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Thesis title: Barriers to education for students attending a secondary school before, during and after its transfer to an Academy
Qualification: PhD
Date awarded: 09 August 2010

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**Barriers to education for students attending a secondary school
before, during and after its transfer to an Academy**

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
PhD

School of Education

University of Sheffield

August 2010

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores multiple barriers to education experienced by students living in poverty and attending a secondary school based within one of the most disadvantaged areas in the UK. It reveals that students living in poverty experience multiple barriers during the course of their secondary education, some of which parallel the introduction of policy initiatives ostensibly intended to equalise education experience. The study includes a focus on the changing of a school to an Academy which took place mid-way through the research period. Very little first-hand research has been permitted within Academies to date making the investigation relatively unusual. Methodological tools included observation and interviews with students, school staff, and professionals associated with the school. The data shows that students living in poverty experience a range of barriers to secondary education. The transition of the focal school to an Academy was intended to raise standards but the research findings raise problems in relation to this agenda, including a worrying increase in the rate of pupil exclusions. It is concluded that changing the focal school to an Academy did not ease the barriers experienced by many of its students, but arguably resulted in new barriers being formed which negatively impact on staff, students, potential students and their families.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my husband, Jim Dee, and mum, Monica Howell, for their support and patience during the last 10 years, and my daughter, Jasmine, for allowing me to spend so much of 'our' time working on this paper.

I would also like to thank my supervisor, Dr Michele Moore, for her constant help and encouragement.

I am also very grateful to those who were so generous with their time and assistance when participating in my research.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1. Prologue

Waiting in the school office, I am astonished by the activity erupting around me. Children noisily troop in and out, a stream of parents turn up to see staff, a teacher hauls in two fighting children, and a school secretary urgently tries to contact the parent of a child who has brought an Alsatian dog into school. Due to the lack of space, I move into the corridor and have to jump to one side to avoid a fighting child who is being held back by a teacher.

This is Chestnut Grove, a secondary school in one of the most deprived areas of Walton, a large city in the North of England. Chestnut, as it is known locally, is situated in the middle of a Council housing estate and is widely seen as a school where parents send their children when they cannot get them in anywhere else, or when they simply don't care, and where children go when they are expelled from other schools. It is not the kind of school that parents aspire for their children to attend.

[source: Fieldnotes, 2003]

I spent almost five years visiting a secondary school, which I will refer to throughout as 'Chestnut Grove', on a regular basis to conduct primary research for this thesis. Whilst I found some evidence to support negative views widely held at the time about the school, I also found positive evidence concerning the school which was not in the public domain; evidence of passionate teachers, a dedicated Headteacher, and many able and committed students. This thesis comprises the story of my research endeavours at Chestnut Grove, a story which, unintentionally, carries for me an echo of another school story; that of Hackney Downs (O'Connor, Hales, Davies and Tomlinson, 1999).

2. Research focus

This thesis presents a story of a school based in an area ranked amongst the top 2% of the most deprived areas of England (Walton¹ City Council, 2007). The story I tell covers a period of almost five years and involves many individuals entwined with the school including students, their families, school staff and other professionals associated with the school.

¹ Fictitious city name used for purposes of confidentiality

I initially planned to study the financial costs of obtaining an education, and the effect that this had on students aged 11-16 years living in poverty and on their families, in England. I selected this topic due to my own personal experiences as I felt, and still feel, that poverty should not negatively impact on children's access to education. I therefore decided to investigate this issue further to find out if the issues that I experienced at school had been isolated or if, as I suspected, a number of students living in poverty were having negative experiences related to their poverty while attending school. I hoped to use my research findings to try to influence changes which would have the potential to be beneficial to students experiencing difficulties at school due to poverty. I realised that my research alone may not effect such changes, but hoped that it would make a difference by encouraging schools to reflect on ways to change their practices.

I had previously undertaken research in this area; my dissertation for my undergraduate degree focused on the financial charges imposed by primary and secondary schools for items related to education (Howell, 1999). I found evidence of a significant lack of consistency between schools, which meant that it was effectively a lottery in terms of what parents found that they were asked to pay for, depending on the policies, often unwritten, of the school that their child/ren attended. I felt that this was unacceptable, and that the issue was deserving of further, more in-depth research. As a result, I decided to focus my thesis on the same topic.

Once I started to undertake primary research, however, I quickly found that the project developed a life and a focus of its own. Rather than finding issues related to the cost of school neatly compartmentalised and distinct, ready to be conveniently studied, I came across evidence of additional, wider and unanticipated barriers relating to children's experiences of school. I realised that the financial costs of compulsory education was an area which could not easily be studied in solitude as finances formed an integral part of a whole network of interrelated barriers to education experienced by students attending a school located in a deprived area. I realised that I should not try to remain focused on the issue of financial costs alone as this would risk discarding much valuable data I had begun to amass during an initial six months of preliminary field research, and which I could soon foresee I would potentially collect as my research went on in Chestnut Grove. I therefore decided to widen the scope of my research to include consideration of barriers in addition to finance that I began to be exposed to through my research in school.

As a result of this change, the focus of this thesis became the numerous barriers to education experienced by students living in poverty attending a school in a deprived area. This included, but expanded upon, my original research focus on the financial costs of education.

The themes I gradually uncovered in the area of barriers to education related to the impact of four main areas:

- the surrounding area and students' families
- the cost of education
- the school environment
- the school's priorities and approaches.

Although the topics may initially appear to be very broad, as I will illustrate throughout this paper, I feel that these areas all come together under the banner of the educational experiences of children living in poverty, and specifically the impact of deficits in cultural, social and material capital.

3. Previous research in this area

The topic of barriers to education for children and families is not new; a range of research has previously been undertaken in this area, albeit not explicitly labelled as 'barriers to education'. Such research is detailed in Chapter 2: Literature Review, and includes research undertaken by Middleton and Thomas (1994) and Horgan (2007).

There has been a significant shift in the focus of research in this area over the decades. Literature in this area had a clear financial focus in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. see Bull, 1980), due to the attention given to the reduction in education welfare benefits by the Conservative Government in power at that time. This included the removal of free milk for under 7's in 1971 by the 1971 Education (Milk) Act (Great Britain, 1971) and the abolition of clothing grants for children in need in 1980 by the 1980 Education Act (Great Britain, 1980) and 1986 Social Security Act (Great Britain, 1986). More recently, research has tended to focus on issues such as inequalities caused by choice and the marketisation of education (e.g. Gewirtz and Ball, 2000) including, most recently, the introduction of Academies (e.g. Beckett, 2007).

While my research cannot be directly compared to other work previously undertaken in this area, in retrospect I found that the story contains a number of parallels with the story of Hackney Downs school, as told by O'Connor et al (1999). Both Chestnut Grove and Hackney Downs were schools in deprived areas, trying to succeed in difficult circumstances, yet both were repeatedly publicly criticised for failing their pupils, and were consequently closed (O'Connor et al, 1999). This public criticism arguably disrupted pupil education far more than if the schools had remained open with the appropriate support and understanding required ('The murder', 1995). However my position is quite different to that of several authors of the Hackney Downs story as I had no involvement with Chestnut Grove prior to starting my research, whereas several of those who wrote the Hackney Downs story had worked in, or been associated with, the school prior to writing the book.

4. The participation of children in research

It is noticeable from my reading that few studies which seek to understand the barriers faced by students in schools in difficult circumstances include the words of students themselves. While I recognise, indeed welcome, the fact that all researchers bring their own backgrounds and perceptions to their research, I feel that it is equally important that those who are involved in research should also have the opportunity to be heard directly, otherwise readers are reliant solely upon the interpretation of the researcher.

I feel that student perspectives should be at the very heart of reflections on education, and therefore should play a key role in research in this area, as has been suggested by other researchers previously (e.g. Moore, 2000; Clark and Moss, 2001). The same could be said of all research involving children; Middleton and Walker (2004) speak of *'the importance of actually listening to the views of parents and children whom researchers, journalists, politicians and pundits often enjoy criticising but all too rarely consult.'* (p.4). This perspective is supported by Beresford, Green, Lister and Woodard (1999) who state that it is important to give a voice to those who live with poverty. Similarly, Robinson, Else, Sherlock and Zass-Ogilvie (2009) suggest that currently, the voice of those living in poverty is not heard as much as it should be, although those living in poverty are themselves experts about poverty.

Attree suggests that research which involves children, particularly those living in poverty, tends not to include the voices of those researched due to the challenges

that undertaking research with children presents (2006, p.55/56). I suggest that the same methodological limitations could in theory apply to any research involving children, and potentially contribute to the relative lack of their involvement in research about them.

I had a strong feeling that there can be potent power in the words of research participants, including children and young people, and in omitting or removing their own words, the researcher potentially runs the risk of diminishing or masking children's identities and experiences or even misrepresenting them. Research accounts which underplay children's own voices may not only prove potentially inaccurate but may also be unethical. As Pendlebury and Enslin (2001) note: *'Educational research is unethical when it misrepresents or misidentifies and so betrays its putative beneficiaries or the goods and values that they hold most dear.'* (p.361). This can take different forms; there is no guarantee that by simply involving children in a research project, they are being represented – as James (2007) notes, where children are invited to contribute to research *'their ideas may be dismissed'* (p.261).

These were issues which were at the forefront of my mind when planning my research. It has been suggested by some researchers that some parents are more adept than others at making choices about their children's education, for example, and that living with poverty may be a variable which distances parents from schools (e.g. see Reay and Ball, 1997). I therefore feel that it is important to consider – and give a voice in research to – those who typically do not have the experience and/or confidence to make themselves heard in debates about education, and who consequently may find themselves further marginalised.

I therefore take the position that the voices of 'the researched' should be heard; I feel that this is particularly vital at a time during which market forces are increasingly prioritised in the provision of education, as evidenced by the Academies programme. I feel that a range of key stakeholder perspectives are important in research, but this must be approached carefully to ensure that the contribution of research participants is not misrepresented by the researcher.

5. Methodology

As will be detailed in Chapter 3: Methods, I primarily took a qualitative approach to my research, using a range of research tools including interviews, shadowing,

observation and diaries, with mixed success. I invited a wide range and large number of people to participate in my research, including a class of students from four of the school's five year groups, their parents/carers, three individuals who were successively Headteachers at Chestnut Grove, and a number of additional school staff. I also interviewed several professionals associated with the school.

Through my research, and the process of writing this thesis, I came to feel that qualitative tools are more appropriate than quantitative approaches when examining people and their lives. Yet in the first instance I chose to use questionnaires to generate quantitative data at the initial stages of my research. While it may be argued that questionnaires as a quantitative tool are incompatible with the narrative approach that ultimately emerged in my research, I felt that questionnaires conducted early on in the research journey remained useful for my research; they allowed me to invite literally hundreds of participants to give their perspectives on the financial cost of education, and I used the responses given to allow me to refine my approach to my research, and identify participants I wished to interview.

I could not have accessed anywhere near the number of participants who responded to the questionnaire via the use of purely qualitative tools, and therefore feel that quantitative tools can play a part in educational research, particularly at early stages. This is particularly the case when quantitative tools allow for qualitative insights, and with this in mind my questionnaires included space for the respondents to provide additional information, both on the areas I suggested, and other areas they wished to comment on. As Wellington notes, mixed methods can be used in studies, with some researchers having suggested that qualitative and quantitative methods can be used together (1996, p.17).

As my research progressed, I found that the many participants I invited to become involved in my research began to tell me stories about themselves and about other students, staff, and the school itself, and together these stories formed a larger 'story of Chestnut Grove', including reference to its closure and re-opening as Chestnut Academy. Together the stories offered by individuals wove into what I have come to feel is a compelling, multi-faceted story of a school in a deprived area, and the barriers to education experienced by its students.

I therefore hope that my research account gives readers a flavour of the everyday experiences of students attending Chestnut Grove, later Chestnut Academy, and that my analysis of the stories gives a feel for the multiple barriers that they experienced in pursuing an education.

6. Findings

As detailed in Chapter 4: Findings, I discovered rich data which seems to make an addition to educational research on two counts. Firstly, my research is the first study I am aware of that records in a contemporaneous manner the transition of an LEA school to an Academy, including the impact that changing to an Academy had on the school's pupils and staff. Secondly, I feel that my study adds new insights through showing the multiple barriers experienced by students living in poverty at one school – revealed in both the students' own words, and those of their families and school staff and associated professionals. The barriers experienced relate to areas as seemingly diverse as the financial cost of education, parental choice in selecting schools, the school environment, and the involvement of businesses in the provision of education.

Although this data covers a wider scope than my original research focus, the data comes together under the central theme of barriers to education. The data shows that students from families living in poverty attending a secondary school in England face a number of barriers to education concurrently, both within and external to the school environment.

I feel that it would be helpful at this stage to present an introduction to both the city of Walton, and to Chestnut Grove school, to give readers some background knowledge about the city and school, before this thesis proceeds further.

7. Context - introduction to Walton and Chestnut Grove

a) Walton

I chose to undertake my research in Walton, a large city in the North of England with areas of differing affluence; it contains a number of wealthy areas, as well as some of the most deprived areas in the country. In the 2007 Indices of Deprivation for Walton, of the city's 339 Super Output Areas (SOA's) – geographical areas – 76 were in the 10% of the most deprived nationally, while 53 areas were in the least 20% deprived nationally (Walton City Council, 2007).

The SOA in which Chestnut Grove is located was ranked 497th in the entire country, out of a total of 32,243, placing it in the top 2% of deprived areas in the country. In terms of educational deprivation, the area ranks 219th in the country, again, out of 32,243 (Walton City Council, 2007).

The region that Walton is situated in has strong roots in manufacturing and has lost 24% of its jobs due to a drop in industrialisation since 1979 (Davies, 1999). This is likely to be a key factor in the higher than average rate of unemployment in Walton; almost a quarter of children live in a family with no earner (Davies; 1999). 70.5% of adults in Walton are employed – compared to an overall average of 74.4% in Britain - and 6.2% are unemployed (5.2%), with 2.5% of residents claiming Jobseekers Allowance (2.2%) (Nomis, 2006).

b) Chestnut Grove

Chestnut Grove is a secondary school with 1100 pupils which is situated close to the centre of Walton. The school is located within an area of high socio-economic deprivation, and is surrounded by local authority housing. 48.2% of adults in this quintile have no qualifications, compared with 32% in Walton as a whole, 40.1% are owner occupiers (compared to 60.2%), and 29.9% of households claim Income Support (17.8%). Life expectancy at birth is significantly lower than the city's average at 72.2 years (78.9 years) (Public Health Analysis Team, 2007).

Chestnut Grove was formed when two schools were merged in 1988. In 1997 it was put into Special Measures; a status applied to schools by Ofsted when it is felt that they are not providing an acceptable level of education; Special Measures were subsequently removed from Chestnut Grove in 1999. While these events pre-dated my research, I feel that it is likely that the removal of Special Measures will have been welcomed by the school; Perryman found that staff at another school which was taken out of special measures focused on the positives of the change:

Coming out of Special Measures allows you to attract better quality staff and I think areas of the school that have slipped will be much better next year because you can say we're out of Special Measures, we are moving forward, lots of exciting things, new buildings, more money. We will get the staff, so things will get better.
[Alistair, middle manager]

High-achieving children in the area are seriously considering coming to our school.

[Eileen, senior manager]

(Perryman, 2005, p.290).

Overall educational attainment by students is relatively low, with just 25% of school leavers going on to further education, employment or training. To put Chestnut Grove in its context in Walton, in 2006 18% of pupils gained 5 or more GCSEs at grades A-C compared to an LEA average of 37.7%. In comparison, the national average was 44.9% (DfES, 2006a).

Chestnut Grove includes students with a range of special needs and has a relatively high turnover of staff as evidenced in the school's Ofsted Inspection report published in 2001 as the study began:

- 1130 pupils on the school's roll, of whom 484 are known to be eligible for free school meals
- 34 pupils with statements of special educational needs
- 263 pupils on the school's special educational needs register
- 10 pupils with English as an additional language
- 11.9% authorised absence (compared to 7.7% national comparative data)
- 3% unauthorised absence (compared to 1.1% national comparative data) (data relates to half-days)
- 30 teachers left the school during the last two years
- 23 teachers appointed during the last two years.

(Ofsted, 2001).

Two major events occurred during the period of almost five years that I spent undertaking primary research in the school, which had a huge impact upon staff and pupils. Firstly, Chestnut Grove underwent a period of crisis part-way through my research when a major incident occurred which was widely reported in the local and national media. The school was widely criticised, with local residents starting a campaign to sack the Headteacher. The reader should note that throughout the thesis I have deliberately opted to omit references to these media reports, as well as other references relating to the school, in order to respect confidentiality matters.

It was later speculated by teachers and professionals associated with the school that this incident contributed to the second major incident which occurred during the period of my research; the school successfully applied to transfer to an Academy later that year. The Headteacher in post when my research started had his employment terminated and the school closed on 31 August 2006, a year after the serious incident, and re-opened the following day as an Academy with a new name which, for the purposes of this thesis, I will call Chestnut Academy.

My research followed this course of events, and so, while I maintained a focus on barriers to education, an additional focus of my research became why a school chose to become an Academy, how this impacted on staff and students, and the wider policy and practice implications of this change. The opportunity to conduct research in such a setting was extremely timely as it came during a period when the number of Academies in England increased significantly, and subsequently came under intense criticism for a number of reasons; this is detailed in the next chapter, Literature Review.

8. Structure of thesis

This thesis is structured as follows:

- **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**
examines key literature in this area, considers links between existing literature, and identifies gaps in the literature.
- **CHAPTER 3: METHODS**
details the key methodological tools used, and considers the implications of these.
- **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**
details research findings, split into four inter-related themes, all of which relate to barriers to education for students living in poverty.
- **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**
considers the impact of findings, both in relation to my research as a whole, and the wider picture in terms of previous research in this area; the chapter also makes recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Introduction

As detailed in the previous introductory chapter, my research focus became the barriers to education encountered by students living in poverty aged 11-16 and attending a particular secondary school in England. While there is a range of previous research in this area, including that undertaken by Middleton and Thomas (1994) and Horgan (2007), I found that previous accounts tend to focus on specific, individual barriers rather than the multiplicity of barriers which may be experienced by students living in poverty concurrently. I felt that the multiplicity of barriers deserved further attention.

In this chapter I will review literature in the field of barriers to education. This is a relatively broad area and I have chosen to focus specifically on literature relating to the two areas which I feel to be key to my research: (a) poverty and education, and (b) government priorities in education. There is some overlap between these two areas. The literature covers a wide period of time as I feel that the older literature included is essential to the review, and common themes emerge which have recurred throughout the history of this area. I reviewed much literature after I completed my fieldwork because, as detailed in the previous chapter, the topic of my research broadened during my research as a result of the fieldwork itself, and this influenced the literature I ultimately felt required to review.

Before specifically considering literature in this area, I will first discuss the question of what poverty is. Poverty is a term which is used widely throughout educational literature (e.g. see Tomlinson, 1997; Reay, 2004a), and refers to a concept that is deeply embedded in this thesis. I feel that it is essential to give consideration to what poverty actually is before reviewing literature in this area. I will also consider issues related to the use of terminology in this area, as difficulties concerning this arose at an early stage during my research. Poverty is at the very heart of my research topic; it therefore seems appropriate to start by considering the numerous arguments about what poverty is, and what impact it has had on educational policymaking and practice in Britain.

2. What is poverty?

Poverty is an extremely contentious entity, which has no internationally agreed definition. Dickens and Ellwood (2003) note that: *'How the governments and most researchers measure poverty depends crucially on what side of the Atlantic they reside on'* (F220). In Britain, poverty is normally defined as an *'income level below half the national average'* (Sutherland and Piachaud, 2001, p.F86). An alternative definition is Townsend's (1979), which could be considered seminal as it is still cited widely by researchers after more than 30 years - he states that people are *'in poverty'* when they:

lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and activities which are customary or are at least widely encouraged and approved, in the societies to which they belong. (p.31).

This focus on relative poverty carried echoes of Adam Smith's (1776) definition of poverty:

By necessities I understand not only commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without. (p.693).

Although Smith wrote the above words more than 230 years ago, the quote is reproduced frequently enough to indicate that it still has relevance, and it has been suggested that Smith is nearer the mark on the current situation than recent UK governments (CPAG, 1999a, p.13).

Public perceptions of, and attitudes towards, poverty have changed significantly over the years. Following the far-reaching welfare benefits introduced in Britain in the 1940s, including the Education Act 1944 (Great Britain, 1944), there was little public debate about poverty until the late 1970s when researchers, most notably Peter Townsend (e.g. 1979), seized upon the concept afresh and undertook a range of research in this area. It is perhaps no coincidence that this was the period during which a Conservative Government was elected and started to undo much of the welfare provision that had been introduced by the previous Labour government in the 1940s (Hills, 1998).

There has arguably been a long history of politicians giving conflicting messages about poverty depending upon their political affiliation. The level of poverty in England increased during the period that the Conservatives were in Government,

1979 – 1997, and the Conservative's attitude to this situation was summed-up by the then-Secretary of State for Social Education, John Moore, when he stated that: *'individuals and organisations concerned with poverty were merely pursuing the political goal of equality'* (May 1989, quoted in Bradshaw, 1990). Conversely, just 10 years later, Moore's (Labour) successor Alistair Darling stated that a poverty audit was to be undertaken to *'place the problem at the top of the nation's agenda'* (Gordon, Pantazis and Townsend, 2000b, p.81).

