and most intensively cumulative when the rules for learning – assumptions, use of language, mechanics of learning, adult/child relationships and expectations – are the same in each social context. Historically, this has advantaged children from middle class backgrounds and, as argued elsewhere, engenders learning disadvantage for children from working class or culturally different ones (Riddell 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007a).

Both these concepts elucidate the relationship between social structure, on the one hand, and agentic action, on the other, which it frames: what comes into the head, what choices seem 'right'. But it in turn is created and recreated by repeated actions, either in terms of relative social (and economic) advantage for some, or disadvantage for others.

To return to the young people attending independent schools, as the young people move from school to home and back and through other social and community situations, they experience similar representations of what is important. They receive clear expectations of how they ought to be (people like them), what they should spend their time on, how they should behave, and what would be the appropriate ambitions for them, because of who and what they are.

In general, part of what we think about ourselves involves taking on the views of others about us – especially if expressed by people in socially ‘approved’ situations, that is, that do not appear ‘odd’, and where we do not feel as though we are a ‘fish out of water’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992 p127, and Grenfell and James, 1998). The ‘self’ is constituted socially:

the self... is essentially a social structure and it arises in social experience...
it is impossible to conceive of a self arising outside of social experience.  
Mead 1934, p140

As the young people move from place to place, they begin to absorb and accept these futures and the discursive practices (Foucault, 1969) in which they are expressed and framed. They begin to see them as part of their ‘destiny’, their self-futures, as valorised destinations, their ‘subjective opportunity structure’ (Gorard et al, 2007, p129). As their understanding and experience develop, the young people begin to accrete their own stories about themselves, their self-narratives, expressed in the terms of the vocabulary and thought structures they have absorbed: the discourses practised in nearly all of the contexts of their lives.

Although the young people, according to the parents interviewed, may accept these futures with varying degrees of enthusiasm and engagement, they will
find it extremely difficult to escape the thought patterns of the discourse and find alternative narratives and vocabulary to rebel fundamentally against them. Other expressions of destiny, and the words and thought processes to express them, are not routinely available to them.

And as the school breaks down the steps to getting into a good university even further, it becomes more difficult to find practical, alternative, generic paths – they will develop a generalised feeling that this is ‘right’, and will get to know that ‘other people of my age, background and attending schools like mine “go to uni”’, but a good one. Through the cyclical movements to and from school and other social contexts, this understanding develops cumulatively. The young people ‘come to see the relationships between school, higher education and work’ (Ball 2003, p84) by this process - one function of a discursive practice.

They now understand the steps: they have acquired a realisable aspirational identity. It too develops cyclically and cumulatively like epistemic identity. And it similarly depends for its actualisation on the interrelations in destiny narratives between home, school and other contexts, and whether they are mutually reinforcing or not. For independent school students, they are so; where they are not, they may not support, at best, the development of specific aspirations, and at worst, may undermine them.

There is a fuller discussion of this notion and the evidence behind it in Riddell (2007a) and my forthcoming book. The contexts through which these young people move and in which their aspirational identities develop is shown in Figure 1.

In this sense, these young people at independent school are born to rule – they are chosen by birth, and/or social circumstances. They have been preparing and been prepared all their lives for ‘prestigious’ universities and careers. Their contexts, acquired discourses and narratives largely and overwhelmingly develop and reinforce their intended aspirational identities, and give them the technical know how to achieve and maintain them. They are working to achieve their class positions, as Mike Savage (2000) expresses it. Their working class and ‘disengaged’ counterparts, on the other hand, find it hard to work for anything other than their current social position. This too is further discussed elsewhere (Riddell, 2007b and 2008).
Parental statements as narratives of entitlement
It became clear in the interviews conducted with parents that they all had a story to tell about what their children were like, a narrative, often based on obvious achievements, but in actual fact constructed to describe what they were capable of and had a right to expect. Considering the processes involved in constructing aspirational identity, as a crucial component of life project, these narratives assume an important role.

Many of the parents had a developed notion of relative pecking order when speaking about their children, which did not necessarily see them at the ‘top’. Consider the following comments (I have not named the schools their children were attending):

...she's one of these where all her friends ring her up for advice on how to do their Maths.