The Labour Government in power at the time of writing this thesis has announced that child poverty is at the heart of its policy-making; Gordon Brown, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, said in 1999: *'Child poverty is a scar on Britain's soul.'* (CPAG, 1999b, p.8). The same year, Tony Blair, then Prime Minister, announced that he intended to 'end child poverty' within 20 years. This was a key development in terms of the recognition of poverty; for most of the post-war period, poverty has remained largely unacknowledged officially (Daniel & Ivatts, 1998). The announcements were applauded amongst social commentators who said that, although overdue, this commitment was extremely important (Ridge, 2002). However, MacInnes, Kenway and Parekh note that, following an initial fall, child poverty has started to rise again since 2004/5 (2009, p.8). The Labour Government in power at the time of writing this thesis has signalled their continued commitment to ending child poverty by introducing the Child Poverty Act, which received Royal Assent in March 2010; this places a legal obligation on the Government to meet their commitment to end child poverty by 2020. The act contains four targets which relate to both relative and absolute measures of poverty (DfES, no date 'a').

The Labour Government in power at the time of writing has in recent years adapted their tool for measuring poverty to include measures of absolute and low income, as well as material deprivation (Department for Work and Pensions, 2003, cited in Attree, 2006). The 2004 *Opportunity for All* publication included 15 indicators specifically to measure child poverty, out of a total of 54 indicators of progress. Three indicators related to different aspects of child poverty: absolute low income, relative low income, and material deprivation and low income combined (DWP, 2003, cited in Lloyd 2006, p.318/9). A similar approach was used in the 2004/5 Households Below Average Income (HBAI) publication, published by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP; 2006), which included for the first time questions relating to material deprivation, which could be seen to give an indication of the level of relative poverty in Britain. These questions were introduced following

criticism that a quantitative focus on low income *'deflects attention'* from the experiences of those living in poverty (McKendrick et al, 2003, p.3, cited in Attree 2006, p.2).

In 2005/6, the HBAI report indicated that a number of items and services that many would consider to be essential were in fact out of the reach of many children and their families:

- 11% of all children would like to go swimming at least once a month, but can't afford to
- 5% would like to go on a school trip at least once a term, but can't afford to
- 6% would like a hobby or leisure activity, but can't afford one
- 5% would like leisure equipment such as sports equipment or a bicycle, but can't afford this
- 10% of children have parents who would like two pairs of all weather shoes, but can't afford these
- 7% of children have parents who would like to keep the house warm, but can't afford to.

(DWP, 2007).

While these figures may be useful in showing how relative poverty changes from year to year, they do not give any indication of what impact the lack of these items and services has on the lives of those affected.

It is not only UK data which is used as a measurement tool and driver for policy; the Labour Government in power at the time of writing has noted that it is also influenced by Britain's relative poverty ranking among industrialised nations (Lloyd, 2006, p.321). This approach is supported by a number of researchers who have postulated that poverty is a relative, rather than an absolute, concept (e.g. see Robinson, 1976; Lansdowne, 1993). However, although little research has been undertaken into absolute poverty in Britain, a number of researchers have argued that this type of poverty is still rife today. For example, although food is unquestionably a basic and essential need, there is evidence that many children in the UK do not receive adequate nourishment (e.g. see Nelson, 2000). Similarly, diseases and illnesses such as rickets, anaemia and tuberculosis are making a comeback in Britain, and research has indicated that two million children are undernourished and below average height and weight (Winter, 1997, p.2). This is supported by research undertaken by Middleton and Walker which suggests that

absolute poverty causes long-lasting damage to the children it impacts upon (1994). Similarly, Nelson (2000) notes: *'It is inevitable that poverty which is so widespread will have adverse consequences on the growth and health of children in Britain.'* (p.307).

It is clear, then, that poverty is a widely debated issue which has extremely strong political elements, which makes the task of discussing poverty in this thesis less straightforward than it might otherwise be.

3. Poor, living in poverty or disadvantaged?

A natural progression from the question of what poverty is concerns what it should be called. The question of what terminology should be used to discuss those living in poverty arose early in my research when my supervisor at the time, followed by a senior member of staff at Chestnut Grove, questioned my use of the word 'poor' instead of 'socially disadvantaged'. As someone who had used the word 'poor' from childhood, the use of alternative terminology had simply never occurred to me, and I undertook research to establish whether there were any guidelines in the use of terminology.

A number of organisations such as the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and the UK Coalition Against Poverty use words such as 'poor' or 'poverty', however I consider that there is the potential for these words to cause discomfort, due to their perceived negative connotations. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation advise that people on low incomes support the use of terms such as *'people on low incomes'*, *'people in poverty'* and *'people experiencing poverty'* ('Language', no date, see also 'Mind your language', no date). The JRF sources note that terminology such as *'poverty-stricken'*, *'impoverished'* and *'the poor'* can be stigmatising, stating that: *'People who are poor are not a generic group (just as disabled people are not). 'Neutral' phrases such as 'people in poverty' or 'poor people' are better.'* ('Language', no date)

This guidance is supported by Beresford et al, who note that people living in poverty have suggested alternative words or phrases to describe their circumstances, including *'social deprivation'*, *'not well off'*, *'financially challenged'* and *'financially disadvantaged'* (Beresford et al, 1999, p.67). 'Disadvantaged' and 'deprived' are other terms that are used frequently by researchers in this area; for example, O'Connor et al (1999) spoke of many of Hackney Downs' pupils as

'coming from very deprived backgrounds' (p.21). 'Disadvantaged' is also widely used within the JRF website and reports and publications (e.g. see Taylor, 2008).

Conversely, some researchers (e.g. Oppenheim and Harker, 1996) have argued that words should be used which have retained their meaning throughout time arguing that 'poor' and 'poverty' can be viewed as unequivocal, and there is an inherent strength in these words, although some may find use of them to be uncomfortable and politically sensitive. Oppenheim and Harker (1996) have argued that if the word 'poverty' is not used, the experience of people living in poverty also disappears from public perception (p.vi).

Similarly, the two Breadline Britain surveys undertaken by MORI in 1983 and 1990 used the word 'poor' widely. Speaking of what the surveys found to be considered a relative minimum living standard, Mack and Lansley (1997) note:

Those of us who have worked with the Breadline Britain research sometimes refer to those living below this publicly determined minimum standard as being 'in poverty' and to those who suffer it as 'poor'. So did the respondents to our surveys. Others, including Ministers, are free to prefer more restrictive definitions of these terms, even at odds with common useage but it is sophistry to argue that they have thus resolved the policy issues at stake. (p.xxi).

This approach was also continued with a later survey, the Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey of Britain (PSE) 1999, conducted by the Office for National Statistics, which extended upon the Breadline Britain surveys (Gordon et al, 2000a).

While I started my research keen to use the word 'poor' as a clear, unambiguous word, as my research progressed, I found that my position changed. I became less comfortable using the word 'poor' as I increasingly realised that this word created deficit images and did not define the whole identify of those involved in my research. I have therefore chosen to use the terms 'living in poverty' and 'experiencing poverty' throughout this paper because I feel that these terms explain the circumstances of those involved in my research, without suggesting that their financial situation defines them.

4. Previous literature in this area

Having considered what poverty is, and what terminology should be used to describe it in this thesis, I will now review previous literature in the area of barriers to education. I have split the data into two key themes:

- a) poverty and education, and
- b) government priorities in education.

I have selected these themes as they are the ones which repeatedly stood out to me when undertaking, and analysing, my research. Although they are distinct areas, they are deeply intertwined. These themes continue throughout the following chapters, though with different emphasis and subheadings which emerged as my research findings unfolded as I discuss in detail later on.

5. Echoes of Hackney Downs

One piece of research which I found invaluable as I came to reflect on my research, and which spans both topics which were of immediate interest, is the story of Hackney Downs school (O'Connor et al, 1999). As noted in Chapter 1: Introduction, I found that this story had many parallels with that of Chestnut Grove/Academy, and I will therefore refer to areas of relevance throughout this chapter, as so much of the book holds a resonance for me in relation to the key themes in this paper.

6. Key literature in the area of barriers to education

a) Poverty and education

Poverty and education are topics at the heart of my research, and seemed to be the natural place to start my review of literature. I found that literature in this area can predominantly be divided into three key themes: educational attainment, the school environment, and the financial cost of education, all of which are of relevance to my research topic.

i) Educational attainment

Attainment has traditionally been used as a measure of the success of a school and its pupils, with low-achieving schools, typically located within deprived areas, being labelled as failing – this topic is explored later in this chapter.

A number of studies have linked poverty with lower educational attainment, including those undertaken by Robinson (1976) and Daniels and Stainton (1994).

Goodman and Gregg (2010) note that: *'only 21% of the poorest fifth (measured by parental socioeconomic position; SEP) manage to gain five good GCSEs (grades A*-C, including English and maths), compared to 75% of the top Quintile'* (p.7). Similarly, the End Child Poverty Network and Children in Wales found that: *'Children from unskilled backgrounds are five times less likely to proceed to further and higher education than those from more affluent backgrounds.'* (cited in 'Combating child poverty', 2007). As Blanden and McNally (2006) note, the link has been observed historically: *'The observation that children from poorer backgrounds do worse in terms of educational outcomes was first highlighted in Rowntree's investigation into poverty in York at the turn of the twentieth century.'* (p.10).

The situation could be considered to be particularly problematic in the UK, considering its relative poverty. Hirsch (2007b) noted that *'the UK has one of the highest associations between social class and educational performance in the OECD.'* (p.8). Literature in the area of poverty and educational attainment predominantly falls within the areas of diet, housing and family background, each of which is addressed below.

Diet

Much research (e.g. Banks, 1971; Nelson, 2000) suggests that diet is of key importance in attainment, which suggests to me that absolute, rather than relative poverty, plays a key role. This is not a new theory; Neustatter (1991) quotes a newspaper from 1888: *'We ought to see their stomachs are not empty while we are cramming their little heads'* (p.21).

Several researchers have suggested that the school dinner is the main meal of the day for many children from low-income families (e.g. Kumar, 1993; Horgan, 2007). This has been supported by the Gardner Merchant School Meals Survey (1991), which indicated that 1/6 of the low income families surveyed did not have an evening meal at home. Similarly, a 1989 Department of Health (DoH) study showed that more children from families living in poverty were entitled to free school meals than children from wealthier families, and that these children obtained a higher proportion of their daily nutrient from this meal (cited in Kumar, 1993). Preston (2008) notes that children from families living in poverty may not be able to afford nutritious food: *'Children often arrive at school hungry, and yet, despite the extended school day, free school meals are frequently only available at lunchtime.'* (p.14).

International research has also supported these findings; in New York, one million children were monitored when the nutritional quality of their school meals improved; there was subsequently a 13% rise in educational standards (Lynn, 1991, p.20). This could be seen to support Kumar's assertion that children living in poverty in Britain have had an unsatisfactory dietary pattern since school meal nutritional guidelines were abolished (Kumar, 1993, p.115/6).

An inadequate diet arguably has more severe impacts on children than educational attainment alone. Mihill (1997) notes that the withdrawal of free school milk and subsidised hot school dinners resulted in malnutrition in some pupils, and cites a report which asserts that cases of rickets had been found in the Midlands and Scotland, and that in Yorkshire, children living in poverty were up to 8lb lighter and 1 ½ inches shorter than wealthier children. While this is not an appropriate place to discuss in detail either changes to the school meal service, or school funding sources, I feel that it is important to note that White (1992) found evidence that the move towards fast-food cafeterias is due to the need for schools to generate income (cited in Kumar, 1993, see also Anderson and Butcher, 2006).

Although free school meals are in place for children from families living in poverty, it has been reported that the stigma of claiming free school meals means that a number of pupils choose not to claim them. In 2001, a Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) survey commissioned by the Department of Education found that while for 1 in 4 children, a free school meal was their only hot meal of the day, 360,000 of the 1.8 million children entitled to free school meals did not claim them. This is because many children are afraid of being bullied, or the stigma attached to claiming free school meal. They quoted a pupil: *'People just think that if you're on free school meals you're going to be a one sock person they think you're not very nice and your parents just can't be bothered to get a job or something.'* (cited by Garner, 2005).

The Labour government in power at the time of writing this thesis has acknowledged a link between poverty, diet and education. David Blunkett has previously pushed for an improvement to school meals, and said that: *'If you are hungry and you have a poor diet it is difficult to concentrate and to learn effectively'* (quoted in O'Leary, 1997, p.8). A number of reasons have been given for this inequality, with living in poverty being of key importance; parental levels of education have been found to have less of an impact of children's educational

attainment than living in poverty itself: *'about two-thirds of the observed relationship between poverty and poor educational outcomes remains, even after taking account of differences in parents' backgrounds, including educational level'* (Hirsch, 2008, p.4).

Housing

A number of studies indicate a clear link between housing, poverty and educational attainment. It has been estimated that currently, 1 million children in Britain living in what Shelter (2006) calls *'bad housing'* (p.8). This definition covers homelessness and overcrowding as well as housing in a poor state of repair. It has been argued that living in poor quality housing potentially has many negative impacts on children's experiences of education, including a higher level of absence, due to the disruption caused by moving home, a higher level of illness and infection caused by living in overcrowded conditions (Shelter, 2006).

Shelter's findings support a survey undertaken by HMI in 1989 which showed that living in temporary accommodation negatively affected the educational performance of children (DfES, 1990, cited in Kumar, 1993, p.147). Similarly, Neustatter suggests that living in B&B accommodation may negatively impact on children as there is a lack of peace and privacy, impacting on their motivation, and affecting homework (1991, p.21). More recently, Hirsch (2007b) has found that: *'Children living in temporary and/or overcrowded accommodation find it harder to engage with the educational process.'* (p.9).

Family background

Another key factor cited in relation to low education attainment is family background. It has been suggested that many parents in the UK simply lack the resources to spend on books, extra-curricular activities and school trips and holidays, all of which enhance learning (Kumar, 1993, p.145, see also Hughes, 1992, p.20).

On a more subtle level are parental values and motivation (Banks, 1971, p.73). Parents experiencing poverty may be less willing or able to help their children with their homework, which could be related to a cycle of deprivation (as described by Joseph, 1972). This can be related to low wages and poor working conditions (Blanchford and colleagues, 1985, cited in Kumar, 1993, p.145). Whilst not inevitable, this may suggest that parents who themselves experienced a deprived

childhood may negatively impact upon the next generation's aspirations, which Banks suggests means that academic achievement should perhaps be examined in light of family life, not just individual environmental factors (Banks; 1971, p.75, see also Hirsch, 2007a). Similarly, Goodman and Gregg (2010) assert that: *'Children's test scores are lowest when poverty has persisted across the generations, and highest when material advantage has been longlasting.'* (p.7)

Kellett and Dar (2007) undertook a study in two schools of differing affluence; they found that in the disadvantaged school (Valley School):

questions about children experiencing distractions such as 'smoking, banging, swearing, loud music and TV' while doing their homework were raised by child researchers from Valley School but not from Riverside. Child researchers from Riverside were more likely to phrase questions about preferring to do homework in your bedroom or your garden, which assumes not only availability of quiet, attractive environments but choice too. Children from Valley School were unlikely to have a garden, or a bedroom of their own, as many lived in bedsits with single parents on overcrowded estates. (p.33).

Connor et al (1999) speak of the area in which Hackney Downs was based: *'a neighbourhood where family stresses make any sort of commitment to education rare and difficult'* (p.243). Similarly, Feinstein notes that a child's attainment at the age of 22 months predicts their qualifications at the age of 26, and that this means that any educational intervention which takes place after they have already started school may have little or no impact (2003, p.73). In terms of how social background can have a practical impact on attainment, Goodman and Gregg (2010) note that *'multiple factors'* may contribute, including *'expectations for HE [and] access to a computer and the internet'* (p.5).

On a related theme, it has been argued that children living in deprived areas are perhaps more likely to experience difficult home lives, and may be more prone to behaviour which schools find difficult to manage. One large-scale study carried out for the NUT found that 2/3 of teachers said their lessons were disrupted every week by *'badly-behaved pupils'* ('Teachers report', 2001).

The issue of the behaviour of pupils came through strongly in the story of Hackney Downs - for example, the Headteacher was quoted as saying: *'we seem to get more than our fair share of awkward customers'* (O'Connor et al, 1999, p.24), while a senior professional associated with the school made reference to *'damaged*

students' (O'Connor et al, 1999, p.65). A different Headteacher at the same school made reference to issues with pupil intake: *'So many pupils far more challenging than I had ever encountered before across all cultural and racial groups.'* (O'Connor et al, 1999, p.33). This could be linked to the complex family lives of many of the school's students: *'The complexities of family life made dealing with some Hackney Downs boys extraordinarily complicated and time consuming: expectations on both sides often failed to find any common ground.'* (O'Connor et al, 1999, p.117).

As an example, O'Connor et al cited one pupil, Michael, who injured himself at school and was *'beside himself with worry'* over his *'domestic responsibilities'* which included collecting three young siblings in the evening (O'Connor et al, 1999, p.117). This could be seen to support Dahl and Lochner's (2005) assertion that: *'children growing up in poor families are likely to have adverse home environments or face other challenges'* (p.2). For example, it is widely documented that families living in poverty are more likely to experience mental illness (e.g. see Payne, 2006, p.286).

It has also been suggested that the background of students living in poverty subtly influences their day-to-day experiences within the classroom. Horgan (2007) undertook research in a number of primary schools in Northern Ireland, and found that children from disadvantaged schools complained about teachers shouting at them, whereas children from more advantaged schools did not. The issue of whether poverty impacts on the relationship between students and their teachers was also raised by a student who participated in a study undertaken by Sutton, Smith, Dearden and Middleton (2007) - she felt that life was unfair because: *'if you're rich you get to go to a posh school where the teachers probably teach you with respect.'* (p.21). Similarly, they found that students from private schools experienced a wider range of out-of-school activities than children attending disadvantaged schools (Sutton et al, 2007, p.19).

Improvement in economic standards

In comparison to the research cited above which strongly suggests that poverty negatively impacts upon educational attainment, Banks (1971) notes that there has been a general improvement in the economic standards of the working classes since the Second World War, along with almost full employment, and therefore some researchers doubt that poverty is a major factor in working-class

achievement (Banks, 1971, p.72). However, this takes us back into the realms of absolute versus relative poverty – the economic standards of almost everyone in Britain could be said to have improved since the 1940s but this does not mean inequalities in the education system have been erased. Conversely, it has been argued more recently that inequalities related to social background are actually increasing – Hirsch (2007b) notes that: '*Children born in 1970 showed less mobility than those born in 1958. This is reflected in an increased link between social background and educational results*' (p.8).

ii) The school environment

There is surprisingly little literature in the area of the school environment itself, an area which potentially ranges from the behaviour of both school staff and pupils, through to the physical environment of the school. I have included this in my literature review as it formed a key theme of my research. Literature in this area predominantly falls within the areas of pupil intakes, the physical environment of schools, and the introduction of Academies.

Pupil intakes

School intakes have been raised as a significant factor in educational achievement by a number of researchers. Gewirtz and Ball (2000) undertook research into a school that they called Beatrice Webb; they noted that the school's appearance was very neglected, and that the intake was what I would term 'more accident than design' on behalf of the students' families:

The majority are there for one of the following reasons: they have failed to get in anywhere else; they have been excluded from other schools; or they belong to refugee or homeless families that have been placed in temporary accommodation near the school. (p.256).

This reflects the intake of Hackney Downs; O'Connor et al (1999) noted that with falling registrations, spare places were filled by:

Newcomers to the borough, very often children who spoke no English, latterly a proportion who were refugees traumatised by events in their home countries. This intake was increasingly augmented by a growing number of boys expelled from other schools. (p.16/17).

It's not difficult to imagine the impact that this will have had upon the examination results of schools in disadvantaged areas such as Beatrice Webb and Hackney Downs.

Physical environment

Again, this was an issue experienced at Hackney Downs - staff and students experienced detrimental issues with the physical environment of the school, which was described as *'limited and depressing'* (O'Connor et al, 1999, p.13). This had a huge impact on the school as it contributed to a falling roll: *'Educationally and socially aware parents became particularly reluctant to send their sons to a school in such a bad state of repair'* (O'Connor et al, 1999, p.24).

The authors further note that of all the issues the school experienced, the issue of the physical environment was the problem that was simplest to solve even though *'a survey in January 1990 provided eight pages of defects'* (O'Connor et al, 1999, p.31). This raises questions about how such a situation could have arisen:

How, in the late twentieth century, can a system for financing schools have been allowed to develop which permits a school campus to deteriorate physically over a period of ten years to the point at which no authority, national or local, can afford to put it right? (O'Connor et al, 1999, p.242).

As detailed later in this paper, this was very similar to the situation which Chestnut Grove faced.

Academies

Recent literature relating to school environments mainly relates to the Academies programme and is not unproblematic. For example, a new Academy in Middlesborough was designed in the style of a Tuscan mountain village, but was criticised for a number of features, including open balconies. A Government adviser, Sir Cyril Taylor, was blunt in his assessment of the new Academy buildings: *'The whole building side has been a nightmare...Most of the 27 already open are OK. There are some outstanding ones, but there are some we shouldn't repeat.'* (Woodward, 2006).

Another Academy building which widespread attracted criticism was Bexley Business Academy; the school included impractical open-sided classrooms, and

had to be significantly altered once it was completed. Calling the building 'Crazy', Sir Cyril noted: *'I would never have built that building....You can't teach in that, so we're filling [the open sides] in'* (Woodward, 2006).

Such problems were not constrained to Middlesborough and Bexley alone. Wilce (2006) notes that:

A recent school audit by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), said that half of the schools built since 2001 have been completed to only a poor or mediocre standard, and that nearly all had failed to tackle basic issues of environmental sustainability such as providing natural daylight and ventilation.

This is supported by evidence from Unison which states that the built quality of schools built under the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) is not as high as those built by more traditional methods. The report cites a number of examples of issues experienced by pupils attending schools which have been built or maintained under PFI, including:

- schools in Glasgow having issues with poor ventilation and over-heating, resulting in some students fainting. One school also experienced a collapsing ceiling.
- a school in East Renfrewshire which experienced a number of problems, including a collapsing roof.
- Rosshall Academy having poor ventilation, which was believed to be responsible for health problems experienced by staff and students (Unison, 2003, p.14-15).

The report cites Richard Feilden, a CABE commissioner's description of some PFI schools: *'little better than agricultural sheds with windows.'* (Unison, 2003, p.8).

These issues are ironic given that the demolition of a school and building a new Academy building – typically at a cost of £20 million or more - is commonly cited as one of the key attractions of the Academy programme (Beckett, 2007). It could be concluded from such research that those living in poverty, who are largely the intake of new build schools, are at additional risk of health issues from being taught in unsafe environments.

These findings gain additional significance when considered in light of the fact that it has been suggested that poor quality school buildings can affect educational attainment: *'It is unreasonable to expect positive results from students, teachers, and principals who daily work in an adverse environment.'* (Frazier, 1993).

iii) The financial cost of education

The financial cost of education is an area which is closely, perhaps irrevocably, linked to poverty, as a number of studies show that the financial costs of education are very difficult for families living in poverty to meet (e.g. Smith and Noble, 1995). To put it simply, all children must receive an education, and even for the vast majority of children who attend state-funded schools in the UK, an element of cost is involved. Literature in this area relates to both the actual financial costs of education, and the subsequent associated social and emotional impacts.

The financial cost of putting a child through school

The current Labour government's own research indicates that the cost of compulsory education is rising – a DfES study found that the annual cost of sending a child to secondary school was £1,195.47, with a total cost of £683.79 to send them to primary school. The average cost of a school uniform, was £184.17, with PE kits costing an additional average of £87.22. (Peters, Carpenter and Edwards, 2009).

The study also found that the cost of an average school residential trip was £153.14 in primary schools and £160.07 in secondary schools, with residential trips abroad costing an average of £402.70 (secondary schools only). (Peters et al, 2009). These figures roughly correlate to research undertaken by Norwich Union, which noted that, on average, it costs £14,000 to put a child through state school; an average of £1,300 per year from ages five through to 16 (End Child Poverty Network Cymru, 2006).

Middleton and Thomas (1994) undertook research asking what costs parents needed to meet in order for their children to attend school, and a number of costs were cited including financial contributions towards a wide range of lessons and extra-curricular activities, including skiing holidays, and items children have made in lessons (p.61).

There is evidence that the costs cited above are beyond the reach of many families - the 2005/6 Households Below Average Income Report found that 5% of children would like to go on a school trip at least once a term, but could not afford to (DWP, 2007). This takes us back into the realms of relative poverty; clearly, school trips are not essential for every-day survival, but are desirable to enable children to fit in, and perhaps to enhance their learning.

Keeping up with friends is important to children - a number of researchers note that children *need* to acquire things, perhaps arguably more than other individuals in society, and that this places a burden on their parents which is necessarily proportionately greater for parents living in poverty (Ashworth et al, 1994, see also Golding, 1994, p.ix).

A number of researchers have found evidence that many parents are unable to meet the costs associated with out-of-school activities. Redmond (2008) notes that: *'Many children are excluded from meeting friends outside of school because they cannot afford to do many of the things that their friends are doing, or even the transport costs to go and meet their friends.'* (p.22).

Similarly, Davies, Davis, Cook and Waters (2007) undertook a study in this area and found that:

Financial constraints presented a significant barrier to children's participation in social activities for nearly all of the mothers in this study, whereby the struggle to survive and purchase essential items took priority. Mothers commonly reported that they could not afford the costs associated with enrolling their child in a formal social activity, purchasing the required uniforms and equipment and paying the weekly/yearly fees. (p.218).

In addition, Wikeley, Bullock, Muschamp and Ridge found that students eligible for free school meals participated in less organised out-of-school activities than their wealthier peers (2007, p.2). They noted several reasons for this including, but not limited to, cost. Additional factors included lack of knowledge or confidence about how to access the activities, and the student's perceptions about their participation in the activities (2007, p.2). They stressed that activities are important to students as: *'Young people gain a variety of skills and understandings from organised out-of-school activities. The analysis highlighted the learning denied to those young people unable to take part.'* (2007, p.2).

The latter finding was supported by Hirsch (2007a), who noted that *'Through their lack of participation in out-of-school activities, young people in poverty are denied important learning experiences which may affect their engagement in the more formal learning in school.'* (p.6).

School meals

School meals have been at the heart of much research into the cost of education. Ridge (2002) found that school meals are very important to families living on benefits. This is supported by Smith and Noble (1995), who have told how home circumstances mean that school meals can be of key importance to children living in poverty – they quoted a 15 year old child from a lone-parent family: *'We used to be able to eat like all the time really but not so much any more'* (p.82). However, there is anecdotal evidence that some children entitled to free school meals miss out on them rather than being bullied by other children (Lepowska, 1999, p.27).

School uniforms

The issue of school uniforms has also attracted much attention. The Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) reported that children had been disciplined for not wearing the correct uniform, despite the fact that their parents could not afford to buy it (cited in End Child Poverty Network Cymru, 2006). Other reports highlighting inequalities caused by the cost of attending school include another report by the CAB (2001) who said that school uniforms are too expensive (cited in Ridge, 2002).

Ridge (2002) also noted that the cost of providing school uniforms can be beyond the reach of many low-income families (p.146/7). As a result, low-income families may ask the Social Fund for help, but this then results in increased poverty as deductions are made from their weekly benefits (CAB 2001, cited in Ridge, 2002). In 2001, the Citizens' Advice Bureau (2001) found that 29% of local authorities did not offer families living in poverty any assistance with the cost of school uniforms.

Some schools insist upon pupils wearing clothing which displays the school badge, which can usually only be purchased from the school itself, at a premium price (Middleton and Thomas, 1994, p.69). The Office of Fair Trading undertook a study in 2006 which found that 84% of schools with a uniform required parents to purchase at least one uniform item from a particular supplier/s which was, on average, significantly more expensive than both standard uniform retailers and supermarkets (cited in End Child Poverty Network Cymru, 2006, p.2).

Other research has found that parents have particular difficulties with footwear, and become annoyed when the school writes to advise that their child should be wearing shoes, not trainers (Ridge, 2002, p.80). Middleton and Thomas (1994)

note how some parents feel that they have to confront the school about the cost of sportswear – one mother asked if it was a statutory requirement for her child to have hockey boots, and reported back that the school was unable to tell her. In a study undertaken by Beresford et al (1999), a parent told how she responded to a letter from her child's school by writing back to advise that it was not yet her son's turn to have shoes (p.108). While it is still early days for many Academies, there is some evidence that parents of students attending them find the uniform cost prohibitive; one academy required parents to purchase branded items from a named supplier, and a number of parents complained about the cost. One parent said: *'I've just paid out for my two children and it's cost me the best part of £350. It's too much.'* (Old, 2007).

The DfES (2004) has itself acknowledged the problems experienced by students who go to school without their school uniform. In their survey of schools they found that of 278 schools, the majority would take punitive measures including withdrawing the pupil from class or school, or giving the pupil a detention. In contrast, the minority would loan the pupil a school uniform.

However, some Academies have offered free uniform items in the first year of operation, to assist families with the transition from one uniform to another. For example, Furness Academy in Cumbria note on their website that:

Families of students preparing to attend Furness Academy later this year do not have to worry about the cost of buying a new uniform - as most of it will be provided free of charge to students. Under an agreement with the Academy's new uniform supplier, Identity, and through a Department of Children, Schools and Families grant, nearly every element of the uniform will be provided at no cost to parents. (Furness Academy, 2009).

School trips and residential holidays

The cost of school trips and residential holidays has also been the subject of research. In 2004 the average cost of trips per pupil per year was estimated at £186 (DfES, 2004), and there is evidence that these costs continue to be beyond the means of many families. Ridge notes that schools can use threatening behaviour to coerce parents into making contributions for trips, with the suggestion that trips will be withdrawn if enough contributions are not made (2002, p.147/8, see also Middleton and Thomas, 1994, p.62). Where schools offer financial

assistance, this can be worded in a way which parents see as discouraging (Middleton and Thomas, 1994, p.63).

Assistance for families

It has been suggested that there is a lack of clarity, or transparency, in the help offered by schools to low-income families (e.g. Middleton and Thomas, 1994). Where a rebate is made available, this can be seen by parents as not worth it. Where a rebate is not available, the whole family can suffer to meet the cost. Ridge (2002) cites a parent who says that the cost of a day trip is *'days' meals'* so the family goes without food: *'I'm not one of those mothers what can just sort of produce things out of thin air.'* (p.80; see also Smith and Noble, 1995). The impact of the costs on parents can be huge. Middleton and Thomas (1994) quote a parent who told them of someone who told their ex-husband that if he didn't pay half of the cost of a school trip, she would prevent him from seeing his child (p.65).

Children have also expressed concern at the cost of school trips – one student told of children who didn't attend school trips being *'looked down on'* (Ridge, 2002, p.74), while other children have told of excluding themselves and not asking their parents if they can attend due to the cost (Ridge, 2002, p.77).

Impact on families

In addition to specific costs, as detailed above, research has been undertaken into the more general area of the impact of the multiple costs of education on families. This topic was of particular prominence in the late 1970s, when the newly elected Conservative Government began to withdraw education welfare benefits that had been in place since the 1940s.

The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) undertook research in 1979 which found evidence of families suffering severe hardship, including children missing school because they had no shoes, and children being excluded from lessons because they did not have the correct equipment. One parent found it so difficult to make ends meet that she considered extreme measures, having thought of *'doing something desperate so the children would be put into care. At least they would be properly fed and clothed'* (CPAG, 1979, p.6).

More recent research indicates that many families are still experiencing difficulties; the End Child Poverty Network Cymru has told of children who have free school

meals or who dress differently to other children being bullied, which negatively impacts on their relationship with the school and their *'emotional well-being'* (End Child Poverty Network Cymru, 2006, p.4). Similarly, Ridge found that students claiming free school meals were concerned about being *'labelled and bullied.'* (Ridge, 2002, p.83). Middleton and Thomas (1994) speak of parents being at their *'wits end'* who will do anything they can to ensure that their children succeed and are not bullied (p.72).

Horgan's (2007) research into how children's experiences of primary school in Northern Ireland were affected by the cost of school reinforced a number of the findings of previous studies detailed above. For example, she mentioned the prohibitive cost of school trips, the high cost of crested school uniforms, and the awareness of children about the difficulties their parents have in meeting such costs. Similarly, Peters et al (2009) undertook a study into the cost of schooling which included children, parents and carers, and school staff; this showed that a number of families experienced difficulties meeting the costs of school .

There is relatively little evidence of children living in poverty being invited to participate in primary research about the impact that poverty has on their education. The exceptions include Horgan (2007), Peters et al (2009), and research undertaken by Kellett and Dar (2007), who invited 11 year olds to explore links between poverty and literacy; in a key change from most studies, they invited children, aged 11, to conduct research projects with other children. The children found that the relationship between confidence, self-esteem and literacy skills was key.

Parents have participated in a number of studies to explain the impact that the multiple costs of schooling have had on them and their families. For example, Ridge (2002) quotes a parent who stated that it cost almost £300 to *'rig out'* her child for secondary school, a cost that was *'horrendous'* to her (p.78).

Teacher awareness

Despite overwhelming evidence from many researchers that poverty has a serious, negative impact upon children's educational experiences, it is significant that this issue does not appear to be given a high profile during teacher training; Cowley (2001) wrote of a PGCE course at a London university:

None of the set texts are sociology of education texts, and none engage with social class as an educational issue. Unsurprising then that a focus group of London initial teacher trainees felt that the most useful book that they had read over the year was one called 'Getting the buggers to behave' (quoted in Reay, 2006, p.302).

b) Government priorities in education

A number of changes have been made to education policies since the mid 1970s which have had at their core a very different set of principles to those which established the policies in the 1940s. The key impact of the changes has arguably been the abolishment of a '*fair playing field*' (Smith and Noble, 1995, p.20), and the establishment of a market in education (Pratt and Maguire, 1995, p.22). Despite this, the area has arguably been neglected - Gewirtz and Ball (2000) consider that schooling is: '*an area almost totally ignored in policy debates and research on quasi-market reforms.*' (p.253).

I found that literature in this area can predominantly be divided into two key themes: choice and the market, and the introduction of Academies.

i) Choice and the market

The Conservative government set the scene for the future of education policy when they stated in 1988 that their aim was to '*secure the best possible return for the substantial investment of resources*' (Smith and Noble, 1995, p.10). This language indicates that the Conservative Party viewed education in terms of an outcome-focused business, rather than a service which should be provided on the basis of quality. This was further emphasised by the ex-Secretary of State, Mark Carlisle, when he announced that it was '*one's own responsibility rather than that of the state to provide for one's family.*' (Pring, 1987, p.4). This marked the start of the gradual erosion of the more equitable system which had been in place since the 1940s, and its replacement with what has been argued is effectively '*a publicly subsidised private sector or a privately subsidised public sector*' (Pring, 1987).

A catalyst to these changes was the 1988 Education Act, which enabled local authority schools to opt-out of local authority control. Grammar schools were retained, and open enrolment allowed schools to take as many students as they could by recruiting from outside their catchment area. The 1993 Education Act built upon this by focusing on '*choice and diversity*', and sought to encourage specialist schools. These measures had the effect of changing the emphasis of education

from what schools could do for students, to what students could do for schools (Apple, 2001, p.413).

New Labour, New Conservatives?

Although the Conservative Government set the foundation for these changes, the Labour Government in power at the time of writing this thesis retained a number of elements of Conservative education policy, as detailed later in this section.

The introduction of choice arguably impacts unequally on the children of parents who are not skilled in making choices and playing the system:

One of the central assumptions of these policies is that everyone is equally capable of making free choices in the market place, so that unequal educational outcomes may be attributed to parents making wrong choices for their children rather than to any fault in the system. (Riddell, 1994, p.87).

Selection can be done covertly and some parents are more knowledgeable about the best ways of getting their children into their school of choice (Reay and Ball, 1997). Similarly, Apple (2001) notes how affluent parents have the time and money to drive their children to the best schools, and provide '*hidden cultural resources*' such as after-school classes that improve their children's '*ease*' and '*style*' (p.415).

This approach arguably continued with the election of a Labour Government in 1997. It did not take long for social commentators to suggest that New Labour was nothing more than '*warmed over Thatcherism*' (Giddens, 1998, p.18). These criticisms were made as a number of policies emphasised a withdrawal from the welfare state and the continuation of the public-private partnerships which were so popular with the previous Conservative government (Hills, 1998). For example, the Private Finance Initiative, which had been launched by the Conservatives in 1992, was initially criticised by Labour. However, when Labour were elected to government in 1997 they embraced, and even expanded, the scheme. The scheme is a method of obtaining private funds for public services, in return for partially privatising them. In terms of education, the scheme is used to obtain funds to rebuild or renovate schools, and provide maintenance and cleaning services. For example, in 2000, Jarvis Plc was awarded a £230million contract to upgrade and maintain eight secondary schools in London (Jarvis, 2000). The company went into administration in March 2010, 10 years after the contract was signed; it is not

yet clear what impact this will have upon the schools it was contracted to service and maintain over a 25-year period.

Similarly, the Conservative government had established Compulsory Competitive Tendering to compel local councils to consider privatisation as an option for service provision. New Labour kept this and renamed it 'Best Value'. Even so, it could be argued that New Labour took a different approach to the Conservatives:

While the ideology of Thatcherism – at least in the later years – can be viewed as one which espoused markets and which denigrated bureaucracies (hierarchy) as wasteful and inefficient, that of New Labour promulgated a discourse of partnerships, participation, social inclusion and a pragmatic approach to the use of the market. Notions of reciprocity, inclusivity and partnership were all key ideas in New Labour's vocabulary, and implied the goal of establishing a more consensual basis for state/societal interaction. (Newman, 2001, p.23).

Shortly after Labour was elected to government in 1997, Tony Blair, the then Prime Minister, announced that he was seeking a 'third way'. This was not a new concept, or even one exclusive to British politics. It originally emerged in Britain in the 1930's, and just as Thatcher's approach to politics was said to resemble Ronald Regan's, Blair's commitment to a third way emerged as Bill Clinton announced that he was seeking the same: *'The politics of New Labour reflected an attempt across much of Western Europe and in the USA to forge a new political settlement fitted to the new conditions of a global economy but attentive to the importance of social cohesion'* (Newman, 2001, p.40).

Blair himself acknowledged a move towards Conservative policies by stating that the third way was between the old left, and the Conservative right (Powell, 1999, p.23). This contradicted those social commentators who stated that the third way was completely separate from traditional Labour and Conservative policies – for example, Newman (2001) stated that: *'The idea of a Third Way exaggerates the newness of new Labour while downplaying continuities with both the 'old left' and with Conservative policy-making in the 1980s and 1990s.'* (p.41).

A number of writers have commented on the sense of déjà vu experienced with New Labour's educational policies. Benn (2001) noted: *'Normally, you can tell by reading the first few lines of any speech which political position the speaker occupies. But that is getting harder.'* (p.2).

Labour maintained, and even built upon, some of the Conservative education policies which were traditionally '*detested by the liberal education establishment*' (Whitty, 1998, p.2). For example, Labour changed their views on selection and grammar schools – traditionally they opposed both, but later did a U-turn on this and said that if local parents wanted grammar schools to be maintained, then they would be maintained.

Training the working classes to be more middle-class

It has been suggested that Labour's approach to education is not so much about erasing inequalities as trying to instil middle-class values into the working classes. Accordingly, Gewirtz (2001) calls Labour's approach to education:

a massive investment in an ambitious programme of re-socialization and re-education, which has as its ultimate aim the eradication of class differences by reconstructing and transforming working-class parents into middle-class ones. Excellence for the many is to be achieved, at least in part, by making the many behave like the few. (p.366).

She further questions whether New Labour's approach to education will be effective, noting that: '*In our hierarchically ordered, competitive society, education is a positional good (Hirsch 1976). In other words there is no room for everyone to be a winner.*' (Gewirtz, 2001, p.373).

The issue of whether the values of the thriving middle-classes - '*instrumental, self-promoting, competitive, individualist*' - is really desirable for all is also raised by Gewirtz (2001, p.375). The market revolution, as Gewirtz and Ball (2000) call it: '*is not just a change of structure and incentives. It is a transformational process that brings into play a new set of values and a new moral environment.*' (p.266).

The market system

It has been argued that the changes made by the Conservatives, and subsequently by Labour, has resulted in schools competing for students as parents select the best schools for their children, and schools are required to make policy decisions which will allow their schools to do best in a competitive market-place (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995, p.2). This surely means that there must be at least an element of disadvantage for those students who, like in other areas of their lives, are at the back of the queue when it comes to obtaining products and services in a market system.

Regardless of this, it has been argued by a number of politicians that the market system is actually a fair way of providing education as choice and competition are preferable to bureaucracy (Gewirtz et al, 1995, p.9). However, in practice, it has been suggested by a number of researchers that it is middle-class parents who are more likely to actively choose schools (Gewirtz et al, 1995, p.22, see also Reid, 1997), which means that popular schools may become even more polarised in terms of their intake (Smith & Noble, 1995, p.10).

As Apple (2001) notes, the combination of education markets with the publication of examination league tables means that schools increasingly wish to attract '*motivated*' parents with '*able*' children (p.413). It can be argued that some parents are more knowledgeable about the best ways of getting their children into their schools of choice (Reay and Ball, 1997). Reay argues that choice means that working-class children have no choice but to attend the inner-city schools rejected by most middle-class parents (Reay, 2004a, p.1007). Similarly, the evidence suggests that where oversubscribed schools are allowed to select pupils, modes of selection tend to favour children from middle-class backgrounds (Moore and Davenport, 1990).

In light of this evidence it could be argued that a market-based system of educational provision does not open education up to everyone on a fair basis, but actually exacerbates inequalities by increasing the choice available to middle-class families, at the expense of working-class families (Gewirtz et al, 1995, p.189, see also Henry, Lingard, Rizvi and Taylor, 1999). Gewirtz et al's assertion, that choice doesn't necessarily represent a choice for everyone and in fact reinforced existing class-based division, rings true (1995, p.22).

'Failing schools'

A key discourse which has emerged in this area in recent years is that of 'failing schools'. There have arguably always been less popular schools – those schools that parents would prefer that their children didn't go to, largely because they are based in an undesirable area, or pupils achieve exam results significantly below the national average. However, it is only during the last few years, perhaps since the period that Ofsted inspections began to rise in the awareness of the typical middle-class parent, that the concept of 'failing schools' began to appear in relation to those schools which performed poorly in comparison to other schools

(Tomlinson, 2001). Tomlinson (2001) suggests that the driver for this was an increase in unemployment during the 1970s:

Schools in industrial societies always produced under-achieving students, but from the 1970s the collapse of the unskilled labour market brought into sharp focus the absence of a link between school and employment for an increasing number of students. Rather than recognising an employment crisis, the political response was to attack the school system. (p.85).

In 1993 a circular was released: Schools Requiring Special Measures. It allowed for school inspections, and for special measures to be taken when a school was deemed to be failing. Ultimately, 'failing schools' could be transferred to an Educational Association which could recommend that the schools became grant-maintained, or even closed.

Tomlinson (2001) calls 'failing schools' 'a demonised educational institution whose Head, teachers and governors were deemed to be personally responsible for the educational underperformance of its students' (p.81). These schools, which are characterised by relatively low academic achievements, are punished publicly, and the blame is placed on the school's staff (Lupton, 2005, p.590).