(Anne)

... we were discussing it last night. He thinks he’s a rung below Oxbridge… (but he) had a go for a couple of courses and various interviews. (He had) a leadership interview. He had to go to a current affairs role-play … it was a really demanding interview … (but) he got the (Sandhurst) scholarship.

(Charlotte)

A great sportsman, intellectually he’s quite bright, not perhaps as bright as (his brother) but he got a fist full of A-C’s in GCSE and A, B, C in his A-levels… he mixed sciences and arts at A-level… and he used to play county sports as well. He used to play county hockey and cricket. So he was good
all rounder… he’s a bright kid, he’s no mug and he's immensely talented as far as sport and art is concerned.

(Deborah)

Deborah here describes another of her talented children:

…he’s read a phenomenal amount and he’s a kid that reads The Times from cover to cover every morning. …he’s very aware and alert, so I think ‘well, good luck to you sunshine’ because … his ambition is to be a film producer … and he’s been very sure from a very early age of what he wants to do… He’s a very musical boy, taught himself to play the guitar… I think he will be very successful in what he wants to do … but also, you know, he’s an intellectual as well.

And yet another:

I suspect she will get a run of As to Cs… I would say, she’s a good average, slightly above average intellect… I think she will be successful, she’s quite single minded, she’s very self contained as a person …she’s hugely popular socially. She is befriended by sixth form boys and girls alike and kids lower down in the school.

Fiona, with children at various independent schools, describes her children thus, starting with her son:

… he did get ten A stars, he has got very high AS Levels, very high: out of 300, over 295. (He) is … good across the board. The Classics master want(s) him to do Classics at Oxford, the languages people (too), you know … He was (top) right across the board and … he was top of the year in history.

… my daughter, who’s doing her GCSEs, is very much artistic and musical. She ought to be human rights lawyer, but she really enjoys philosophy and ethics and stuff, and so I think she will do a degree in that first, and see where that leads her…

Jenny describes the acquisition of literacy by her daughter before starting school. She is now a medical student:

…she started reading very early of her own accord …she would ask me what she saw was written…. And she understood. (We) do lots of things at home (but) I didn’t push her… She was quite… receptive… she was very into the written word.

Kerry makes a number of reflective comments about her son who is in the sixth form:

He was obviously very bright…. He’s an academic child, he enjoys studying … he’s always been interested in history and classics right from the start – it’s always been his favourite subject… he was going to look for dinosaurs like most little boys, but he’s moved more into archaeology and studying history… and he loves languages… I think that he obviously has a flair for learning the languages.
He has always been interested in words. Right from being very small, he’s always read a lot and he was always trying to write before he really even could. He would dictate things to me and I would have to write them down.

He’s thought about journalism as well – he has a love of writing, so I think that would appeal. He’s always been the sort of lad who… takes a lot of time to mull things over. He processes them on his own.

It ought to be said that Kerry’s very positive comments were also interspersed with apparently realistic notions of her son’s limitations. Two comments from other parents:

... (and) he has a particular gift for picking up how people speak. He listens and it’s not lost on him – he’s almost a photographic memory. He’s good at dialects and regional variations. He’s doing German, French, and he did Italian GCSE this year, just to do another language, because he had the chance… and in every other respect he’s a bright, intelligent, attractive, gifted and able young man. And he’s hard working.

(Peter)

(He’s) very awkward and argumentative. He always has to be right. And I think he usually is right, which is more annoying. But… a born leader. When he was at school, he would be captain… he wasn’t one year, but he had a bad leg then.

All he wanted to be… was basically to earn lots of money. That’s all he wanted. He’s a snappy dresser, he likes clothes, he likes cars, he wants to buy a Porsche … in his GCSEs he got ten As, six A’s and he got 3 A-levels – As – and he was chosen to do a special paper… and he got top marks in that. But because of how he is… I mean, he’s a sportsperson, because he’s a woman’s man, he’s an academic, and he’s really an all-round person, you know...

(Adrian)

These comments have by no means exhausted the data. Among other stories, a boy was ‘astounded’ he had only been awarded an A, rather than an A* in his exam. And in another case, a boy had written his SATs papers at primary school back to front, in mirror writing, but nevertheless they were all correct.

These stories were often related with sense of pride, and achievement, but not, I would judge, overweeningly so: this was all normal for them. Many of the parents were also too clear about the risks remaining to their children’s trajectories, though objectively, overall, they were secure. Nevertheless, as a group, these are statements of entitlement: because my children are like this (eg bright) and have these qualities, they are entitled to attend a particular school and for particular things to be provided for them.

Among these parents, the sense of entitlement had been realised by choosing independent school, often, it must be said, against the reported poor quality on offer at state primary and secondary schools, but not always. Here are a few examples:
He’s one of these children that need to be pushed. He was just not being pushed at that school at all, which was when we came and had a look at the lower school here, liked what we saw and decided we’d move him there.

….one of the drivers for moving her was because at Bolingbroke (state primary) they had this situation whereby they would have two years in the same class, and where you’ve got bright children that is fine if they’re the lower group in a multi-tiered class. But once they're the top group, you don’t get the challenge…

(Ann)

I’m not a competitive parent but I think he ought to be in the top stream. Nobody would have it. And he would do extraordinarily well in exams… and then when he came to decide, they’d put him down to do dual award science… I was cross because… he’s smart. And the proof was in the pudding because – hello - he got three A*s. But I felt the staff were reluctant actually to listen to me … you know…

(Deborah)

He didn’t enjoy primary school at all: he did the first year in a state school and at the end of that they called us in and said… they couldn’t cater for him, that they had gone through the books for the school… and… their education authority… couldn’t provide the resources they felt necessary for him at the age of five. Well he was five and a half or whatever, he had just done the reception year…

(Fiona)

But Fiona’s son fitted in at selective independent school:

He’s found a niche here of similar boys: they’re all fairly studious and quiet and that’s the good thing about (this school), you can find your niche, particularly once you start your options. You tend to be channelled with kids with the same sort of … generally similar boys, you know.

Kerry, with her son at the same school, relates similar things in first this interchange:

Kerry: He had been marked down as special needs at primary school and there weren’t the resources to help him…. The teachers were wonderful but they didn’t have the resources. I mean he was obviously above the standard of the other children, so I felt he needed an extra push and extra help to keep his interest going.

Interviewer: You didn’t think you’d find that in the local state school?

Kerry: No, I didn’t. We looked round all the schools and thought about it very carefully.

And then in this comment:

The things that he was reading… we looked around and at some schools I thought ‘well no, he’s well beyond this already’, so he did need an extra push.
It’s having other kids who’re on the same level as him to discuss books and things… he had brilliant friends at primary school but they didn’t have the level… the same sort of interests. So I think that’s why he fitted in here, because there were other boys the same as him.

Lynne, with one son at the same school and one elsewhere, similarly explains how her son settled in:

…within this school … you’re inundated with talent and clever, successful, motivated children. Also, one of the things that makes it unique is that the cleverer you are – it’s not a problem - whereas in state schools you can be almost hounded for being that way… There are lots of weird and wonderful kids here, and my (son) doesn’t really fit in that weird and wonderful bracket, but he’s absolutely running with them. My godson… lovely boy, but he’s on a different planet. They don’t mind, and no one’s ever saying, ‘why did you do that?’

Finally Peter said ‘we looked at the local provision and we were terrified’ (showing how ‘unthinkable’ some options are for middle class parents - Ball, 2003, p 65). But once at independent school:

…we thought it was good because they were thinking laterally, they were free thinkers. And when we looked round the school, we saw one boy going past down the corridor, juggling!

But I’ll tell you what they don’t do: they don’t recognise mediocrity. You know, you don’t get a certificate for being there. That’s a difference I’ve noticed from primary to secondary, but also in this school, they don’t say ‘well done’ if it’s just ordinary. There’s not much that’s ordinary around here, do you know what I mean?… I can’t remember what they said, but it was something like ‘excellence is normal here’.

Commentary
In summary, these young people are almost invariably able, bright or very bright, intelligent, and ahead of their peers at primary school. They are variably academic, gifted and talented, intellectual, all-rounders, sporty, socially successful and with leadership potential. They read (a lot, phenomenally, The Times from cover to cover). They love words, writing. They listen well (have a gift for picking up quickly how people speak), mull things over (reflect) and have developed early interests in particular academic subjects (archaeology, history, philosophy, classics, languages), or careers (human rights lawyer, journalist).

The parents’ sense of entitlement arises from their children’s need to be pushed, challenged, be in the top stream, have access to a wider range of books and resources than those available in primary school. They need routinely to be with other children like them, who may be talented, clever, motivated, possibly weird and wonderful; who are on the same level to discuss books ‘and things’, and are free and lateral thinkers.