It has been suggested that being placed in special measures is very difficult for schools – as Bettle, Frederickson and Sharp (2001) note:

If the school is [then] judged to be in Special Measures, it will be in receipt of a difficult and uncomfortable judgement. This may be taken by some members of staff as a direct rejection of their individual skills and capabilities. The fact that the school remains under the spotlight for an additional 24 months, with repeated visits by the inspector, as well as observations and inputs from other attached professionals, adds up to a recipe for possible staff breakdown—for the team, as well as for individuals. (p.67).

The 'failing schools' movement has been widely criticised amongst researchers, with many suggesting that it unfairly blames schools for circumstances out of their control:

instead of seeing the problem as one of access to taken-for-granted educational goods, it sought to problematize the nature of the goods to which access was being sought. And instead of seeing failure as the result of a deficit in working-class homes, materially and culturally, it invited us to entertain the notion that working-class failure was a relational outcome of

middle-class power to define what counts as knowledge and achievement. (Whitty, 2001, p.287).

This perspective is supported by O'Connor et al (1999), who suggest Hackney Downs school was closed because it failed to '*compensate for society*' (p.254). They further state that 'failing schools' are '*officially regarded as operating divorced from their specific historical, cultural, political, economic and social circumstances*' (p.254). Similarly, Tomlinson (1997) notes succinctly: '*Political and media analysis of failing schools is at the microscopic level. Individual schools and their personnel are discussed as though divorced from an historical position, and from basic social, economic and educational structures.*' (p.82, see also p.81).

'Failing schools' are frequently publicly 'named and shamed'; O'Connor et al note how the incoming Labour government had 'named and shamed' 18 schools within weeks of taking power in 1997 (1999, p.241). While this identification of struggling schools may have been intended to make the government look proactive and effective, the flipside has been the subsequent negative experiences of those in schools which had been targeted. O'Connor et al (1999) speak of the '*appalling Press coverage*' that Hackney Downs school received (p.107):

At one extreme, the school closure can be likened to the old English custom of hunting with hounds. Seeking out failing schools had, in the 1990s, become a rewarding pastime for politicians and the media. A quarry run to ground could be publicly savaged and, if necessary, publicly done to death. (p.240).

The result of press coverage was described as '*the wrecking of children's education, and the blighting of teachers' careers*' (O'Connor et al, 1999, p.240). These groups were not able to defend themselves in this difficult high-profile situation. As Tomlinson (1997) notes, '*winner*' and '*loser*' in education emerge because of the groups they belong to, rather than their individual attributes. Although the staff and pupils of schools which have been labelled as failing may resent this, they feel that, as a group, they have little power to oppose their fate when faced against the formidable might of politicians and policy-makers (p.83).

The fact that 'failing schools' are usually situated in extremely deprived areas, and therefore predominantly teach children from working-class backgrounds, does not seem to be judged relevant in assessments of their effectiveness. This oversight is arguably inappropriate, as it assumes that problems with such schools can be

tackled by the schools themselves; this has been called the '*context-blind school effectiveness movement*.' (Lupton, 2005, p.590). This does not recognise the special circumstances that schools in deprived areas face on a daily basis as children attending such schools will inevitably live with a wide range of difficulties which the school may or may not be able to improve. A number of researchers have noted that many schools have to operate in difficult circumstances, such as the entry of large numbers of refugees, large numbers of pupils with special learning needs, or dilapidated school buildings, and despite this, need to justify relatively low academic achievement (Benn, 2001, p.3).

The label 'failing' can impact significantly upon local perceptions of schools. Reay (2004a) studied how '*poor, working-class children in inner London deal with the burden of middle-class representations of working-class lives; in particular the representation of their schools as pathologized spaces*.' (p.1006).

This inevitably begs the question: does 'failing school' really mean 'failing working classes'? or even just 'working classes', full stop?

'Edubusiness'

The Labour government has in recent years taken a clear U-turn in its approach to the provision of education. Tomlinson notes how the Labour government set up a system of secondary education in England and Wales which created schools catering for the 80% of students who did not show an aptitude for academic learning – '*In present day terms all those secondary modern schools were failing schools*' (Tomlinson, 1997, p.84, see also West and Pennell, 2002). Hatcher (2001) notes how advanced capitalist countries have come to a consensus and agreed that the way forward is for them all to meet employers' needs. This will involve a number of changes in educational systems including: encouraging competition between schools, giving parents a choice of schools, funding schools based on student numbers and performances, and ensuring that schools provide value for money. It has been said that: '*Britain under the Labour government has gone further than any other European country in adopting and implementing this programme*.' (Hatcher, 2001, p.45).

What is effectively happening is that public management is being transferred from schools to businesses. It has been claimed that Labour are allowing companies to move into state education, this is a reflection of what has been happening in the

USA, where it has been suggested that social policy is informed by '*social Darwinism*' (Katz, 1989, p.195, quoted in Moses, 2004, p.279).

'Edubusiness' is prolific in the US, with many schools being run on a for-profit basis by businesses. Those schools which are not run by businesses frequently allow businesses to enter the classroom, arguably to the detriment of pupils. Apple tells of Channel One in the USA where schools are given TV sets – tuned to Channel One only – along with videos and satellite receivers in return for the schools signing a three to five year contract guaranteeing that all students will watch the advertisement-heavy channel each day (2006, p.35). An astonishing 40% of America's schools, mainly those in poor areas, subscribe to Channel One. The advertisements on this channel cost advertisers up to \$200,000 for 30 seconds, and unsurprisingly prove to be effective in brainwashing a captive audience:

Children in schools with Channel One, American researchers found, were more likely to accept the propositions 'I want what I see advertised', 'designer labels make a difference' and 'a nice car is more important than school.' (The Observer, 5 April 1998, quoted in Monbiot, 2000, p.333).

Similarly, the increasing cost of textbooks has led many school districts to use corporately-sponsored material, most of which has been found to be biased towards the sponsor's products (Schlosser, 2001, p.55). Schools are increasingly becoming sales outlets for major corporations, with students the consumers. In one case a school district was paid to sell 70,000 cases of Coke during a three-year period. When the school district realised that it was not on-line to meet this requirement, a district administrator suggested that school Principals allowed students to take Coke products into classrooms, and move Coke machines to key locations to encourage increased sales (Schlosser, 2001, p.57). Researchers have noted many dangers in allowing business to enter education as their respective aims may be incompatible (see Hughes, 1992, p.24).

The UK is clearly moving in a similar direction, with the Labour government committed to increasing the role of the private sector in the delivery of public sector services (Hatcher, 2001, p.51). As previously noted, it is widely argued that the current Labour Government has adopted – and even built upon – the Conservative government's legacy (Chitty and Dunford, 1999, cited in West & Pennell, 2002). Wilkinson (2007) notes: '*New Labour's 'choice agenda' has its political antecedents*

in the new right policies of the Thatcher and Reagan eras and is incontrovertibly connected to the ideology of the market.' (p.268).

The Academy programme, detailed in the next section, is a key example of this. Beckett argues that Academies are a larger-scale reinvention of City Academies, which Labour's Jack Straw criticised in 1990 as *'second-order companies whose directors were interested in political leverage or honours.'* (Beckett, 2007). However, Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister, previously made it clear he was open to the use of private companies in the provision of public services, arguing *'remember what matters is outcomes, what matters is what works.'* (Speech to Local Labour Government Conference, Blackpool, 6 February 2000, quoted in Hatcher, 2001).

It is likely that 'edubusiness' will become more prevalent in the UK due to the amenability of the Labour Government in power at the time of writing towards combining business and the public sector. It may be too early to say what effect such schools will have on vulnerable students who have little choice but to accept whatever educational provision is made available to them. Whitty argues education reforms such as those which promote choice can, in fact: *'turn out to be sophisticated ways of reproducing existing hierarchies of class and race.'* (Whitty, 2001, p.289).

Some researchers have suggested that while the wealthy voluntarily exclude themselves from state-provided services, many still choose to participate in state education. Whitty (2001), for example, suggests that the middle-classes have grown rapidly since World War two whereas the education sector hasn't. As a result, while some of the middle-classes use public schools, others have: *'had some success in 'colonizing' particular parts of public education in ways that make it 'safe' for their own children'* (p.289). Similarly, choice policies have enabled the middle classes to withdraw from certain areas, which makes it even more difficult for schools in these areas to succeed (Whitty et al, 1998b, cited in Whitty, 2001, p.291).

Although the majority of research in this area focuses on difficulties experienced by schools in deprived areas, it is important to note that schools in deprived areas arguably do better than other schools in a number of areas including cultural welfare – something that is not widely recognised (Lupton, 2005). Similarly, the

positive relationships between families living in poverty is rarely explored. Redmond (2008) reviewed a number of studies into poverty and found supportive relationships in families which helped resist disadvantage: *'children, rather than blaming their parents for their poverty, offer support and cooperation in their struggle to survive together...families emerge from the studies as protective institutions, softening the impact of economic adversity for children'* (p.11). In addition, Redmond cites Ridge (2007a) who details how children offer both practical and emotional support for their mothers who are returning to work (2008, p.21).

As previous research has clearly shown, there are significant issues with the provision of education, which the Labour government in power at the time of writing this paper could be said to be exacerbating. This can perhaps most clearly be illustrated by the Academies programme, which is detailed in the next section.

ii) Academies

Academies are a relatively new introduction to education in Britain, which have grown out of the Government's highly publicised commitment to raising educational achievement in England, with *'Education, education, education'* being a key theme of their 1997 election campaign (Tomlinson, 2001).

Academies were launched by the Department for Education and Standards (DfES, no date 'b') as a positive addition to British education, which were intended to improve educational achievement in inner-cities by including input from businesses. They first reached the public consciousness in March 2000 when David Blunkett, then Secretary of State, made a speech on secondary education and said that he would shortly be announcing pathfinders for new Academy schools. The first Academy products were launched in September 2000, and the first three Academies opened in September 2002. The Government later announced that it intended to open 200 Academies by 2010.

Two Academies were simultaneously given the go-ahead in Walton in 2006. The Cabinet Member for Children's Services in Walton City Council said:

These two schools represent a formidable new investment in new opportunities for 11-19 year olds in Kirton, Clifton*, Shepherd's Gate* and Walton* and are set to become a permanent part of the educational scene in Walton* for many years to come. The [academy sponsor] bring some*

key skills, firm principles concerning inclusion, access and partnership and we look forward to supporting them in making a success of their new venture, working with them and learning from each other for the benefit of everyone in Walton.*

*pseudonyms for areas of Walton

The DfES presents Academies as being of benefit to students in deprived areas:

Academies are an integral part of the Government's strategy for raising standards in the most disadvantaged and challenging areas. They will raise standards by innovative approaches to management, governance, teaching and the curriculum. The involvement of sponsors from the voluntary and business sector or faith groups will allow them to bring their skills and expertise to each Academy. (DfES, no date 'b').

Under the Academy scheme, existing schools are demolished and new, state-of-the-art schools are built at an average cost of £25million each. The scheme has attracted a significant amount of criticism and controversy because each school must raise up to £2 million each from private sponsors, who in return for their investment are able to influence the curriculum and running of the school. Academies are able to be fully independent and obtain their running costs from Government, bypassing LEAs. Similarly, their staff are not employed within the framework of the Schoolteachers Pay & Conditions Act 1991. However, although sponsors are able to have complete control over the way the school is run, the school's running costs are met by the taxpayer.

It could be argued that Academies are effectively independent state schools which are a continuation of the New Right's commitment to markets in education, and allow the rich and powerful to purchase control of education: *'the New Labour leadership now accepts the logic of the new right's beliefs in educational markets as it seeks a diversity of state schools controlled by those from outside the tradition of public sector professionalism.'* (Wilkinson, 2007, p.268).

Government support for Academies has been constant and unwavering – as Beckett (2007) notes: *'If ministers' willingness to get behind a project were enough to make it work, city Academies would be a roaring success.'* (p.12). However, concerns about the Academies programme have already been raised by the House of Commons Education & Skills Select Committee, which reported in March 2005 that *'£5 billion is a lot of money to commit to one programme...the rapid expansion*

of the Academy policy comes at the expense of rigorous evaluation' (Select Committee on Education and Skills, 2005).

Academies have been resoundingly criticised by researchers on numerous fronts, from funding and design to the impact on the communities they serve, as detailed in the sub-sections below. In particular, activist-led organisations such as No to City Academies and the Anti-Academies Alliance (AAA) are very vocal in their criticism of practically all elements of the Academies programme. The AAA is the larger of the two; it was formed in 2005, and brought together a number of local campaigns into one alliance. A number of Trade Unions are affiliated with, and financially support, the organisation, and it has a number of high-profile patrons including Tony Benn and Roy Hattersley. The organisation is currently run by a full-time member of staff, indicating the quantity of work undertaken by the organisation.

The very fact that the AAA and No to City Academies organisations exist is a clear indicator that there are a significant amount of concerns about the Academy programme. These are detailed further below.

Concerns and criticisms of the Academy programme

Business participation

This is perhaps the most contentious element of the Academies programme, and the one which has attracted the most and loudest criticism. There are no restrictions on who can sponsor an Academy, as long as they are able to make the initial contribution of £2 million towards the re-build of the school. A number of businesses have sponsored Academies to date, including charities, private schools, football clubs and the church.

Peter Vardy's involvement in a number of Academies has come under particular scrutiny. No to City Academies notes that Vardy, owner of a large car sales company, has just one O-level; they consequently question whether he should be able to dictate a curriculum or select teaching staff (No to City Academies, no date).

Numerous concerns have also been raised about the agenda, hidden or otherwise, which would lead businesses to become involved in education. As noted earlier in

this chapter, a number of researchers believe that education and business simply do not mix as they have, or arguably should have, wildly differing objectives. This means that the education system is partially being handed over to individuals who do not necessarily prioritise democracy or the advancement of education (Wilkinson, 2007, p.267). This is of particular concern as parents cannot do anything about the sponsor if they are unhappy with what they teach, or the way they run the school. The sponsor effectively owns the school, employs everybody who works in it, and even selects the governing body.

In most schools, the DfES' guidance on governing bodies requires that they include at least one third elected parents, at least two members of staff, and one fifth LEA governors, with the remaining members elected by the governing body. In comparison, the DfES only requires that Academies have as members the Headteacher, a representative from the LEA and at least one elected parent representative. There is no requirement at all for any staff members other than the Headteacher to sit on the governing body.

At its most extreme, the criticism of Academies had led to them being compared to '*protection rackets*' whereby schools feel that they have no option but to allow businesses to participate if they want continued funding for their schools (Beckett, 2007, p. 17). *No to City Academies* notes that few sponsors have actually paid the token sum of £2 million in full, and in fact they can actually profit from sponsoring a school as they can award all contract work to their own companies, with a potential income of hundreds of thousands of pounds (No to City Academies, no date). This is supported by Cookson, Evans and Taylor (2007) who note how four Academies had been found to have awarded contracts to organisations and companies linked to the businesses sponsoring the schools. For example, the Grace Academy in Solihull granted £300,000 worth of contracts to a firm and charity owned by its sponsor; the Government appeared to have waived the usual requirement that at least three quotes are obtained.

Inclusion

Another key area in which Academies have been criticised is inclusion. The very existence of Academies has been seen by some researchers as being incompatible with inclusion as they enjoy higher funding, and newer buildings, than other schools, and are therefore effectively isolated from other schools (Steve

Sinnott, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, quoted in Reed, 2007).

Academies also appear to be exempt from a number of measures which apply to normal schools, which offer protection to children in certain circumstances. For example, the *Anti Academies Alliance* (2007) notes that while local authorities can make maintained schools accept children with special needs, this is optional for Academies.

The issue of excluding students is particularly key as Academies have been found to exclude higher numbers of students than maintained schools – for example, two Academies in Middlesborough expelled four times more students during the 2002 and 2003 school years than all other schools in the borough combined. The head of one of the Academies said that this was due to: *‘a blip in establishing a level of education that wasn’t here before.’* (*‘Academies ‘failing’*, 2004). However, this was criticised by the head of a local maintained school who suggested that the Academies were using exclusion as a way of controlling parents and children (*‘Academies ‘failing’*, 2004).

On average, it has been found that Academies exclude twice as many pupils as state schools (Perkin, 2008). Beckett cites King’s Academy in Middlesborough; in its first year as an Academy, it excluded 10 of the 285 pupils on roll. Of the remaining 275, only 230 sat an exam (Beckett, 2007). There is little incentive for Academies to keep children they find difficult to teach present in school until the end of a school year as, unlike maintained schools, they are entitled to keep the funding for a child, regardless of when during the year they exclude them (*‘Academies ‘failing’*, 2004). This gains extra significance in light of the fact that the number of exclusions has actually fallen in Britain during the last five years (MacInnes et al, 2009, p.68). Being excluded can have a serious, long-impact upon students: *‘Children excluded from school often do not return to full-time education, so the one-off event of exclusion has a long-term impact on their life chances.’* (MacInnes et al, 2009, p.68). This has been supported by Beckett (2007), who quotes the mother of a student who was expelled from an Academy for smoking:

He’s done two years at college, worked hard, passed everything, his social skills and business skills courses as well, but he can’t get an apprenticeship. He went for an interview and they said, why haven’t you got any GCSEs? So he had to tell them why – he’d been thrown out of

King's Academy. And they didn't give him an apprenticeship. He's applied to about 30 firms and none of them will take him on. It's going to be with him for the rest of his life, being expelled, just because he was caught smoking. (p.77/8).

Academies have also been accused of 'cherry-picking' students, which negatively impacts on neighbouring schools (Chitty, quoted in Anti Academies Alliance, 2007). This may support other research which has found that one Academy is taking in just 47% of pupils entitled to FSM compared to 60% before – conversely, four other schools in the area are taking in higher numbers of children entitled to FSM ('Academies 'failing'', 2004). This is supported by a Pricewaterhousecoopers (PWC) report from 2006 which found that Academies showed a declining rate of FSM pupils which exceeded the decline found at comparable schools (PWC, 2006, cited by the Anti Academies Alliance, no date).

It has been suggested that these inequalities were built into the very fabric of the Academies programme; Millar notes that key parental rights and issues such as admissions and exclusions were excluded from the (confidential) Academies contracts (2006). Gewirtz (2001) makes a further vital point about this approach, noting that *'there is no room for everyone to be a winner'* (p.373). Furthermore:

It is difficult to see how New Labour's re-socialization programme is going to be effective in universalizing their preferred modes of orientation to schooling when the structural inequalities that help to generate and sustain the differential values and behaviour of particular groups of middle-and working-class parents remain. (p.374).

Design

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, criticisms have been raised regarding the design of the Academy buildings themselves; some have argued that the huge cost of rebuilding schools would have been better spent on improving existing school buildings. Ofsted criticised the first Academy school to open, the £18m Unity Academy in Middlesbrough, for its design, based on a Tuscan mountain village as *'not entirely fit for purpose'* (Woodward, 2006). They noted that while the building initially appeared impressive, in fact it was daunting to students due to its high open balconies and stairwells (Smithers, 2006).

Background of businesses

Controversially, a relatively high number of Academies are run by organisations which operate the schools on Christian religion principals. Their reasons for doing

so have been speculated upon by several researchers, including Beckett, who suggests that falling attendances at churches have led to Christian churches to take the opportunity to intervene in education (2007, p. 67). Anti-Academy organisations are particularly vocal on this point, noting that parents do not have much of a choice if their local school has all the equipment, but happens to be run along Christian principals or, in the words of one organisation, an '*extreme religious agenda*' (No to City Academies, no date).

Faith schools have raised much concern amongst social commentators. It has been argued that religion has no place in school and – at its most extreme – concerns have been raised about the quality of the education that these schools provide to children. For example, Peter Vardy sponsors two Academies in Gateshead and Middlesbrough via his Emmanuel Schools Foundation (ESF). These schools, in the Foundation's own words: '*place the Person of Christ and His example at the centre of their inspiration as they mould a curriculum appropriate for students of the 21st century*' (ESF, 2006, quoted in Wilkinson, 2007, p.276). This Academy's approach has included the provision of a curriculum which teaches creationism alongside the theory of evolution – this has been criticised as '*educational debauchery*' by Richard Dawkins, professor of the public understanding of science at the University of Oxford (Wilkinson, 2007, p.276). Further to this argument, it is has been suggested that the idea of faith schools is in itself divisory, and therefore harmful to social relations: '*The problem with faith schools is not their purpose but their consequences. They may be designed to inculcate religious values, but they result in religious ghettos, which can destabilise the health of the country at large.*' (Romain, 2005, p.72).

Standard of education

Academies have been feted by the DfES as increasing the standard of education – they have stated that Academies are '*twice as good as the schools they replace*' (DfES, 2007). This claim is telling as it is made solely on the basis of doubling A – C grades thus confirming that academic achievement, and that alone, is seen as the mark of a good school by the government. However, formal assessment of Academies by PWC has found that '*performance is actually deteriorating*' in some Academies (Reed, 2007). For example, Unity Academy was put into special measures by Ofsted less than three years after opening for failing to give '*an acceptable standard of education*'. Inspectors noted that on any given day, up to one third of teachers did not turn up to work (Smithers, 2005).

In fact, the cost of any increase in GCSE grades associated with new build Academies is astonishing – for each pupil who gains 5 or more A* - C grades, the building cost (spread over 20 years) is £250,000 each (Terry Wrigley, quoted by the Anti Academies Alliance, 2007).

A number of researchers have suggested that where Academies do show improved exam results, this is due to either their high rate of exclusions, or a change in their admission policies. Gorard (2005) notes: *'this relative decline in FSM students in Academies does lead to the concern that any 'improvements' in GCSE outcomes are attributable to a change in student intake more than innovative approaches to management, governance, teaching and the curriculum'* (p.375, cited by the Anti Academies Alliance, no date).