For these parents, their sense of entitlement has been realised or enhanced by places at independent schools, but often began with state schools not
being able to cope with their children, in their view, and their not having either the appropriate resources or peer group.

**Academic potential as an admission criterion**

The continuing social imbalance in the intakes to top universities (see HESA statistical releases), and their significance for providing the gateway to top professions (Panel on Fair Access, 2009) and global elites (Brown *et al.*, 2008), provide good reasons for admissions policies and procedures being the focus of the sort of national attention in the UK not given them by Schwartz (DfES, 2005).

What admissions staff do practically, of course, is not select for global elites, but try and select the candidates whom they think are best capable of benefiting from the demands of existing courses, on which they are often teachers, in the way they are structured and offered to students now.

Of the three universities visited, one was Oxbridge, one another member of the Russell Group and another new. There were many differences between admissions at the three universities, but at the first two, the significant characteristic was that there were between four and ten applicants per place on many courses, often all presenting with three predicted grade As at A Level. It is on these first two I am going to concentrate.

Admissions staff variably examined the 500 word UCAS personal statement, marked work sent from their school, and a variety of additional entrance tests, including specific national ones for medicine, law and others (the UCAS website listed eleven such additional admissions tests for 2009 admissions). For subject departments inviting candidates for formal interviews, sometimes additional written tests were set.

In each of the universities, I interviewed the head of admissions, an academic from a subject department involved in making decisions about offering places, a widening participation officer if they had one, and other staff as appropriate. I also read critically university admissions policies, both general and subject specific, and prospectuses and websites.

One of the striking things about the data, however, is the significance attached to what both the selective universities described as the academic potential they were seeking, and the similar terms in which it is described. Although this is a microstudy, and as it happens I was looking at academic subjects in the humanities, this suggests a similar professional narrative might be found elsewhere.

*Written criteria for admission*

The following information is taken from reading prospectuses and a series of web searches undertaken between November 2008 and January 2009.

The Oxbridge says that, while its tutors will consider all the evidence listed above, they were more interested in candidates’ ‘overall academic ability, and their potential and motivation for the course’ than the particular programmes
which had been followed at school. In the interviews, they would want to find out whether candidates ‘can think clearly and analytically’. They are not so much concerned with what candidates know as how they think about it and how they use it. Interviews will seek evidence of interests in the subject and ‘candidates’ ability to discuss them critically’. One of the college’s introduction to itself (applications to Oxbridge are made on the basis of subject plus college) states that ‘the most important quality for which we are looking is high academic potential – ie an intelligent, enthusiastic and independent-minded interest in your chosen subject and a willingness to work at it’.

The Russell Group university was one of those which had been concerned by the narrow social range of its previous admissions, and had acquired a reputation for looking carefully at the educational background of all its candidates, or, for discriminating against independent schools, according to some heads, including the ones I interviewed. It tries hard to be fair and demonstrate its commitment to be so: at least one of the interviewers, for example, will be ‘trained in fair and effective recruitment techniques’. It points out that ‘a range of contextual information is taken into account to help us assess a candidate’s true academic ability and potential’. In addition to performance at school, admissions staff consider the recent general performance of the candidate’s school or college and ‘exceptional challenges which the candidate may have faced (such as serious illness or bereavement)’.

Again, as well as the evidence listed above, departmental admissions staff are looking for the ‘necessary skills and capabilities to pursue a degree programme’ and whether it is ‘appropriate to his/her interests and aspirations’. Principally, they will be interested in ‘candidate’s interest in and commitment to the subject, and his/her capacity for clear thinking and oral expression, for the critical analysis of arguments and evidence, and for working independently at degree level’. Evidence of coherent, analytical and critical thinking will be sought from the personal statement, with credit being given for ‘well-constructed and accurately expressed argument’. References for candidates should provide ‘evidence of high levels of motivation, an ability to work independently, and intellectual inquisitiveness’, and should give a ‘detailed assessment of the applicant’s powers of critical analysis and expression’.

*What admissions staff said*

All staff interviewed – academic and administrative – described how their institutions’ admissions policies and procedures were used as the basis for decision making. The notion of academic potential and what it was potential for emerged at different stages of the interviews.

First, Terry, at the Russell Group university, comments on what they are looking for in the various evidence they have available to them:

… We’re looking for potential, with a sense that potential may not have yet been fully realised in terms of GCSE or AS or A2 grades. And so we take
grades into account, but we’re probably much more focused on the student and what the student is saying about themselves…

… we are looking for enthusiasm about the subject, commitment to the subject, reading wider than just the A-level texts...

And it’s trying to in some way get a sense of whether the student is committed to study, has got some ideas and a spark of something called potential that we could work with. Our interviews are trying to provoke and discover that…

And again:

… (we’re trying) to discover hidden potential there, which might be a trajectory in terms of where students are: is there a sense of trajectory within their exam results, is that something that teachers are… talking about?

… what we’re looking for is probably a student who’s getting decent A-level results … has commitment, (and) has developed independent learning.

Second, Malcolm, the Oxbridge Admissions Tutor, shares responsibility across the university for admissions to his subject area and is responsible for admissions overall at his particular college. All candidates who are possibly going to be offered a place at this university are interviewed – unlike at the Russell Group university. These statements were made at separate stages of his interview:

What we look for is academic excellence. We certainly like to have people who enjoy other things, are good at sport and … have got their Duke of Edinburgh award, but that would not be the deciding factor. It’s of course… of interest, but we really look for academic excellence… When I say excellence, I mean their potential, academic potential, that’s what we’re looking for, because… it’s the key factor, so of course we pay attention to that.

… all the time what one looks for is, as I said, in a general sense, academic potential… (the ability to) present your own views and listen, and take on board, and critically assess, not just swallow… critically assess any point of view (that one) might produce. So that’s the sort of thing which we (look for)…

And during the interview itself:

… it doesn’t matter at all if they’re at ease or quick witted. We want someone who… has his or her own ideas, is prepared to listen to alternative ideas, and is prepared and able to synthesize and make something out of them. That’s what … my ideal candidate would be.

For Malcolm, the interview responses from candidates can also be a good measure of how candidates will be able to benefit from the style of teaching in Oxbridge, through small group or individual tutorials. The two go hand in hand for him, so he will see:

… what sort of things interested (them). (I’ll) pick a topic or two and see what they make of them, see if they can synthesise and get beyond that.
On the other hand:

... it’s a bad sign if they say ‘no, no, it can’t be, it just can’t be’. What you want is for them to put an alternative view, or say ‘well, I don’t quite understand the point about that’, or ‘I can see how that addresses one part of problem but not the other half’, or something like that. So, that’s one of the things we look for...

And after a discussion about apocryphal stories about Oxbridge interviews (such as being asked to define a paper clip), he said:

...often I will say, ‘take your time’. Some of the candidates feel that... it’s like a chat show and they must be quick at repartee. And often I would much prefer someone who says ‘give me a minute, I’m not quite sure’, who actually thinks rather than just comes out with a quick clever response….I think (we) would prefer something thoughtful rather than something quick. It’s not that we don’t allow them to think that fast. It’s just that some people think quickly, but it’s not in itself the criterion...

So as well as the academic potential, therefore, Malcolm emphasised the fact that they were looking for ‘teachability’, the ‘ability to benefit from a tutorial, from tutorial style teaching’. He gave an example from one of his current students who described his own admissions interview as a ‘mini tute’.

For Terry, this was also important:

We need to get a sense of whether this student could cope as a first year - and although there are possibilities for them to develop skills and for us to try and do as much as we can - we have to have someone in the position where they’re starting to think like a first year undergraduate.

Admissions tutors, according to Terry, must ask ‘could this student cope. Would this student benefit and be the kind of person that would really thrive as an undergraduate?’.

**Commentary**

In summary, these universities are looking for academic potential plus the capability of thriving as a first year undergraduate. They are looking for interest in, enthusiasm for, and commitment to, the subject in their potential students, who will have read round the subject and beyond the A Level texts. They need not necessarily be fast thinkers, but their thinking will need to be clear and analytical. They will be able to listen carefully to, and assess critically, evidence, arguments and views put to them. They will be able to synthesise information and viewpoints, and present their own views coherently and constructively. What they know now is not as important as how they think about, use and express it.