Staff turnover

Although it is still relatively early days for many Academies, the turnover of staff, particularly Headteachers, has been striking. Marley (2009) notes that *'More than half of the principals at schools sponsored by the United Learning Trust have been replaced within two years of the academies opening.'* This supports Beckett's (2007) assertion that *'the turnover of city academy head teachers has been truly alarming'* (p.127). Beckett (2007) quotes the Headteacher of an Academy: *'I am now the longest-serving head of a city academy in the country. To my knowledge no other principal has lasted more than six months, and I have been here three years.'* (p.127).

John Dunford, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, has suggested that this high turnover is either due to issues with the appointment system, or *'unrealistic expectations'* (Marley, 2009).

It is difficult to find any positive material relating to Academies from anyone except the DfES or Academy sponsors themselves. A key gap in the literature is a lack of insight from those attending or teaching at schools which have become Academies and I hope to address this within my Findings chapter.

7. Suggestions for change

Interestingly, while a number of researchers have critiqued elements of current educational policy (e.g. Gewirtz, 2001; Beckett, 2007), many have not made suggestions for improvement. However, Smith, Smith and Wright (1997) suggest

there should be a better partnership between central government, local authorities and schools, and that additional resources should be made available to schools in deprived areas, which should be targeted more effectively. In particular, they suggest that school improvement programmes should be used more widely, in place of intervening in 'failing schools' during periods of crisis. They also suggest that the 'best' teachers should be encouraged to work in, and remain in, schools in disadvantaged areas.

Blanden and McNally (2006) suggest financial resources can be helpful in supporting school improvement when properly directed, while lower-cost initiatives such as *'high quality teaching practices'*, including literacy and numeracy hours, can also be effective (p.13).

Lupton suggests that the context in which practice is developed should be examined, rather than individual institutions (2005, p.590). Similarly, Reid suggests that league tables could have a place in an equitable education system – in forming the basis of analysis of the education system (1997, p.19).

Gewirtz (2001) suggests that as middle class parents tend to choose between schools, a change should be made to the system:

the most legitimate response – is to dismantle the market system which privileges these particular kinds of middle-class orientations, values and modes of behaviour. New Labour's response is however somewhat different. They want to try and cultivate in all parents an inclination to choice, a belief that choice is something to be valued, and to develop in all parents the cultural skills necessary to exploit the system of choice to their children's best advantage. (p.367).

Preston makes a number of practical suggestions including the reduction, or removal, of charging policies relating to school activities, and the inclusion of child poverty on the curriculum for teacher training (2008, p.16/17).

Goodman and Gregg make a number of recommendations, focusing on the areas of parents and the home environment, children's attitudes, and the approach of schools. These include raising the aspirations of both children and their families, and providing teaching support directly to those students slipping behind at school (2010, p.8/9).

8. Key theoretical perspectives of the study

As this chapter has shown, a range of research indicates that poverty has an impact on children's access to secondary education in the UK, via an assortment of variables including the financial costs associated with obtaining an education, parental background, and the areas in which students live and schools are located.

Considering the different elements of my research as a cohesive whole, I have found that theories concerning the impact of 'capital' on education help locate my theoretical perspectives, particularly with reference to the four types of capital proposed by Bourdieu (1984):

- economic capital
- social capital
- cultural capital
- symbolic capital.

Bourdieu's research in this area was grounded in the French education system but in recent years, this concept has been explored and expanded upon in terms of the UK education system (e.g. Reay 2004b). The concept of financial capital impacting upon access to education is not new, as has been shown earlier in this chapter, and arguably for many this is the first consideration when giving thought to what factors may impede access to education. The concept that factors other than finances alone may be of relevance to access to education is, however, more recent.

The four different elements of capital proposed by Bourdieu carry a clear affinity with themes that surfaced in my research and I feel that they provided me with scope to consider a more rounded perspective of the circumstances and experiences of students than just examining one element of their home or school lives would have allowed.

The value of capital in relation to children's experiences of education has also been explored by Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2004) who note that the different types of capital can propel the 'owner' socially (Walkerdine et al, 2004, p.105). I felt that this suggestion was highly relevant to my research, as I found that numerous factors resulted in students experiencing barriers to education, detailed in the next chapter, which I retrospectively found to relate closely to Bourdieu's suggested categories and Walkerdine et al's ideas. It is important to note that, as with much of

my literature review, the concept of capital in relation to education was something which I only became aware of after my research was complete, but which I retrospectively found to substantiate my findings and add theoretical strength.

Choice in education also comprised a key theme in my literature review, and this issue, too, relates closely to theories of capital as Reay, for example, argues that an increase in choice in education has made it easier to see cultural capital at work (2004b). She argues that this is due to the fact that schools are increasingly drawing upon parents in an attempt to raise achievement levels:

We have now reached a point at the beginning of the 21st century when parental involvement is no longer optional as parents are increasingly seen to be co-educators alongside their children's teachers (Reay, 2004b, p.76).

It is important to consider though, that in terms of culture: *'the value of a particular culture can only be known by the different fields in which it is realizable and can be converted.'* (Skeggs, 2004a, p.16).

In summary, there are several notions of 'capital' which relate to the ways in which children experience the education system in the UK. The theoretical position of this paper thus became that a deficiency in various types of capital negatively impacts upon access to education for students living in poverty.

9. Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented the themes with which I became preoccupied before, during and after my fieldwork. However, as previously noted, before I started my fieldwork I focused primarily on the financial cost of education; my literature review naturally grew beyond this in line with the organic expansion of my research topic.

The literature in this chapter clearly shows evidence that children experience many barriers to secondary education, ranging from the cost of school to the introduction of the new Academies programme. However, as previously noted, I have yet to find many studies which have explicitly addressed the multiple barriers experienced by children, which seems to me to be a key gap in the literature. An exception is Horgan's (2007) study of the impact of poverty on children's experiences of school in Northern Ireland, although this focused on children aged 4-11 rather than children of secondary school age.

I have also not come across any literature from researchers who have themselves gained extended access to Academies; this seems to be vital given the many, substantial concerns that many researchers have about Academies. At the time of writing up I found other researchers discovering the potential for researching Academies limited by a sense of reticence about researchers within those Academies (Moore, 2010). Consequently there seems not to be much in the way of empirical research from within the Academies and looking back I see that my project, which may not now be logistically possible, offers a unique witnessing.

The next chapter will detail the methodology I employed over a period of almost five years spent visiting Chestnut Grove, later Chestnut Academy, on a regular basis, during which time I studied many of the above-mentioned issues and concerns.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

1. Introduction

Methodology was the very lifeblood of my research in the sense that it both produced and sustained the enquiry. Although I had a clear idea about what I wanted to explore, I was initially unsure of which of the many methods available to use and besides, as already mentioned, the research focus shifted during the course of enquiry in ways which meant that methodological decision making needed to be kept constantly under review.

Like most PhD researchers, I started out by reviewing the methods previously used by studies which were of particular interest to me such as Middleton and Thomas (1994) and Smith and Noble (1995), and considered their application to my research area. I also read a wide range of literature in this area and found that relatively early writing about research methods, including that by Wright Mills (1959), was invaluable in developing my understanding of long-standing academic debates in this area.

I found that some of the issues I had already started to consider, including the role of the researcher in the research process, and the question of validity, had been addressed and debated numerous times by a number of researchers; often the issues remained consistently problematic regardless of the decades that have since passed. This reading was extremely helpful in assisting me to consider my approach to my research, and the potential benefits and disadvantages of the many options available to me.

After careful consideration of the wide range of options available, I made a choice of research tools, and complemented a predominantly qualitative approach, with some quantitative tools when I felt that this would supplement the other tools used. I strove to take a highly flexible approach, adapting my tools and their application where I felt that the situation warranted this. In practice, I encountered some situations which raised both practical and ethical questions for me, and found that I needed to make my own decisions on how to proceed in the absence of specific

guidance from the research reading I had found so helpful in the initial planning stages.

This is the story of my methodological decision making.

2. Methodology literature review

There is much literature in the area of research methods, particularly relating to qualitative studies in the social sciences. For the purposes of this paper I have divided key literature into two themes which are of particular relevance to my research:

- a) the position of the researcher
- b) the voice of research participants.

a) The position of the researcher

Bias and neutrality are perhaps the most frequently raised topics in methodology debates, as the personal beliefs and motives of researchers are arguably central to their approach to their research; this has been succinctly called *'the ideas people think and act with'* by Halpin (1994, p.198).

The issue of bias is illustrated by Becker and Gouldner's high profile argument about whether sociological research can be undertaken in a way which is free from bias. Becker (1967) argued that it is impossible to undertake social research without taking the side of one of the research subjects, stating: *'there is no position from which sociological research can be done that is not biased in one way or another.'* (p.245). He argued that society usually sides with *'superiors'*, and that researchers are normally only accused of bias when they side with *'subordinates'*. Becker (1967) further stated that the question is not can researchers avoid taking sides? because they cannot; the real question is: can researchers avoid bias distorting their work by making sure that they work impartially?

Becker's perspective was strongly criticised by Gouldner (1971) who challenged the idea that researchers automatically identify with one side or the other, and accused Becker of goading others to side with the underdogs, such as jazz musicians, instead of *'respectable'* society (p.29).

I am firmly with Becker on this argument, and believe that the very nature of Gouldner's research shows clear bias against those he accused Becker of siding

with. I believe that bias is established in every researcher's work from the very moment that they set a research topic – their very research question comes from biases that they hold, and I feel that this should be openly acknowledged right from the beginning of the research. As I detail later in this chapter, this is the approach taken with my own research; I felt an affinity with the students who participated, and this was certain to impact upon my research, regardless of any effort I may have made to undertake my research in an objective manner.

This approach is in line with that taken by Carr (2000), who cites Popper (1961 and 1972), stating that facts cannot speak for themselves; they need to be collected and presented in a certain way, and that a researcher's beliefs and knowledge naturally and unavoidably affect this:

The naïve empiricist thinks that we begin by collecting and analysing our experiences...but if I am ordered to record what I am now experiencing, I shall hardly know how to obey that ambiguous order. Am I to report what I am writing; that I hear a bell ringing; a newsboy shouting; a loudspeaker droning; or am I to report, perhaps that these noises irritate me? A science needs points of view, and theoretical problems (Popper, 1961; 106, cited in Carr, 2000, p.441).

Carr (2000) stresses that partisanship should not be seen as a negative influence on research:

Far from being some kind of unwelcome intruder whose presence or absence can be empirically detected, partisanship is an essential ingredient in educational research whose elimination could only be achieved by eliminating the entire research enterprise itself. The existence of partisanship in educational research is, therefore, not an empirical matter concerning what, as a matter of fact, is the case but a logical necessity which it is neither possible nor desirable to avoid. (p.439).

This perspective is also supported by Halpin (1994), who dismisses as 'naïve' the idea that qualitative researchers report their findings without allowing their ideas or presuppositions to have an influence (p.198). Wright Mills (1959) positively welcomes partisanship, arguing that one's work cannot - indeed, should not - be separated from one's life. He tells new researchers that:

The most admirable thinkers within the scholarly community that you have chosen to join do not split their work from their lives. They seem to take both too seriously to allow such disassociation, and they want to use each for the enrichment of the other. (p.215/6).

I took this position in choosing to undertake research in an area in which I had prior personal experience, and an ongoing interest.

It is, then, clear that some social researchers (e.g. Carr, 2000) agree that partisanship is unavoidable. Some welcome it; I certainly do because I recognise that if I had not been so committed to my research topic, I would not have had the insight to research it. I also believe that it was beneficial to have pre-conceived ideas; this gave me something to work towards, a goal, and I was fully prepared to change the direction of my research if the goalposts changed in any way, which eventually came to pass.

A closely related area is the question of whether research can ever be truly 'neutral', however carefully it is planned. I feel that these questions of neutrality are very closely interlinked with bias; just as researchers cannot help having bias with, or against, certain research subjects or topics, similarly I do not believe that researchers can plan to approach research in a completely neutral way. Walford (1991) states that:

it is now widely recognized that the careful, objective, step-by-step model of the research process is actually a fraud...There are now several autobiographical accounts by scientists themselves and academic studies by sociologists of science that show that natural science research is frequently not carefully planned in advance and conducted according to set procedures, but often centres around compromises, short-cuts, hunches and serendipitous occurrences. (p.1).

Walford (1991) gives an example of a researcher and Prize winner James Watson, who was frank about his research: *'His revelation of the lucky turns of events, the guesswork, the rivalries between researchers and personal involvement and compromise gave a totally different view of how natural science research is conducted from that given in methods textbooks.'* (p.2).

Walford (1991) also stated that researchers can have preconceptions about what they hope or expect to find before starting a research project. He undertook research about the first City Technology College, in Solihull, and was frank and open in admitting that he hoped to find problems with it that could be published in time for the forthcoming election, to damage the Conservative Party. He noted:

When we embarked upon this policy evaluation we already had our own ideas about that policy and wished to expose what we thought the problems were...we hoped to be able to show that the CTC programme had severe problems and was acting to the detriment of many children. (p.95).

Similarly, when embarking upon my research, I had pre-conceived ideas about the costs of education, and their impact, that I wished to 'prove', or 'disprove'. I was very open about this from the very start, and have included further details about my personal experiences in this paper.

Clearly, the position of researchers is not a clear-cut area in methodology literature, with debates in this area having continued through the decades.

b) The voice of research participants

The issue of whether research participants should be given a 'voice' – which, for the purposes of this paper, I consider to mean being given the opportunity to have their views heard in their own voices, presenting their own positions and priorities - is a key and ongoing debate in qualitative methods.

I should at this point flag a key distinction between 'giving a voice to', and 'empowering', research participants. Troyna (1994) notes that the two are very distinct, but that some researchers can blur the boundaries between the two, claiming to be 'empowering' research participants when they are actually 'giving a voice' to them; he calls this the '*casual use*' of the term empowerment (p.19).

As noted in Chapter 1: Introduction, it appears from my readings that the majority of qualitative studies do not, explicitly or otherwise, give a voice to research participants, and this is especially noticeable with research which involves children living in poverty (Attree, 2006, p.54). Hazel (1996) also notes that social research about young people often neglects their perspectives. Some researchers have expressed concerns about this; Barnes (1999) notes that without the input of those living in poverty, there is a danger that their experiences will be distilled to numbers on a page (p.vi). Similarly, Apple (2001) argues that those living in poverty must be involved in questioning education and its institutions, as they are the ones who are affected by the way these institutions operate (p.410). It has also been argued that it is becoming ever more important that the voices of those living in poverty are

heard as the increasing influence of globalisation and the reduction of the welfare state means that they are increasingly vulnerable (Beresford et al, 1999, p.27).

The idea of giving people who are members of minority or vulnerable groups a voice can be a contentious issue as the research potentially runs the risk of being superficial, intrusive or exploitative (Beresford et al, 1999, p.27). However, including those living in poverty in research arguably has a number of benefits including better informing the poverty debate and enabling poverty action to be stronger and more effective (Beresford et al, 1999, p.26/7).

Several studies have included interviews with parents of children living in poverty which are revealing. Cohen, Coxall, Craig and Sadiq-Sangster (1992) quote a parent who explains the reason why she had to stop participating in the PTA at her child's school: *'how could I go to those meetings in trainers with no soles, and jeans with holes in?'* (p.81). Additions of this type arguably add an immense richness and depth to studies which cannot be given by statistical analysis alone.

I feel it is important to consider why the voices of those living in poverty, particularly children, are so noticeably absent from most research into poverty. Attree (2006) states this is because of the ethical problems involved in research of this type and, in particular, the practical issues such research involves, such as talking to children in a way that does not negatively impact on them, and enables them to *'participate on their own terms'* (Backett and Alexander, 1991; Morrow, 2001b, both cited in Attree, 2006, p.55/6). The position of researchers, as well as the researched, is also arguably key in approaches to research about poverty. Alcock (1997) notes that a problem with most research on poverty is that academics are usually not living in poverty, and their research tends to ignore the subjective views of people living in poverty.

However, just as research about poverty does not typically involve the voices of those living in poverty, it has been argued that neither does policy-making for those living in poverty. Gewirtz (2001) speaks of: *'a more general tendency in New Labour education policy-making to ignore the voices of those, who the policies are – at least ostensibly – designed to help.'* (p.375).

It is easy, though, for the idea of giving a marginalised group a voice to spill over to romanticism (Pendlebury and Enslin, 2001, p.363). It is also important to note that

there are potentially problems in speaking for others. Pendlebury and Enslin (2001) cite Alcoff in noting that:

It can lead to two equally objectionable responses. On the one hand, it can result in an unself-conscious appropriation of another's position ('paternalism' or 'imperialism'); on the other, it can result in a guilty retreat from the practice of speaking for ('collective indifference' or 'silence'). The former arises from the speaker's or researcher's desire for mastery; the latter from the speaker's or researcher's desire to be immune to criticism. (p.364).

Alcoff suggests that researchers try to avoid the impulse to speak for others, and consider the impact that one's location has on what one says (Pendlebury and Enslin, 2001, p.364).

This research confirms what I believed before I started to plan my primary research. I was keen to ensure that I gave research participants the opportunity to be heard in my research, although I was aware that 'giving a voice' to my research participants did not necessarily mean that I was empowering them.

3. Narrative case study

It is important to refer to the tradition of narrative case studies, in which I locate my research. Early on, I planned, and undertook, my primary research with consideration to the areas I wanted to explore, and the methods I felt would be of most value in obtaining rich data. At the original starting point I had not made concrete decisions about which traditions of research methodology my study would most closely belong in, but instead, built an understanding of this once I had begun the process of being immersed in the school settings, and understanding this best retrospectively, when I had completed data gathering and started to analyse my primary research. This hesitant start, which reflected my commitment to working in flexible ways to suit the school partners in the project, reflects Skeggs' reflection on one of her studies: '*When I began I did not know what ethnography really was or how to do it.*' (1994b, p.73).

During the latter stages of analysing my research, I started to give thought to where the research methodology that had evolved 'belonged'. I felt that my study straddled the traditions of ethnography (e.g. Latour and Woolgar, 1979) in that it formed a story of a school over a period of several years – and also the traditions of narrative enquiry (e.g. Chamberlain, 1975) in that the story was formed by the

stories I was told by a number and range of individuals studying at, working at and associated with the school.

However, I felt that as I had to gather my data a little at a time the research process did not formally constitute ethnography. While I spent almost five years undertaking research in the school, this was not on a full-time basis, as I was employed full-time in a non-related area, and therefore undertook my research within school during my annual leave, and, on occasions, in the mornings before I went to work. As such, weeks passed during this period when I was not in school, and during which time incidents are likely to have occurred which I did not witness, and was not later told about. In light of these considerations, I feel that my study is best described as a case study, rather than an ethnography.

In addition, narratives became a very strong feature of my work. While I had always intended that interviews would form a key element of my research, the narrative dimension soon began to lead the directions of the project. Participants began to tell me stories – about themselves, other staff and students, and the school itself – which I felt truly brought what I had first thought of as my ‘data’ on the school to life. I added to these narratives by constructing my own narratives about the school via my research diary, which contained my ‘version’ of the stories I was told, and what I witnessed myself.

In summary, I feel that my study is firmly located within the traditions of narrative case studies and I learned a great deal as I came to realise the power of narrative approaches in in-schools educational research.

4. Planning my research

a) Ethical considerations

When planning my research I knew that considerable attention should be given to undertaking my research in an ethical manner. I intended from the very beginning to involve students aged 11-16 and their families in my research and felt that it was paramount that I did not risk harming those who so generously gave their time to me, particularly children, who are arguably vulnerable because of their age.

Even before I had refined my research topic I knew that I would be exploring potentially very sensitive areas, and wanted to ensure that I did so in as ethical a manner as possible. I feel that it is important to note, though, that the issue of

ethics itself is debatable – as Pendlebury and Enslin (2001) ask, ‘*ethically sound from whose point of view?*’ (p.361).

As a starting point, I believe that the consent of research participants is paramount in qualitative research. However, this has not always been the case historically, as McNamee (2001) notes:

The notion of voluntary informed consent is unquestionably at the heart of research ethics in the natural sciences following the horrifying revelations of scientific experimentation on prisoners during the Second World War. The Nuremberg and Helsinki declarations laid out the invaluable principle of consent, asserting that the subjects of research have the right to be informed of the nature and purposes of the research and autonomously to choose whether to participate in it. (p.310).

I was keen to ensure I did not just pay lip-service to undertaking my research ethically, but took whatever steps were necessary to ensure ethical practice actually happened. I felt that this was essential even though most research participants would appear in my research reports under pseudonyms and would in all probability never read my thesis. As Neuman (2000) states: ‘*The researcher has a moral and professional obligation to be ethical, even when research subjects are unaware of or unconcerned about ethics.*’ (p.90).

It is important to note how the hierarchies that exist in schools inevitably mean that the researcher is likely to gain the consent of students, and school staff, purely on the basis of the consent of the Headteacher; McNamee (2001) cites Homan’s research in noting that:

researchers commonly utilise powerful gatekeepers in order to smooth the way to gaining access to participants’ data. He notes the standard practice in educational research of gaining consent from a Headteacher to research within a school where the researcher knows that if the person at the top of the institution gives consent it is unlikely anyone lower in the hierarchy, most notably the pupils themselves, will refuse to participate (p.311).

While I felt that my research was extremely important in that it had the potential to improve the school experiences of students living in poverty, I strongly believed that I could not allow for the possibility of it causing any participants upset or embarrassment. I felt that this could particularly be the case for some of the

teachers and associated professionals involved in my research as the nature of their roles meant that their anonymity could not be guaranteed.