Their teachability as an undergraduate will include these qualities, particularly in the context of the Oxbridge tutorial system, but all of them are expected to be inquisitive and motivated. Above all, they must be able to work independently.
In parenthesis, it is worth noting that these qualities are assessed by a number of means, all of which have weaknesses in the eyes of the academics and administrative staff using them, including the variable degree of coaching and preparation which has taken place (‘polish’, as Malcolm called it). In addition, although all the staff interviewed were keen to widen access, and were looking for potential, they were clear that the students should be almost ready to be undergraduate students by the time their applications were being considered, and to take the course as currently designed and offered. And although they either made differential grade offers or would like to, depending on the applicants’ schools or colleges, there was limited scope because of the quality of the applicants overall.

**How narratives of entitlement could become ones of academic potential**

It is relatively easy to understand, from the descriptions of the detailed preparation for university admissions given by the independent schools, how the ‘polish’ described by Malcolm could be acquired by their students. But there are also some very similar formulations between the two sets of descriptive statements:

- The academics’ desired interest in, and enthusiasm for, the subject in their potential students, is reflected in the parents’ descriptions of early developing interest in a range of academic subjects and wider activities (drama, sport) outside;
- Potential students, according to the academics, need to have read round the subject and beyond the A Level texts; the parents described their children’s extensive reading (and writing) habits - often of books well ahead of those provided for their peers.
- Though not needing to be necessarily fast thinkers, potential students’ thinking will need to be clear and analytical, according to university staff. They will be able to listen carefully to, and assess critically, arguments and views put to them, and be able to present their own views. According to their parents, the independent school students are quick (or bright) and persuasive individuals. They listen well, picking things up quickly and mulling things over.

So these independent school students are hearing these narratives about themselves in the home and, because of the processes described earlier of developing aspirational identity, they are acquiring self-descriptions, at a deep ontological level, that are beginning to be like how they will need to be thinking about themselves in a university context. This is good preparation for writing a UCAS personal statement and going to interview. The terms they will have acquired in this particular discursive practice, within which their self-narratives are being expressed, will be the ones that spring to mind, at a deep level from habitus. This is how social structure works – through the very words we use.

The job for these students’ independent schools is then clear and much less than that facing schools preparing ‘aspirant’ working class students for university, whose home narratives may be positive and supportive, but whose
parents may not be pursuing ‘middle class cultivation techniques’ (Gillies, 2007, p97). The greater distance between home and school narratives may be exacerbated there from an early age by parents’ concern about staying out of trouble, and contact with school being limited to the formal occasions such as parents’ evenings (Gillies, ibid, and Riddell, 2007b). In the middle class home, children will continue to be ‘presented with possibilities’ about themselves, as one of the parents said, about what they are like and capable of.

So to reach the characteristics of academic potential, the independent school needs to ensure the academic grounding for university entrance. Both the independent schools I visited (and many more on the web) expound the academic qualifications of their staff, including at doctoral level. ‘Scholarship’ was expressed as a core value at one of the schools I visited and both boasted that a measure of good teaching was going beyond the requirements of the syllabus. The closeness of independent schools to prestigious universities is even expressed in their buildings – ivy-clad and set out round quadrangles. Any Oxbridge graduate, such as myself, immediately feels at home there. Finally, nothing will be left to chance because of the drip-feed processes of preparation for university in place at these, as it happens, mono-focal establishments.

**Wider relevance of the microstudies: the discursive practices of parenting**

A larger sample of interviews in universities would be necessary to confirm or otherwise whether the ‘common feelings’ across the two universities are part of a wider professional discourse about the nature of academic life and potential, as I have said. I suspect it is.

But the ‘my child is bright and therefore needs the right sort of provision’ entitlement narrative does seem to be widespread. The ESRC study *Identity, Educational Choice and the White Urban Middle Classes* (see Crozier et al, 2008 and James and Beedell, 2009) suggests it is. And Lucey and Reay (2002) highlight ‘the unquestioned belief that middle-class parents have that their children are clever, or at the very least, have great potential’, such that they need ‘levels of input which they perceive are not available in the local… comprehensive schools’ (p329). If these narratives are allied with the concerted cultivation described by Gillies (ibid) above and Lareau (2000), which we know are middle class traits, they will have the effect of promoting advantage through the processes described.