This approach is quite different to that taken by psychoanalysts – their perspective is that distressing research participants is not always negative as it can help them to gain new understandings of their lives, and help them to understand that negative experiences do not actually threaten their survival (Holloway and Jefferson, 2000). However, this is not a theory that I was either qualified or inclined to test; I had no intention of causing embarrassment or other harm to the research participants in any way. My research topic required me to raise potentially embarrassing questions and issues with students and I needed to ensure that I did so as sensitively as possible.

Similarly, I planned to ask the teachers and associated professionals involved in my research to discuss relatively sensitive issues which, despite attempts to disguise identity, possibly could later be traced back to them and affect their professional reputation. As Neuman (2000) notes, social research can harm participants in multiple ways including physically, psychologically, legally and professionally. I therefore decided to take a number of steps in an attempt to ensure that my work maintained ethical integrity at all times:

- I informed all potential participants of the aims of my research, and that it would be published in the form of the thesis
- I did not coerce anyone into taking part in my research – it was entirely voluntary and I ensured that participants were aware that they could withdraw from my research at any time. I was aware, however, that as an adult undertaking research in a school with children, there was always the risk that the children would not feel confident in asserting their wishes to me – as Christensen (2004) notes, '*power is inherent to research*' (p.166). Christensen argues that power should be seen as embedded in processes, rather than people, and I feel that this should be kept in mind when designing and undertaking research (Christensen, 2004, p.166/7)
- I explained to all potential participants that I would as far as possible offer them confidentiality, but that their anonymity could not be guaranteed. As Grinyer (2002) notes, it is not only ethical, but is a legal requirement, to give research participants as much anonymity as possible due to the Data Protection Act 1998

- I was prepared to end interviews immediately in the event of interviewees requesting this, or becoming distressed
- I aimed to treat all research participants with respect at all times, and strove to treat participants under the age of 18 in the same way that I treated adult participants – by this I meant with the same courtesy and respect. I wanted to avoid using the power that was implicit with my age and position as a researcher to coerce the involvement of students, or indeed any research participants.

The only area of my planned ethical approach that I was not able to adhere to was obtaining explicit parental consent from all parents before interviewing their children. Before I started my research, I felt that this was one of the areas which was most important. However, the Inclusion Officer at Chestnut Grove advised me that I should only ask parents to contact me if they weren't happy for the research to take place, as he had found that this approach worked best when requesting parental consent for students to participate in extra-curricular activities.

Although I initially felt uncomfortable taking this approach, I reconciled myself to it by virtue of the fact that the school advised that I take this approach, and they took it themselves on a regular basis. This did however raise an ethical dilemma for me: should I do something I was uncomfortable with just because the school did it themselves? Did compliance with the school's preferred procedure for gathering parental consent mean that my parental consent procedure was therefore necessarily ethical? I did decide to take the school's recommended approach even though I was not 100% happy with it. My position could be considered to be 'ethical' in line with Neuman's (2000) assertion that '*Ethical research requires balancing the value of advancing knowledge against the value of non-interference in the lives of others.*' (p.92). I therefore decided to proceed as suggested by the school but I know this decision was not uncomplicated.

To assist in maintaining the anonymity of my research participants, I decided to give all students the chance to use a pseudonym. Grinyer notes that while it is common to assume that research participants will want to use pseudonyms, she did not find that this was the case when she interviewed young cancer patients:

While it is essential that the interests of research participants should be protected, there does appear to be a risk that accepted practice

embedded into ethical guidelines and legal requirements may not always be experienced by respondents in the ways anticipated by the researcher. The balance of protecting respondents from harm by hiding their identity while at the same time preventing 'loss of ownership' is an issue that needs to be addressed by each researcher on an individual basis by each respondent. (Grinyer, 2002).

She quoted one respondent who had in the period between participating in the research and publication of the researcher lost her son, and changed her mind about the use of pseudonyms: *'Looking back I was very disappointed not to see Stephen's and my name in print. Even though my words were there, it felt as though I had somehow lost ownership of them and had betrayed Stephen's memory.'* (Grinyer, 2002).

Although my research was very different to that conducted by Grinyer, I felt that the point that research participants may change their mind about aspects of their participation, and were entitled to do so, was pertinent. I decided that if pseudonyms were used I would have to consider carefully how they would be chosen – for example, I was concerned that research participants may choose flamboyant names that detracted from the research, or which were not what Grinyer (2002) calls *'equivalent names'*; names of a similar type to those of the participants. I decided to give the participants a choice, and then address the complicated issue of what I considered to be *'inappropriate'* or *'unequivalent'* names only if this unlikely scenario arose.

I approached my research with students with some trepidation as I had not undertaken research with children before, and wanted to ensure that I did so in a way that caused them no harm. Furthermore, I wanted to try to ensure that the research was a valuable experience for all participants wherever possible. As Christensen notes of her own research *'From the beginning I knew that it was important as a researcher to establish relationships with children that they felt they would want to continue throughout the research process.'* (Christensen, 2004, p.167). While this was an admirable aim, I was not entirely sure how to achieve this.

I experienced similar questions and dilemmas when planning to invite adults to participate in my research. While much research literature focuses on the need to ensure that children are not harmed by research, little has been written about the need to safeguard adult participants. Malin (2003) notes that:

If university researchers are to continue to invite classroom teachers to collaborate in research that is aimed at establishing equity in schools, then they must ensure that those teachers are protected from any harm, including the undermining of their self-esteem. (p.29).

This follows her experience whereby she found that:

not all teachers want to work collaboratively. The teacher I was to call 'Mrs Eyres' was not comfortable with any form of collaboration. She was confident with her approach and satisfied with the outcomes...I was merely a university student and former teacher. What authority did I have to be offering advice to this teacher with more years experience than me? (p.29).

This was an area of concern for me as my research topic may have been perceived by the participants to include an element of criticism of the schools I asked to participate in my research. I was openly asking if students were experiencing physical discomfort or embarrassment because of the costs involved in attending the school. I was concerned that this interest could in itself make the teachers reluctant to work with me, so I was exceptionally careful when approaching them regarding any elements of my research.

This later became even more important when my research topic developed into a review of Academies – I interviewed three successive Headteachers at a school which had converted to an Academy, and was very concerned that the latter two would decide to end my research within the school as I raised issues central to the Academy movement which had been widely criticised by both a number of researchers, most prominently Beckett (2007), and which were featuring in the local and national press. I felt it was essential to conduct my research in a manner which would not make the Headteachers, or indeed other research participants, defensive as this was likely to affect the quality of the research obtained.

As my research progressed, it became clear that I needed to be especially cautious about the way I presented and publicised my research findings. Goodson and Sikes (2001) note that *'particularly perhaps in the case of life history research, it is not always possible to predict the sort of harm that informants may experience as a consequence of their involvement.'* (p.90/91).

While my research took the form of a story of a school rather than an individual, the story would consist of the narratives of many participants who may be identifiable

due to the unique nature of this story. I also felt that potential for harm existed as the school had already received significant negative attention in the press, which I felt negatively impacted upon both its staff and students and I did not wish to reproduce. As a result, I felt that I had a duty of care of sorts to the schools since they had been willing to participate in my research. I was mindful of the harm that could potentially be caused to research participants, for example, McNamee (2001) cites Chamberlain's work, '*Fenwomen*', noting that:

Tabloid journalists revealed the identities of those in the book and wrote lurid stories of their private lives, to the outrage of those who had agreed to co-operate with Chamberlain. In this innocent failure to safeguard what was promised to the participants, her attempt to give voices to women who had traditionally been disempowered backfired tragically. (p.311).

Although my research was very different to that undertaken by Chamberlain, I was nevertheless increasingly concerned as my research progressed that potentially controversial findings could result in harm being caused to those who had helped me with my research, particularly one member of staff. The mere possibility the school's staff seeing my research in print gradually became an area of concern to me. Mackay, an investigative journalist, notes:

I have written many pieces focusing on families in poverty and while nearly all have been happy to be associated with the final piece – believing that it gave them a voice and highlighted the problems of their lives in a truthful and honest way – some have been very angry and disappointed. Despite agreeing that there were no factual inaccuracies, omissions or exaggerations in the final copy, some interviewees simply do not like seeing the realities of their lives displayed in print or on film. It embarrasses or shames them. (no date).

I also belatedly became concerned about the possibility that my research could potentially become what Lather terms '*rape research*' (Lather, 1986, p.263, cited in Goodson and Sikes, 2001, p.93). This is research where a researcher takes what they want from their research subject then leaves without any further consideration for their informants.

I felt that this was a potentially very difficult area – as my research progressed it became clear that it would be, at least in part, an indictment of the Academy I had undertaken research in. I had not intended this when I started my research but I witnessed a number of episodes which suggested that the introduction of Academies negatively impacted upon students' education, and it therefore became

inevitable that this would become a key dimension of my research account. I was concerned about how this would impact on my research participants as some of them had been very frank with me, and I was anxious that they may be identified from my research.

I had no plans to undertake any future research in the school and did not feel that it would be easy to work with the school in any way to discuss my findings, as I felt that they related to the whole Academy movement, rather than the workings of one individual school. This meant that I would not readily have the opportunity to spend time in school in order to address findings. This was one ethical dilemma that I simply did not know how to tackle. I decided that the best way to approach this would be to simply anonymise the identity of research participants wherever possible, and strive to ensure that the information I presented was as factual as possible and not an attack on the participants in any way, while recognising that it was impossible to prevent my feelings about the school from impacting on my research findings and conclusions.

The matter of anonymising the identity of the school was not straightforward. As the research progressed it gradually became evident that anyone with knowledge of the focal city, or who was prepared to spend some time doing some research around my data, would have little difficulty in identifying the school. I realised this was something I could not change. I was not willing to remove or dilute key findings, as I felt this would irrevocably alter the accuracy of my research. In the end, the three individuals who were Headteachers of the school during my research all left their posts before this thesis was completed. I feel this means it is more acceptable to publish my findings in full than would otherwise have been the case.

b) Trying to ensure that my research was representative

When planning my research, I felt that it was important to consider whether I needed to ensure that my research was 'valid', in the sense of being 'truly representative' of the experiences of my research participants. I feel that this issue is not straightforward for any researcher, regardless of the research tools and methods used. Wolcott (1990) raises an interesting question when he asks: how important is validity in research? And is it something that should be actively pursued?

We sometimes learn from poorly reported studies and poorly analysed ones, while seemingly truthful, or correct, or neatly analysed accounts may have no impact or provoke no further thought. A preoccupation with validity may be as much a distraction to our collective efforts as qualitative research as it most certainly would be for me were I to set my course by it. That is not to dismiss validity but to attempt to put it into some broader perspective. (Wolcott, 1990, p.148).

Research is by its very nature open to abuse, whether unconscious or conscious - unconscious as I feel that researchers will always touch their research with their own life experience and bias in some way, and conscious as unscrupulous researchers may falsify results in order to meet their own agenda, whatever that might be. Pendlebury and Enslin (2001) note that '*researchers are in a position of power that may tempt them to betray the trust of those researched.*' (p.363).

Research can also be unethical, for example when it misrepresents those it is representing - again, either consciously or unconsciously. Again, Pendlebury and Enslin (2001) note that '*educational research is unethical when it misrepresents or misidentifies and so betrays its putative beneficiaries or the goods and values that they hold most dear*' (p.361).

Whilst this could in theory apply to research in any area, Pettigrew (1994) notes that government-funded research may, in particular, be suppressed:

where there is no guarantee that research work will be available for peer and public scrutiny, quality control may lie with civil servants and managers whose impartiality and knowledge of the discipline of research may well be in short measure. This not only places constraints upon the credibility, trustworthiness and validity of research but also its longer-term ability to generate accumulated understandings (p.46).

I had to decide how I would position myself when undertaking my research, as I felt this was key in obtaining research which was representative of my participants. Lane (1992) proposes that there are two ways of approaching research: '*one can come to know a culture from the inside as a 'native speaker' or from the outside as a trained and attentive listener.*' (cited in Pendlebury and Enslin, 2001, p.362). I needed to consider: on which side did I belong? While I was obviously no longer a child attending school, I was aware that the fact that I was interested in researching the experiences of children living in poverty at school was due to my own negative experiences as a child. However, I could hardly consider myself to be a '*native speaker*' as it was a number of years since I left school, and the schools I hoped to undertake research in were not those I attended. While this is an extremely

complex issue which cannot easily be put into simple categories, in basic terms, I felt that my position mirrored that ultimately adopted by Lane (1992, cited in Pendlebury and Enslin, 2001), who chose to straddle the divide. I had links to both sides, but could not say that I truly belonged to either. I feel that Wellington and Szczerbinki's (2007) point is pertinent: *'the way researchers see themselves may be totally different to the way they are perceived by other people involved in the research (especially when children are involved!)*' (p.70).

In terms of positioning my research, I decided that it was important to be open and honest about my interest in my research with the participants. I felt that my natural bias was likely to show via my choice and use of research tools, such as the research questions I used, so I felt I should explain my background to all participants at the beginning of my research, in an appropriate form.

I did not feel that it was appropriate to present a long history in the letters I sent to parents, so I simply included details of the specific areas that were of interest to me, and how it impacted upon their children (see Appendices 2 and 3). When interviewing students I felt this could provide an interesting introduction which would explain to the students why I wanted to speak to them, and possibly encourage them to talk about things which they may have been reluctant to discuss. I told them about my own background and how this developed my interest in researching the cost of education. This was effectively positional, as presented by Pendlebury and Enslin (2001):

Positionality has become something of a touchstone for good qualitative research writing in education. Along with her research topic and tasks, the critically reflexive researcher introduces herself, often at some length. She does so less for the purposes of confession or to bring into the open the idiosyncrasies of personality and temperament than to acknowledge her autobiography as one marked by gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity and so on, and to acknowledge the possible effects that her position may have on the form and outcomes of the research. (p.365).

Regarding my position as a researcher, I needed to consider if there were any issues relating to myself that I needed to be aware of when undertaking and analysing my research. Bridges (2001) argues that researchers should come from within the community they are researching. I do not agree with this perspective - if such a rule was imposed, much valuable research would never take place. Similarly, researchers who come solely from the community they research would potentially lose the benefit of seeing a particular research group or situation with

fresh eyes, and different prior life and research experiences. I agree there are certain aspects of research where it may be more valuable to have someone with a special insight into that particular group, as this may assist with both acceptance by the group being studied, and consequently may improve the quality of the research itself. However, such familiarity could also result in the researcher becoming blind to certain elements of the group being studied. I think there are arguments to be made for either case.

Bridges (2001) notes '*it is not always very obvious who is inside and who outside the group.*' (p.372). In my research situation, I felt I did in several ways come from the community I was researching, being a native of Walton, and having previously worked closely with many families in the area within which Chestnut Grove was based in my previous role as a Housing Officer, as well as having grown up in a family living in poverty. However, I feel that one issue researchers working in familiar environments can potentially encounter is that they may 'miss' key features that researchers from an external environment might pick up:

'Going native' (Gold, 1958) occurs when researchers become so immersed in a group or culture as participants that they lose the ability to step back and reflect on or question events. Being a native presents similar, if not greater, difficulties for researchers. Researchers who enter familiar settings such as schools where they have been socialized in their early years begin their work with layers of assumptions. (Agee, 2002, p.571).

This reinforced my belief that it is impossible to divorce one's position from their work, and it is therefore important that this is acknowledged openly.

5. Methods

a) The selection of research tools

I wanted to ensure that I struck the right balance between gaining in-depth data about the experiences of students and their families living in poverty, while involving enough participants in my research to try to ensure that my findings were representative of the experiences of these groups. I considered a number of research methods for inclusion in my study and I decided that the best way of approaching my research would be to incorporate a variety of techniques including questionnaires, interviews and shadowing/observation. As Eder and Fingerson (2001) note: '*A combination of methods is often useful in research because it is*

difficult for any single method to capture fully the richness of the human experience.' (p.188).

I felt there was no ideal timescale in which to undertake my primary research as I subscribed to Walker's view that: *'Ethnographic projects are never finished, only left, with their accounts considered provisional and tentative.'* (quoted in Jeffrey and Troman, 2004, p.538). Although I mentioned a notional period of three years to Headteachers when in the very early stages of my research, I decided to simply undertake my research for as long as felt right, until I felt I had come to a natural conclusion which, in practice, happened after almost five years.

Due to the qualitative nature of my research, I felt that shadowing and interviews were likely to become key tools for me as I wanted to find out more about the everyday life of the school; I wanted research participants to tell me their story and the story of the school. I also wanted the opportunity to construct a story from what I witnessed myself, too. Effectively, I wanted to use a range and number of methodological tools to construct a series of narratives from which to construct a story of the school. The use of interviews was key for me as I felt that they are a more proactive, and less passive research tool. Wellington and Szczerbinski (2007) note that *'Interviews are often said to 'reach the parts which other methods cannot reach.'* (p.81). They continue:

interviewing allows a researcher to investigate and prompt things that we cannot observe. We can probe an interviewee's thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, views, feelings and perspectives. We can also elicit their version or their account of situations which they may have lived or taught through; his or her story.' (p.281).

I agreed with this perspective as I felt that interviews would allow me to actively engage with those who participated in my research, rather than merely observing them.

Narratives have a long and strong history as a tool in qualitative research. They were first used in the form of life histories of American Indian Chiefs in the early 20th century (Goodson and Sikes, 2001, p.6). They then fell out of fashion from the 1930s to the 1970s before gaining renewed popularity, particularly amongst sociologists interested in deviancy (Goodson and Sikes, 2001, p.9/10). Narratives can add a significant amount of value to research which may otherwise rely on just what a researcher has witnessed themselves or is told, by a participant, about

themselves only. This seems to me to be very single-dimension research, missing the richness which narratives add.

While narrative research is relatively unknown outside of social science research, it is arguably an extremely valuable tool. As Clough (2002) notes:

There is a characteristically narrative structure to consciousness, that we are always making sense of our lives in stories of one form or another; thus – it might be argued – even the quantitatively based research report has a story to tell because such research inevitably involves human experience even though the research design might seek to exclude such. (p.13).

Stories and life stories form a specific strand of narration, and I found it striking that Goodson and Sikes noted that life stories are particularly popular with researchers researching women as they can bring attention to lives which otherwise would be '*lived privately and without public accomplishment*' (Goodson and Sikes, 2001, p.10). The same could be said to be true of children living in poverty attending school in a disadvantaged area – the only public attention they tend to receive is negative press attention about their school's accomplishments, such as the widespread condemnation of 'failing schools' which has been endemic since the mid-1990's, and the negative, inaccurate coverage of the serious incident the school was involved in which is detailed later in this paper.

I therefore felt that it was important to find out more about the students I included in my research as I hoped that this would give me the tools I needed to give them a voice. I felt that understanding them better was the key to understanding more about their school experiences. As Goodson and Sikes (2001) also note:

The fundamental reason why researchers choose to use a life history approach is because they believe that detailed, personal information about how people have perceived and experienced things that have happened in their lives will enable them to better understand whatever it is they are studying. (p.91).

Sparkes (1999) notes that researchers should not make assumptions about the information they are told by research participants: '*any narrative as a form of communication is influenced by the cultural conventions of telling, the motivations of the teller, by the audience, and the social context.*' (p.20). The same could be said of the story I found myself weaving, based upon my perceptions of the people and situations I encountered, during both the formal interviews I conducted, and

the less formal shadowing in classrooms, around the school and on visits to student's homes with the school's Inclusion Officer.

I feel that my telling of episodes I witnessed, and how I felt they related to the wider picture, are important in adding depth and richness to my research, however I have ensured that the narrative elements of my research are clearly flagged as such. For example, when students told me about students they knew, and particular difficulties that they felt such students experienced, I have included this in my research, but made clear that I am presenting information that was initially told to - *but not witnessed by* - me.

I feel these narrative threads are the glue that hold my research together and allowed me to make sense of it, in the same way in which, it could be argued, we all make sense of our lives via both what we witness as well as by what we are told.

It is important to note that narratives and stories are potentially contentious research tools, as they have the potential to be seen as less valid than more scientific, quantitative methods of research. As Goodson and Sikes (2001) note: *'life history data disrupts the normal assumptions of what is 'known' by intellectuals in general, and sociologists in particular.'* (p.7). This did not concern me. My research was about people, and I strongly felt throughout my research that what I was researching was their lives and experiences, as told to and witnessed by me.

I feel it would be reticent to discuss the presentation of a research based on stories without making reference to fictionalised accounts. They have been used in a number of life stories or life histories when researchers have been unable to find the subjects they are seeking, and have consequently decided to create and present create fictionalised accounts of fictionalised individuals (see Goodson and Sikes, 2001, p.37). The main benefit of such an approach is that it allows the researcher to present an individual in the circumstances they wish to examine or comment upon, and then base their analysis around such a character. While I can understand why this tool is used, I feel fortunate and extremely grateful that a wide range of individuals agreed to participate in my research, and the stories they told me were so rich that I did not feel the need to fictionalise any accounts.

Before detailing my methodology, I should note that I have chosen to detail this in the order in which I undertook each method, while of course many methods overlapped. This means that some tools which may have seemed 'neater' grouped together are instead spread throughout this section. I did not want to 'tidy up' my approach to my methodology in retrospect, choosing instead to present it in the actual, retrospectively slightly random, manner in which it actually occurred, to give a more accurate picture of how my research actually evolved.

b) The identification of focal schools

The identification of schools for inclusion in my research was not a straightforward task. As my initial research explored how the rising cost of education affected students and their parents living in poverty, I had to decide exactly which students I wanted to focus on, and which schools I should undertake research in. I decided that the vast majority of children I researched should be from families living in poverty, in order that I could explore my research question fully. While it would have been extremely useful to compare students from families living in poverty with those from middle income and wealthy families, in order that I could compare their experiences, I felt that it was more important to devote the time available to me to undertaking primary research solely within the group I was interested in. I therefore decided that the best possible use of my time would be to research just children living in poverty, and attending schools in deprived areas.