Many readers of this paper will have come across this narrative in their professional lives. Nevertheless, it is interesting to ask how the parents interviewed for this research and many other projects take on the assumptions and vocabulary to describe and interpret their experiences with their children. In fact, this discursive practice is ‘out there’ in the vernacular discussions of parenting, and parents’ roles in relation to schooling. This was confirmed by reading online discussions on parenting websites over several months, including requests for advice and the ‘expert’ responses provided. These sites are now a huge phenomenon and, in no particular order, include:
The same sorts of discussion can be found in threads on national newspaper sites, often after a particular opinion piece. In addition, the UK Government hosts www.parentscentre.gov.uk and many councils provide advice to parents on their own websites (for example: suggestions for parents of able children on a London Borough website), without necessarily providing interactive web sessions or chat rooms. Not to be left out, pressure groups such as MENSA and the National Association for Gifted Children also host advice for parents of gifted or very intelligent children. So this huge volume of information, generative of a discursive practice about a sort of parenting, comes from a mix of providers, including companies seeking revenue through advertising and associated publications, self-help groups such as Netmums, statutory authorities, pressure groups and national newspapers.

The topics covered on these combined websites are immense in range, and cover the whole age range, from pre-natal to applying for university. Many postings on chatrooms are straightforward requests for advice, or are seeking others with similar or different views on particular matters. Parents tell many stories about their children, but the notions of brightness and ability, and the difficulty of getting what parents want or need out of school (not just in the state sector), as in the above discussion, are there in a good proportion of entries.

The following brief extracts from themes, titles, discussion topics and thread contributions were active in 2008 and 2009. These thread contributions are broken up at some points to make them easier to read and these particular examples were variously hosted by Education.com, mumsnet, raising kids, parents connect, American Mensa, The Times online and netmums, and are all made by different people. Where it is not obvious, I have included a category after the quotation.

…bright vs gifted: is there a difference? …all gifted children are considered bright, but not the other way round (expert advice)

bright child, low average attainment ‘cos specific learning diffs, role of school? … my 15 year old daughter still cannot spell or punctuate…. She is predicted A/A* for content… (thread contribution)
good luck everyone who is not happy with the way your child’s school is handling things and I hope you all find the help and support you need….

I know exactly what you mean about being unsure what to push for – I get easily put off when teachers act dismissive …since I made loads of fuss a few weeks ago… my daughter loves writing

Like yours, my (daughter) is really bright – certainly in the way she thinks and talks – but finds it really hard to learn at school…

…this type of child is hardest to get help for…. Exactly because they are bright with lots of potential…

…school aren’t bothered…

… too bright for teacher? …. My 6 year old is very alert to her surroundings… when the Mir space station was coming down, she watched it intently on tv….she began excitedly to tell her teacher about it… (but) the teacher just shrugged…

You certainly have a bright little girl there! (expert reply)

And in a similar vein:

My bright 16 yr-old is on the verge of dropping out of college just three months into his AS-levels…

You say your son is bright, and if he could get A or B grades without too much catching up, he certainly is… (expert reply)

…Try to determine whether it’s a case of ability or confidence… often the performance of people with ability does not live up to expectation… due to factors such as ill health, emotional upsets or even practical issues. (a different expert reply)

How can I help my very bright child develop social skills? …

… The socio-emotional development of a gifted child can be very difficult… (expert reply)

The following are all comments posted by parents:

Intelligence: (is) not enough to succeed in school… my son is bright, above average in many ways… more than a 100-watt bulb in a galley of dim candles… (but) you’d never tell from his (school) grades… (which are) in at least the top ten per cent …on a standardised scale…

My little boy is currently in year 1… he has always been a very bright boy – he knew the alphabet at 14 months and was reading fluently by 2 ½ years… he had various problems in pre-school… being disruptive due to being bored…

Anyone else out there who has a Gifted and Talented child? ...(Mine) is 5 and a half and we knew she was special since she was … 1 yr old. By 16 months
she could read all the letters of the alphabet which she learnt by her self…
she was a fluent reader before she was 3… she has a really strong memory,
more for visual and factual things …

… at the moment we have a problem with my eldest (still only 5) in that she
has ‘given up’. It is all boring and she won’t do stuff…

My son is only 2 ½… he’s definitely quite far ahead of his peers… he’s been
able to recognise the alphabet for quite a while… Now he has a large
vocabulary … he’s just started wanting to form letters… Hubs has a 150s
IQ… so all this leads me to think Son is going to be quite bright.…