I then had to consider how I would find which schools contained the largest numbers of students living in poverty, and were predominantly based in deprived areas. Fortunately, an extremely comprehensive publication, Walton Trends, was available which included the levels of deprivation in all areas of Walton. I referred to a map, and identified the eight most deprived wards in Walton, which, incidentally, were mainly based around the city centre. I decided that it would be useful to look at the schools located within these areas in more detail. However, I wanted to ensure that I had information on all schools in Walton before making my decision, to ensure that I was not missing any out that appeared to be extremely deprived, though located in an affluent area.

The issue of how to define poverty, and low achievement, is complex, as noted in Chapter 2: Literature Review. I felt, however, that I wanted to focus on children living in poverty, and the most straightforward way of identifying those children was to use performance at GCSE - previous studies have indicated that there is a

strong link between low academic achievement and poverty, e.g. Robinson (1976), Daniels and Stainton (1994) and Goodman and Gregg (2010).

I therefore looked at those schools with the lowest percentage of students achieving five or more grades at A*-C in 2001, based on DFES results, and identified nine – 1/3 of all schools in Walton - which clearly stood out. The average percentage of students achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A - C at these schools was just 20% compared with an overall average of 42% for Walton LEA, and an average of 50% in England (DfES, 2001).

I then looked in more detail at the wards; in order to determine how affluent or deprived each area was, I looked at what percentage of households, within the area in which each school was based, was in receipt of Income Support, what percentage of children lived in households with no earner, and where the household scored within the Index of Local Deprivation. I selected this range of features as I felt that together they would give the most accurate picture of the numbers of families living in poverty within each ward, and consequently, of the type of students likely to attend each of the schools. I then considered this information together which gave me a shortlist of nine schools which clearly met the requirements of my research. All were relatively low-achieving - at least, in terms of their GCSE results - and all were based within the most deprived wards of Walton.

There were just two schools of the nine which did not completely match this picture. One was low-achieving but based in what I, with my local knowledge, considered to be a relatively wealthy area. Another was mid-achieving but based in a deprived area. I decided to keep both of these schools within my sample as, from anecdotal evidence, I felt that both were likely to contain large numbers of students living in poverty.

As I final check, I looked at the Ofsted reports for each school, and, having found that they appeared to fit the profiles of the types of school I wanted to research, I approached all schools via a letter to Headteachers introducing my research, and asked if they would be willing to participate in my study.

c) Making initial contact with schools

Of the nine Headteachers I approached, two contacted me to advise that they were interested in becoming involved in my study, and I arranged meetings to discuss my research with them. Although this was a relatively low proportion, it was more than I had expected, as the questionnaire I had issued to schools for my dissertation (Howell, 1999) for my undergraduate degree had indicated that most Headteachers felt that they were too busy to become involved in research.

Although I made it clear in my introductory letter to Headteachers that just an initial meeting would be required, I appreciated that time was not easy to spare for the Headteacher of a large secondary school. I was also aware of the additional demands potentially involved in managing low-achieving schools based within deprived areas.

The two schools from which Headteachers agreed to meet with me to discuss my research further were Middleton and Chestnut Grove (both pseudonyms). The Headteacher at Middleton had recently overseen a huge development of the school and appeared to be committed to increasing both standards and achievement at the school. The Headteacher at Chestnut Grove stressed that he was exceptionally committed to students, to the extent that he was more than willing to take students who other schools turned down for issues such as perceived behavioural difficulties. Both Headteachers wanted to help their students, and seemed to be genuinely interested in my research and the potential benefits that my findings might bring to their school.

I felt that both schools were suitable for my research as, firstly, they fitted the socio-economic picture I was interested in and, secondly, both Headteachers were interested in my research. I hoped their commitment to improving their schools might mean they would be interested in my research findings, and that these may, in the future, be utilised by the Headteachers to make a difference to pupils living in poverty at their respective schools.

Once I had established both schools would be involved in my research, I interviewed both Headteachers using semi-structured interviews. I designed key questions which covered the areas which I really wanted to find out about, including the Headteachers' perceptions of the costs of school, and included opportunities for them to add additional information related – or unrelated – to the

questions, as they felt appropriate. The interviews provided helpful information about the schools as well as allowing the Headteachers and I to discuss issues further as we felt relevant. They gave me an invaluable insight into both of the schools, the way that they were managed, and the Headteachers' perceptions of their students. This was the first point at which all the information I had seen on paper about both schools began to come together as a cohesive whole; I felt that my research had immediately been enriched in a way that I could not have obtained from any number of Ofsted reports.

d) Issuing questionnaires

I decided to issue questionnaires to students and their parents as a first step, to collect data that would help me decide how to take my research forward. Although my overall approach was predominantly qualitative, I chose a quantitative tool that would enable me to select participants for the next, qualitative, stage of my research. I wanted to keep the questionnaires relatively short and user-friendly, and keep the language brief and accessible to increase the return rate, while gaining data that would be both meaningful when considered in their own right, and would allow me to identify which students I wanted to research further. I also felt that it was important that the content of the questionnaires did not have the potential to negatively affect the respondents in any way e.g. by asking them to answer extremely personal or sensitive questions.

Robson (2002) adapts ideas of de Vaus (1991, p.83-6) and suggests that certain guidelines are followed when constructing questionnaires, including the following:

- *keep the language simple*
 - *keep questions short*
 - *avoid leading questions*
 - *ask questions only where respondents are likely to have the knowledge needed to answer*
 - *avoid direct questions on sensitive topics*
 - *use personal wording if you want the respondents' own feelings*
- (p.245/6).

I decided to follow these suggestions, and also provided additional space next to questions to allow respondents to expand further as they wished, which added a qualitative element to the tool.

In an attempt to ensure that the students felt comfortable about responding honestly to the questions, I noted at the top of each questionnaire that their teacher would not read the content of the questionnaire, but that they would place it in an envelope and return it to me. I also included a letter to each teacher outlining my research, thanking them for their assistance and confirming that they should not look at each questionnaire. I had the Headteachers' assurances that teachers would not look at the questionnaires, and had no option other than to very much hope that this would be the case, as I physically could not be present to supervise the distribution or collection of the questionnaires in eight different classes across the two schools. I chose to include this assertion within the questionnaire to both ease any fears about confidentiality that the students might have, and to reinforce to the teachers that they were not to view these questionnaires.

In retrospect I perhaps did not need to be so prohibitive; seeing the questionnaires may have had some benefits for the students if teachers read about issues which they then proactively decided to address, such as the cost of school uniform, etc. However, I wanted the students to feel they could provide honest answers, without fear that their teacher would read these.

I structured the questionnaire as follows: (Appendix 1: Student questionnaire about the cost of attending school):

- I included a section asking what items the students and their parents had to pay for so the students could attend school. I included this section so I could collect responses to areas of expenditure that I had already identified, and so that the students had the opportunity to include other areas. For each item that I identified I asked 'Do your parents ever have difficulty paying for this?' and 'Do you think your parents should pay for this?' I also asked 'If you don't think that your parents should pay, who do you think should?' While I realised that this may run the risk of 'leading' the students in their answers, by possibly suggesting that their parents should not pay for certain items, I wanted to get straight to the point and ensure that the questions I was interested in were answered directly.
- I then asked if the student knew of any schemes to help students who needed extra help to pay with things. I cited reduced price school uniforms and school trips as examples – again, this may have led students slightly, but I felt that it was important to give clear examples to avoid confusion.

- I then asked if the student thought that the school should do anything else to help students who needed extra help to pay for things. As above, this was to give the students the chance to mention something that I might not have thought of. I followed up with some more specific questions:
- Do you ever ask your parents to pay for fashionable clothes for school?
- Do you ever ask your parents to pay for school trips and holidays?
- Do you think that your parent/s ever have difficulty paying for these things?
- Have there ever been any times when your parent/s have been upset because of the cost of things for school?
- Do you claim free school meals?
- If yes, do you ever feel embarrassed about this?
- If yes, do you think that your school could do anything to help you feel better about this?

I was initially hesitant about including some of these questions, especially the one which asked if the students were embarrassed about claiming free school meals. I was concerned that by asking this question, I was at risk of attaching a stigma to an area in which the students may not initially have felt – in retrospect, perhaps ‘How do you feel about this’ may have been a better question. However, as I knew that this questionnaire would probably be the only contact I would have with the majority of students completing the questionnaire, and as I was intending to use the questionnaire to identify which students I wished to invite to participate further in my research, I felt that it was important to explicitly address the questions I was primarily interested in.

I also gave careful consideration to the inclusion of students’ perceptions of whether their parents experienced difficulties paying for things. I decided to include this as I wanted to see, overall, what the students thought – then compare this to the overall answers given by the parents.

I finished the questionnaire by asking: ‘Is there anything else that you would like to mention about the cost of going to school that this questionnaire has not covered? Please give full details’. I wanted to give the students the chance to make any additional comments if they wanted to, as I recognised that I would not necessarily have covered all key areas, and wanted to invite respondents to add additional areas. I also wanted to show the students that their views were important to me.

I covered similar questions in the questionnaire for parents (Appendix 4: Parent questionnaire about the cost of attending school). I preceded the questionnaire by asking if the respondent would be willing for me to interview them and their children. I included the main body of questions included in the students' questionnaire, then added some more personal questions to enable me to check if there were any trends in the answers depending on the respondent's financial situation. I asked the parents rather than students as I felt it was inappropriate to ask children about their parents' financial situation. I included the following questions:

- Is your child entitled to free school meals?
- How many adults are there in your household?
- How many work full-time? How many work part-time?
- Do you think that your income is enough for your family to live on?

As with the questions I included at the end of the student's questionnaire, I was concerned that parents might not be comfortable completing what were extremely personal questions. However, I felt that it was important to include such questions as the initial focus of my study was students and their families who were living in poverty, and I needed to seek confirmation as to the financial situation of the parents involved in my research. I did however try to make the questions as approachable as possible, so instead of asking how much a family's weekly or annual income was I focused on how many working adults there were in each household, and whether the respondent perceived that they had enough to live on.

I took the questionnaires, along with a covering document about my research (Appendix 3), and a covering letter for parents (Appendix 2), to my meetings with the Headteachers for their approval. The covering document and letter contained brief details of my research, and contact details for both myself and my supervisor, in case the parents had any questions or wanted to verify my identity. It was extremely important to me that everyone asked to complete the questionnaire would have access to a clear explanation as to why they were being asked to do so. I did not want them to feel that they had to complete it, but I also wanted to encourage them to think about the issues that I was researching, hopefully for their own benefit as well as for the benefit of my research.

I realised this meant that I assumed that experiences of participating in my research would be positive. Just as I did not feel that it was possible – or even

desirable - that my research could be done in an unbiased manner that would not impact on the participative schools in any way, I also felt that the students and parents who participated in my research would inevitably be impacted by it in some way. Just the completion of the questionnaires would mean they had to consider their personal situations in some way, and this therefore meant the research would have some tangible effect, however small, on them. I felt that this was largely unavoidable. Unless I had been able to enter schools as an invisible observer, my every action would inevitably have an impact on the schools and research participants in some way. I was committed to ensuring that where possible this impact would be positive; if nothing else I wanted people who engaged with the research to perhaps question why things were as they were, and how this contributed to their everyday lives.

As a final step before distribution, the Headteacher at Middleton proactively asked the school's Learning Assistance Unit to review the documents for clarity and they made minor suggestions, such as substituting 'research student' for 'PhD student' to ensure that the students and their parents would understand the documents.

Regarding the distribution of the questionnaires, I agreed with the Headteachers that they would be distributed to one class each in years 1-4. The Headteachers suggested that I did not include Year 11 (i.e. the 15 and 16 years old students) as they would be leaving school soon and therefore would not be able to participate further in my research if requested. I hand-delivered the documents to each school, and the Headteachers arranged for them to be distributed via morning registration.

Chestnut Grove managed an excellent rate of return on the student questionnaires - 80/120 (67%). However, it seemed that the teachers at Middleton did not buy-in to my research to the same extent. From speaking to a Learning Mentor later, I got the impression that the teachers there did not seem to be committed to distributing or collecting my questionnaires, and therefore only 33/100 (33%) student questionnaires were returned. For parents, overall, 20/220 (9%) parents returned questionnaires, even though I had provided stamped, addressed envelopes. These were entirely from Chestnut Grove; I did not receive any from Middleton. I was later advised by a teacher at Middleton that the provision of SAEs to parents was generally ineffective as it was widely believed that they removed the stamp to use for another purpose.

The results of the student questionnaires were extremely useful in helping me to identify students to interview. Regarding the parents' questionnaire, I did appreciate that 20 was not a large sample, but found that there appeared to be trends, albeit with small numbers, with regards to the answers, which may have indicated that it is likely that the answers were representative of the entire sample. I found the additional comments provided by students and their parents to be extremely helpful too, in that they convinced me that my research had a foundation, and was worth pursuing. Some comments were not only illuminating, they were personally difficult for me to read as some students showed that they were more than aware of the effects of the cost of school on their contemporaries and families. The apparently high level of awareness from students about their parent's financial circumstances surprised me.

Although only 20 of the parents' questionnaires were returned, I found these questionnaires to be extremely useful – for example, I thought that the parents' use of language was extremely interesting. The Headteacher at Chestnut had, during our initial meeting, expressed concerns at my use of the word 'poor' to identify the types of students and parents I would be researching, as he felt that there was a stigma attached to the word. He said that he felt that a term such as 'socially excluded' would be more acceptable. However, as detailed in Chapter 2, my research into other studies had indicated that use of words such as 'poor' and 'poverty stricken' were widely used amongst families living in poverty, and I was interested to note that two of the parents who completed questionnaires had used the terms 'poverty stricken children', 'very poor families' and 'poverty families.'

I was confident that the questionnaires indicated that I had managed to contact families representative of the group I wanted to study – many were clearly living in poverty. The additional information I had requested from the parents revealed that, of the entire sample, 30% had children entitled to free school meals, 65% were not working, and 61% of respondents thought that their income was not enough for their family to live on.

After analysing the questionnaires and, in particular, reading the additional information provided by both students and their parents, I strongly felt that my research was worthwhile, and that I should pursue it. The only additional change I retrospectively wish I had made was to add some equal opportunities monitoring questions, such as nationality and ethnic origin, to assist my analysis.

Although I had received a relatively low number of questionnaires from Middleton compared to Chestnut Grove, and my analysis of these indicated that the majority of the respondents did not come from families living in poverty, I decided to pursue my research there further in the hope that access to a larger sample would give me access to a larger number of families living in poverty.

e) Approaching Inclusion Officers

Following my decision to continue to undertake research at both Chestnut and Middleton, I decided to contact an Inclusion Officer at both schools. I felt that they would be a good first point of contact regarding how best to approach students and their parents. I hoped that they would have a unique role, almost as a gatekeeper, who could act as my link between the formal world of the teachers within school, and the informal world of the students and their parents. I decided to write to an Inclusion Officer at each school to introduce myself and my research and asked for their assistance with my research, specifically the following areas:

- approaching students and parents
- whether they felt that individual or group interviews with students and parents would be most appropriate and effective
- identifying suitable locations for the interviews.

The Inclusion Officer at Chestnut Grove, Shane (pseudonym) agreed to meet me to discuss my research, and we had an extremely productive meeting which gave me a deeper insight into the school, its students and their parents. Shane also gave me some useful tips for composing a letter to parents to ask if I could interview their children; he advised that if I asked them to return a slip to confirm their permission, I wouldn't get the vast majority back, and that I should instead ask them to get in touch with either Shane or I if they were *not* happy for the research to proceed. Although I had concerns about this approach, as detailed earlier in this chapter, in case the parents never received their letter, or did not feel confident enough to get in touch, I decided to follow this course of action. Following my discussion with Shane, I was concerned that my own preferred course of action would have left me with no students to interview.

Unfortunately I found it extremely difficult to get in touch with an Inclusion Officer at Middleton, as my numerous phone calls went unanswered. I also felt that my contact at the school was becoming less willing to assist me, and I was concerned

that a high proportion of the student and parent questionnaires had not been distributed by teachers.

As my research was, at this time proceeding so well at Chestnut – the school was being very helpful, and I had already obtained what I considered to be extremely rich material - I decided that I would suspend my research at Middleton and concentrate on Chestnut Grove. While I realised that this meant I would lose the benefits of comparison that I would have if I involved two schools in my research, I felt this was outweighed by the benefits that I would gain from spending all of my available time in one school; Chestnut. In effect, I felt I was staying true to my research by concentrating in depth on one school.

f) First set of interviews with students

I felt that interviews would be a key research tool and decided to use semi-structured techniques. I wanted to ensure that all areas of interest to me were covered, while also giving interviewees the opportunity to speak freely and raise other issues and experiences that I may not previously be aware of. As Holloway and Jefferson (2000) note, using a 'question and answer' interview can suppress the interviewee's experiences as they try to tailor their answer to what they think the interviewer wants to hear.

I also decided to use open-ended questions that would allow the interviewee to take me where they wanted. I also felt that it was extremely important to plan the venue of the interviews carefully – Hazel (1996) says that researchers interviewing children need to balance the need to obtain confidential data while not leaving themselves open to accusations of abuse, against the needs of the participants to feel safe. I decided that conducting interviews in schools would be preferable wherever possible, as I had found in my previous job as a Housing Officer that interviews conducted in homes tend to be interrupted on a regular basis by other family members and visitors; I therefore felt the interviews would flow better if I found a quiet location within the school.

From the initial sample of students who had completed the questionnaire I chose to interview 12, as I felt that this would yield enough information to allow me to decide whether or not the questions were effective, or should be changed in any way before I undertook further interviews. I chose most students to interview on the basis of their completed questionnaires - they met the profile of the type of student

I wanted to interview, as their answers indicated that they and/or their parents had difficulty meeting the costs associated with attending school. The twelfth student did not fit my profile, but I felt that it would be valuable to interview him in order that I could compare his experiences to those of the other students. By doing this I was loosely testing my selection methods as I anticipated that the first 11 students would discuss difficulties experienced by themselves and their parents, and that the last student would not. I decided that if this was not the case, I would need to reconsider my selection methods.

I also ensured a gender balance (five males, seven females), variation of ages (the students were spread across school years seven to ten) and representation of pupils on free school meals and those not (six of each). I hoped that this would give me access to students with a range of experiences and perspectives, and give me the opportunity to see if there were any experiences which appeared to be shared by certain students. I remained aware, however, that this sample was very small, and that any possible shared experiences would need to be investigated further.

When preparing for the interviews, I felt it was essential to take all necessary precautions to ensure students participating in my research suffered no ill-effects, no matter how small, as a result of their having agreed to participate in my research. I wanted to treat the students as I would adult participants, and try to avoid being patronising or condescending. While the obvious temptation was there to plunge straight into the research to maximise the time available, I felt that it was essential to ensure that students were briefed on what I was doing, and had the opportunity to opt out if they so wished.

I was highly aware that due to the age gap involved, and the fact that the school was co-operating in my research, the students may have felt they had no option but to be involved. I tried to avoid this by making it clear to the students that participation was entirely voluntary, but found the balance between treating the students with the same courtesy as the adult participants, while avoiding being patronising, difficult. As Christensen (2004) has asked, 'what is an adult?':

the definition and meaning of 'adult' as a social and cultural category remains relatively unexplored and unproblematic. It is often used as a general umbrella term, without specifying the specific institutional practice concerned, for example, 'teacher', 'parent' or 'pedagogue.' However, in

contrast, children often greet researchers, who enter their lives as strangers, with the frank question 'Who are you?' By making this enquiry children encapsulate one of the key processes of research: the working through of the wider notions of who we are to each other. (p.166).

It was clear that the students would not view me as another student, and I had no intention of passing myself off as either a student or teacher. I therefore could not expect to be accepted as what Geertz (1983, cited in James, 2007) calls a 'native'. Fine and Sandstrom (1988) instead suggest that the role of 'adult friend' is adopted, which allows an adult identity to be maintained while the research can access the experiences and perspectives of children (quoted in Christensen, 2004, p.73). To summarise my ideal approach, I feel Christensen (2004) puts it neatly: '*It is [however] possible to be a different sort of adult, one who, whilst not pretending to be a child, seeks throughout to respect their views and wishes.*' (p.174).

The issue of power was, as I have previously noted, another area to which I had to pay close consideration. I was aware that as an adult who appeared to be working within school with the support of school staff, students may view me as a power figure similar to a teacher. I was concerned that this may mean that they would not be comfortable answering questions openly and honestly. Similarly, I was unsure as to how I would be viewed by any adults involved in my research. Christensen's (2004) point is pertinent:

Viewing power as inherent to research emphasises that research is a practise that is part of social life rather than an external contemplation of it. This requires that the researcher pay attention to broader issues of social and cultural life that are, or can be, sensitive to the issue of power. (p.166).

I agreed with this position and felt that it was essential to acknowledge this before undertaking and analysing my research. I wanted to investigate my research topic without making the students or parents I spoke to feel any shame or embarrassment about their circumstances, and I wanted to observe the way that things were, not observe the way that things were when a researcher was questioning them. I was aware, however, that it would have been naïve to assume that my presence in school did not affect the behaviour of research participants in any way.

To gain access to the students I wanted to interview I composed letters to their parents/guardians asking if I could interview their children. I kept my letter short

and friendly and simply advised that further to my previous letter, I was continuing my research in the school and would like to interview their child, and asked them to contact me or Shane if they did not want me to interview their child.