… my son has been moved into a mixed age class… the older kids are bored,
the teacher has no support and does not seem to be coping… From being a
bright happy social child I have an unhappy lonely child who is falling
behind… I have complained…

I have a longstanding concern that she will be bored and or not challenged
enough at school… my big fear is that… at school… she will languish, play,
muck about, get bored until all the other children ‘catch up’, and by then she
will have lost the impetus to learn…

When I briefly spoke to her teacher… she just talked about teaching her
phonics, completely missing the point that she already reads superbly… I had
a similar response from my son’s teachers, saying that they couldn’t let him
have books that were above the level of the class until he had been tested …

These are instances of the same discursive practice called in aid by the
parents interviewed for this research. They may well be statements of the
‘entitled middle class self’ (Skeggs, 2004), but the following last quotation
should remind everyone who reads these entries out of detached interest of
the anguish behind some of them:

I think you sound like a fantastic mum and you should be very proud of all the
hard work you do with your son. As mums we never stop worrying…

These chat room discussions have all the advantage of raw immediacy, but
the narratives and the practices of which they are a part are also found in
softer form in a number of parenting guides in print, some of them associated
with the websites listed on page 16. Most of the more general guides, such as
on new babies, or toddlers, do not say much about education and deal with
more prosaic matters such as diet, but there are also school-focused guides
in print such as Wilce (2004) or Gilbert (2007). These are very much for the
Education Consumer – how to make sense of and get the most for your child
out of school admissions, for example; how to choose the right school, and
how to assess it, including the sort of headteacher; how to appeal and how to
complain once a place has been secured.

Both these books have short sections on giftedness, and both talk about the
possibility of the gifted child becoming bored if not stretched. Gilbert includes
a description of a parent complaining about a child not being put in the top
set. These books, and others like them no doubt, situation education as a
series of important encounters to be maximised to ensure the realisation of children’s life projects.

There is another sort of parental guide such as Tynan (2008), which was written to accompany a television series. Again, the subtitle of uncovering your child’s hidden gifts echoes the discussions on giftedness elsewhere (gifts from whom?). The notion behind Tynan is how ‘brilliant’ you and your child are, or will be (by the time you have got to chapter 10), and therefore, again, about choosing the school which is right, and getting the most out of it.

Implications
The upshot of the microstudies and this wider survey of discursive practices of (middle class) parenting appears to be that notions of scholarship, and academic potential, are owned by middle class parents, because they are closer to their lives, with the complete and complex cultural congruity between family life, leisure activities and expectations, and the defining expressive and instrumental orders of the classroom. It could be said that this is because middle class parents are better at it, as Dave Aaronovitch does here in The Times:

The reason why some children do far better than others is obvious… one parent in my daughter’s class complained that her six-year old son…was in no condition to do the boring reading that the school expected… Boys play football she announced….. Money itself is rarely the explanation… Perhaps one reason for the growing advantage of the middle classes is not that they are richer, but just that they assimilate better all the dire warnings about face-time, junk food and smoking. None of it is a mystery…

(Dave Aaronovitch, writing in The Times, June 12th, 2007)

And there is some evidence that the ‘sensitive parenting’ of middle class parents, described by Gillies and others, may be the most effective in ensuring educational progress. So it is not surprising that structurally, academic universities are middle class in the UK. Attempts to increase the working class intake will depend for their success on bridging a larger aspirational and narrative gap, and inducting them into different habits of mind and thinking about themselves - things which current social structure works against and makes more difficult.

Radnor et al (2007), in an article drawing from interviews with school gifted and talented coordinators on how they do their work, including in pushing potentially first time university attenders, describe how coordinators:

…focus in on those pupils that display in any way at all the aptitudes, abilities, behavioural characteristics, that put them in the frame to be nurtured and supported, extended and enriched. They give them strategies and training to draw them further into the cultural traits and mores of the middle class that make up the highest percentage in the university population.

(Radnor et al, 2007, p292)

So, if students are displaying incipient features of bright behaviours, they will be closer to the notion of what an ideal first year undergraduate is conceived
to be by those academics who will teach them, and they will be given a series of experiences and activities to get them closer still, by the time they go to interview or have to write about themselves. They will become more middle class in that sense. Part of the task, surely, is also to develop similar narratives in their parents and end this social and cultural hegemony.

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