I then wrote my interview questions. I decided to use a semi-structured interview so certain themes could be pursued depending on each student's responses in the interviews. I kept these along the same theme as the questionnaire - firstly, because the answers to the questionnaires had reassured me that I had identified areas of difficulty, and also because I wanted to take the opportunity to further explore the answers given by students.

I started each interview by introducing myself and my research, as I strongly felt that it would not be ethical to ask students to participate in the interview unless they knew the background to my research, and the context of the interview. I was also hoping that talking about my research might give the students more of an idea of the areas I was looking into, and encourage them to discuss their experiences at more length. Before starting each interview I assured the students that any information they gave me would be kept anonymous - as Christensen (2004) notes:

Reassurances such as these are important when carrying out research with children. Not only are children aware of the possible 'exploitation' of information but also confidentiality has a particular resonance among children whose relationships and friendships are often performed throughout the engagement with telling and keeping secrets, revealing secrets to other children or 'telling' adults. (p.171).

However, it is important that such promises are kept – Malin (2003) cites Punch (1986) in stating:

Claims of anonymity 'ring hollow' because, with the close relationships developed, the long term stay and then the richness of the description in the findings, it is easy for some insiders, including the main players, to recognise each other and themselves. (p.22).

I therefore felt that it was essential that, in the event of a research participant's anonymity potentially being jeopardised, maintaining anonymity would take precedent over the level of detail I wanted to include in my research. I assured the students I would keep their identity confidential, and asked them if they would like to choose a pseudonym which I could use if I quoted them in my research. The

majority of students appeared to be a little excited at the prospect of this; a few, however - mainly the ones who turned out to be incommunicative in their interview - declined the invitation, so I suggested that I choose names for them.

To ease students into the interviews and help them to feel more comfortable I asked them a few general questions about themselves. This also had the added advantage of giving me an insight into their lives and perceptions of themselves. I asked the students what they liked to do outside of school and what kind of clothes they liked to wear when they were not at school. I then asked what they liked and disliked about school, and how they thought a teacher would describe them. This was the first stage at which I explicitly introduced narratives – I wanted to find out what the students felt that their teachers felt about them, what they thought about the school, and see how they relayed this information to me. As Agee (2002) notes: *'inquiry into the perspectives that educational research and participants hold about familiar settings such as schools can help in questioning assumptions and gaining new perspectives, thereby revealing a richer picture of teaching, learning, and lived experiences.'* (p.569).

Once I had eased the students into the interview by chatting about their likes and dislikes, I moved onto the main body of questions. During the interviews I tried to ensure I remained sensitive to the students' needs and reactions. I anticipated that I would encounter some reluctance to answer my questions, and I wanted to tread the fine line between coaxing answers out of shy students, and taking a – silent – cue from students and realising when it was time to end an interview. As Clark and Moss (2001) note: *'We are keen that a participatory approach to listening is respectful of children's views and also of their silences.'* (p.7).

The issue of where I would interview students was one I gave much thought to. I knew the interviews should take place in a quiet place, out of the earshot and view of others, in order to afford both myself and the interviewees privacy and the opportunity to concentrate fully on the interviews. However, I was concerned that this could pose risks for myself and the interviewees. Craig, Corden and Thornton (2000) identify the following risks for professionals working in private settings:

- *risk of physical threat or abuse*
- *risk of psychological trauma or consequences, as a result of actual or threatened violence, or the nature of what is disclosed during the interaction*

- *risk of being in a compromising situation, in which there might be accusations of improper behaviour*
- *increased exposure to general risks of everyday life and social interaction: travel, infectious illness, accident.*

As it happened, the school assigned offices to me, so I had no say into where I would be interviewing students. The one available to me most frequently was a small office off the nurse's room, which offered privacy coupled with the advantage that a member of staff was close by if I - or the students - needed them for any reason, but not within earshot or view. The only downside was that the room was situated next to an old-style toilet with an overhead cistern, and every time it flushed the students and I had difficulty hearing each other speak.

The school provided me with timetables for all students, and permission to remove them from lessons. To my surprise, the teachers did not object to a stranger interrupting their lessons and asking to remove a student from class to conduct an interview, and did not question me further or ask to see ID. During the entire period of my research, I was not asked for proof of identity, a criminal records check, nor was my supervisor contacted, as far as I am aware.

This became a common response throughout my research – people seemed to trust me unquestioningly. I did wonder retrospectively if this was because I am a petite, softly-spoken and young-looking woman. I wondered whether another researcher would have gained the trust of my research participants, and unfettered access to students, with such ease. I wondered what the implications of such uncritical acceptance might be in terms of the data I was gathering.

To help, a school secretary fetched students for me one afternoon. She was a little over-zealous, as at one point I had a queue of students waiting to be interviewed, which placed some pressure on me and potentially had a negative effect on the students as they missed part of their lessons. I also felt queuing to see me probably was not assisting with putting students at their ease. Furthermore, I felt anonymity I was assuring each student of was being compromised somewhat by the fact that other students knew who was participating in the study from who was standing in the queue. However, I decided not to raise the issue with the school as they were trying to be helpful, the damage had been done so to speak, and I decided to see if I could take steps myself on future interview days to prevent this from happening again.

I used a tape recorder to record all interviews as I felt this would ensure I could focus my full attention on the students' answers to my questions, enabling me to identify and follow themes as relevant, and I wanted to be able to maintain eye contact with students while they spoke to me. I also felt recording interviews would enable me to transcribe, whereas just taking notes could lead to gaps or inaccuracies in my accounts. As Goodson and Sikes note, using tape recorders can impact upon research: *'Some people may be inhibited by the knowledge that their words could 'come back to haunt them', and there are those who find it extremely difficult to speak fluently in the presence of a tape recorder.'* (Goodson and Sikes, 2001, p.33). Furthermore:

It can be argued that using a tape recorder introduces an element of artificiality into the situation. However, unless research, of whatever type, is undertaken covertly – an unacceptable approach for life history work – it is bound to be 'artificial.' (p.33).

Tape recorders can, however, be a positive asset to research; as Wellington (1996) notes: *'the use of a tape-recorder (particularly of the high-quality, purpose-made variety) is often seen as a compliment by the person being interviewed.'* (p.35).

I felt that the interview questions had mixed success. With some students I genuinely felt as if I had gained an insight into their lives and interests, as well as their perspective about school. With a minority, however, the questions elicited nothing more than one-word answers, and they seemed to be almost resentful of this stranger who had pulled them out of class and was asking them personal questions. It may have been shyness however, but either way, in all instances, I felt it would be wrong to continue to probe the students to expand upon their answers further when they clearly did not want to continue with their interview.

I did wonder whether the reluctance of some students to be involved in my research may be linked to their life experiences – much research shows, as detailed in Chapter 2: Literature Review, that students from families living in poverty are likely to enjoy less social activities and experiences outside their home than their wealthier peers, and subsequently have lower self-esteem, and issues with confidence. It may have been the case that, by choosing to focus on students living in poverty, I was unwittingly selecting students who were less likely to become engaged with my research than other students. If this was the case, I was

not, by this stage, in a position to do anything about this – this issue perhaps merited an entirely new, different, study of its own.

I concluded all interviews by thanking the students for their participation, and reassuring them that I would keep their identity anonymous. I asked them if they had any more questions to ask me - most did not.

When the first set of 12 interviews were concluded I fully considered the results and if the questions had worked. Overall I felt that they had, as those students who seemed to engage with me answered most questions in detail, and did not raise additional issues that I felt warranted changes to the initial interview template. The exception was the beginning of the interview, which I expanded to ask a little more about the students before commencing the interview questions. This was because I had found this section had given me such an excellent insight into the students that I wanted to try to obtain more. I also thought this might make them more comfortable, and that consequently they would be more likely to expand on their answers to the other questions.

I also felt, on analysis of the interview transcripts, that I needed to work on my interview technique. I had initially felt that this was an area that I would not have any trouble with, due to a previous job interviewing adults about anti-social behaviour, but I soon realised that interviewing children about their experiences at school required a completely different technique. On analysis of my transcripts, I found that there were a number of leads I had not followed up, and that I had on occasions said evaluative things like 'that's good' and 'oh dear.' I was concerned that these value-laden comments may unintentionally have made some students feel that they should alter what they were saying to gain my approval, and I resolved to try to avoid using such words when I next undertook research.

During the course of the interviews, two students mentioned two other students who they said were bullied because they were living in poverty – one student was apparently often called names by other students because his parents could not afford to buy him new trousers so he had to wear ones that were too short, while the other student was relentlessly bullied because of her cheap clothes. I decided to try to interview these two students as they seemed to be the types of student I was particularly interested in involving in my research; those who experienced physical hardship or embarrassment because of the cost of school. I wrote to their

parents, as I had previous parents, but did not outline the specific reasons I wanted to interview their children – I felt that this would be inappropriate. Similarly, when I met the two students and asked if I could interview them, I did not explain why I had chosen them. I did however, focus specifically on bullying to find out what they had to say about this.

In an ideal world, I would have undertaken a series of interviews with each student - as Christensen (2004) notes:

one-off interviews with children, whether these be qualitative or quantitative, or with the use of task orientated tools or not, are at risk of not providing the context within which children can respond in accordance with their own views. This is so because children will have been left little scope for engaging in a critical manner with the research questions and the research practice, despite the fact that children may have given informed consent. (p.168).

I therefore decided to shadow some of the students – spend several hours with them during a school day - to get to know them better, to help put their interviews in context and help me to gain a wider perspective of the school.

g) Shadowing students

Christensen (2004) notes that she undertook a wide range of research as part of her ethnography - she observed and participated in lessons, spent time in after-school and holiday centres, participated in summer camps and visited students at home. She also met and interviewed students' families, undertook participatory techniques including dramatised plays and peer group discussions. She notes that: *'As is now more widely recognised in research with children, my fieldwork was not confined to verbal accounts requiring conversational skills. Rather it encouraged children to use a diversity of means to express themselves in the communication between us.'* (p.167).

This illustrates the range of techniques valued in modern-day, qualitative research; conversely, historically researchers have arguably been expected to follow quantitative techniques such as observing their research subjects, and take care not to interact with them in case they affected the research process in any way.

I was particularly interested in undertaking shadowing as I felt that this would provide a useful complement to the interviews – I felt that the interviews gave the

interviewees the opportunity to present their take on themselves and the school – effectively tell me their narratives about the school, and even their take on the school’s story. I was, however, aware that interviewees may have chosen not to be completely open and honest, particularly as they did not know me. Shadowing, on the other hand, would give me the chance to observe students and school life first-hand and make my own observations about this. I was aware I would bring my own bias to research of this kind but, as outlined previously, I felt this was unavoidable. It was simply a different type of bias compared to that which interviewees would bring to their own interviews, and that which I would bring when analysing and reporting on these interviews.

I identified three students to spend time shadowing. I chose them because they were extremely open and talkative in their interviews, and mentioned issues which I was interested in looking into further, all of which related to poverty, and how this impacted upon their experiences of education. I decided to shadow each student for half a day each initially. I met with the students individually briefly in advance to explain that I wanted to spend some time with them at school; I asked if they minded, and they all said that they did not.

The three students responded to my presence with varying degrees of enthusiasm - one seemed pleased to have me there, one seemed a little uncomfortable, and the third did not openly say that she did not want to be shadowed, but managed to evade me completely within an hour by going off with her friends without telling me, and not returning. This experience is not uncommon in research with children. Christensen (2004) notes how during her research, children *‘responded to my questions with straightforward rejection’* (p.168) when she was asking questions about the school. On one occasion, she recounts how *‘a group of girls spontaneously dashed away from me when I attempted to walk with them through the school gates’* (p.169). Christensen (2004) believed that this was because her questions were focused on the school, and not on the students themselves. When she addressed this, she found that the students were more accepting, and noted that:

a researcher who wants to spend time with and around children will, unless they modify usual adult behaviour, very easily be seen by the students as intimidating and overpowering. This may call forth both children’s quiet acceptance and, as demonstrated in my case while my role was still unclear, strong reactions from them. (p.169).

The time I spent with all three students, even the apparently reluctant participant, was invaluable as I was able to see teaching methods within the school, how the students interacted with each other and the teachers, and how a typical day at school unfolded for my participants. I also saw how students spent their break and lunch times; for most students this appeared to involve talking or smoking in the toilets, or buying fast food from one of the two school canteens.

I felt I was able to find out more about the students and the school via these three sessions than by shadowing school staff, or even walking around the school on my own. When I spent time with staff I noticed that all communication was very much focused on addressing the behaviour or educational achievements of the students – this formed the focus of the conversations between the school staff themselves, and the school staff and students. When I did spend time around school by myself, I found it very useful in that I was able to see how students interacted with each other, how students and school staff interacted, but never in detail – I did not feel comfortable just stopping and listening, as I would have liked. However, during the shadowing sessions, I was able to see what I can only assume, constituted a typical period in school for the students showing who they saw and spoke to, what they did and so on.

h) Issuing school diaries

I decided to issue 14 diaries to all students I had interviewed – the initial 12, plus the two who had been identified to me by other students - in order that they could record the kinds of experiences they had at school. I felt that this would give me the opportunity to learn more about them, and to find out about what they considered to be important events at school. To ensure that the diaries were practical, I chose sturdy ring-bound styles with 100 pages, which I considered would be more than enough for a month's use. I also chose a style which had an integral pen, in the hope that this would encourage and facilitate the students to write in it (I had become aware during my visits to the school that pens were lost on a daily basis).

I wrote a paragraph telling the students what I hoped the diary would be used for, and the date that it should be returned to the school office, which I taped inside the diary. I had intended to meet with all students when issuing them, but unfortunately the logistics made this impossible, so Shane agreed to issue them to students himself. I was concerned that this could affect the use of the diaries as the

students may have considered them to have been issued by the school, rather than me, but I felt this was unavoidable.

I agreed that the school office staff would save the returned diaries for me. To ensure that the student's parents were kept fully informed of my proposed plan of research, I arranged for a letter to be sent out via the school giving further details of the diaries. The students seemed to be pleased to be given the diaries. After they were issued, I saw one of my interviewees in a lesson, and he was holding his diary close to his chest - when another student asked why he had the diary he said *'because I'm special!'*

Unfortunately, my fears that a low proportion of the diaries would be returned proved to be founded. Although I had arranged for Shane to speak to each student individually after a month to ask if they could return the diaries, none were returned, and all students said that they had lost them. In retrospect, I felt that the failure of this research tool was likely to be largely due to my impersonal, third party approach to administering it. Rather than speaking to each student to ask them to complete the diary, and explaining its role and importance in my research, I submitted it, with a letter, via a member of school staff. I suspect the students would either have treated it as another – unwanted? – piece of school correspondence and simply put it aside, then promptly forgot about it – alternatively, they may have seen it as a bonus set of stationery to replace that routinely lost within school. I feel that if I had somehow found a way of meeting each student to discuss the diary – then arranged to meet them to collect it once completed – I would have personalised the experience for them and had a much higher rate of return.

i) Second set of interviews with students

I later undertook another set of interviews, to give me the chance to meet more students. Instead of choosing more students who had completed a questionnaire, I asked Shane to identify students who met the profile I was interested in - i.e. students from families living in poverty who appeared to experience difficulties in meeting the costs of attending school. I felt this would potentially give me access to a different set of students, those who perhaps did not return, or give open answers on, their questionnaires but were perceived by others (i.e. teachers) as living in poverty, or students who were not in the samples of classes my questionnaires were distributed to. Shane and other teachers identified 11 students

and I arranged for letters to be sent to all their parents. No parents contacted me or Shane to advise that they did not want their child to participate. I then visited school two weeks later to interview as many of the students as were available.

In the event, only five students were available, as apparently an unusually large number of the students were absent from school, and I carried out interviews using the same interview schedule as before. Unfortunately I was not able to interview any additional students as I had not written to their parents in advance to request permission. Overall, all interviews went well and I felt the students relaxed more due to the additional questions I asked. Also, the interviews felt less stilted because I felt I had developed better interviewing skills and followed themes as appropriate rather than cutting off and moving concertedly on to the next questions.

j) Shadowing the Inclusion Officer

To further enhance my understanding of the school, I spent two days shadowing Shane, the Inclusion Officer, which included attending home visits to the parents of students who had been under-performing. This increased my understanding of how the school operated, and how it was felt to be a priority for Shane to try to raise standards of underachieving students by visiting them and their parents to illustrate what action needed to be taken if they were to achieve 'good' grades in their GCSEs.

I undertook another period of shadowing with Shane a few months later, this time primarily within the school. I attended several classes taught or co-taught by Shane, and spent time with him 'on duty'; a period when other teachers would ring him if there was any trouble with students in class or in the playground. I encountered some startling episodes during this time, including seeing a female student fleeing in tears from a crowd of approximately 50 other students who were chasing after her, shouting, because she'd been in an argument with another student. This technique obviously gave me quite a different insight into the school than that I had gained from questionnaires and interviews – it brought my existing research to life as I felt I was finally seeing some of the issues that had been raised by a number of research participants. I decided to continue to undertake shadowing as one of my key research methods, alongside conducting interviews.

k) Interviews with Inclusion Officer and Assistant/Heads of Year

As I felt the student interviews had been extremely useful, I decided to interview a number of school staff, including Shane. I decided to retain the form of semi-structured interviews as I had previously found this approach to work well. The interview with Shane was very valuable; as he had limited teaching commitments he was able to spare an hour for the interview; no small feat for a senior member of school staff, as I later discovered. I had spent a significant amount of time with him by the time of the interview, so he was aware of the areas I was interested in, and proactively discussed them at length.

I also chose to interview the heads or assistant heads of each school year, 1 to 5 (NB: the job title of these staff was changed to 'Head of House' when the school changed to an academy). I would have liked to interview both the heads and assistant heads of each year, but unfortunately their workloads and the fact that the interviews took place during an exam period meant that this was not possible. This also meant that the interviews were quite hurried – in one instance, Shane took me into an exam and temporarily relieved one teacher from the role of invigilating the exam in order that I could conduct a (hasty) interview. Although all interviews were necessarily brief, I found they each further enhanced my understanding of the way the school worked and how charges were established and enforced, as well as what teachers thought about their students. I later undertook an additional interview with an additional head of year, bringing the total number of heads and assistant heads interviewed to six.

l) General observation

Although my first few visits to Chestnut Grove were arranged with the specific intention of undertaking interviews, I inevitably ended up observing the school, teachers and students during the time I spent at the school. The time I spent waiting to meet interviewees in the school office gave me the opportunity to witness a number of incidents, such as students fighting, and teachers aggressively apprehending students who were missing lessons.

Witnessing these episodes was extremely valuable as they enabled me to gain a wider perspective of the school, and put the interviews in context. I therefore decided to undertake scheduled sessions of observation. I requested permission from Shane, who had become my main contact at the school. I explained that I wanted to spend more time simply observing students and teachers as they went

about their daily business and interacted with each other as this would enrich my research, and possibly widen my network of contacts within the school. Shane agreed, and introduced me to a number of teachers who agreed that I could observe their lessons.

I was aware that being introduced to teachers, rather than selecting them randomly, was not ideal. My perception of Shane's relationships with other school staff was that he seemed to have a better, more informal relationship with those who were slightly more liberal and friendly. I was therefore concerned that this meant that I would be observing classes with a specific 'type' of teacher who perhaps interacted with students and other teachers differently to other teachers. However, I felt this was balanced by the fact that Shane tended to be closest to those teachers who worked with the most demanding students – those with special needs or who were amongst the lowest achieving students in the school. I had noted from the time I had already spent within the school that these students were more likely to be from families living in poverty, and felt the skewed sample would actually work to my advantage, although it was not necessarily typical of the school as a whole. This was the approach I had taken when selecting students to interview and I felt it had been successful. Although this was not the approach I had planned when I decided to undertake observation, in retrospect, I found it had worked well.

In all cases, Shane introduced me to the teachers although, due to their schedules, there was little time to introduce my research and no time at all to cover ethical considerations such as anonymity. This was far from ideal but the situations in which I was introduced to the teachers – in the teachers' common room as they were on their way to a lesson, or at the beginning of a lesson – meant there was no manageable alternative. I tried to ensure that I was no more than an observer during these lessons, but was aware that my presence meant that I inevitably impacted on the lessons in some way – whether the teachers changed the way that they interacted with the students, or the even the content or structure of the lesson. In some cases, the teachers even made reference to me in the lessons by directing comments to me during lessons. I felt this was unavoidable, as there was not the opportunity to discuss my research, or the fact that it may have been preferable for the teachers to ignore me completely, prior to undertaking observation sessions.

I also spent a significant period of time in common areas of the school, such as in the playing fields, the lunch halls and just walking around the corridors. I did attract some attention from students as I was obviously not a student, and clearly was not a teacher they recognised. On those occasions that students did ask who I was, I introduced myself and explained my research and took the opportunity to identify students who I may later wish to interview or spend time shadowing.

m) Interview with Assistant Headteacher

Part-way through my research I met with the Assistant Headteacher on the suggestion of the Headteacher. Chestnut Grove had become involved with a local organisation which was tasked with working towards a government target to reduce the percentage of young school leavers not in education, employment or training (NEET). Chestnut had become involved because the highest percentage of their school leavers in the city – 22% - were labelled NEET (Walton Futures, 2005).

This interview gave me a new perspective on the school – the extremely high number of students who became unemployed on leaving – which added an additional element to my research. The meeting was very helpful as I discussed, and gained approval for, my plan for taking my research forward within the school. As with my previous discussions with Shane, it was extremely useful for a member of staff to give me advice on tried and tested methods of working with students and their parents.

n) Governors Meeting

I attended a Governors Meeting as I felt this would give yet another opportunity to meet more people closely involved in the school, and find out what the Governors felt were key issues. I was introduced briefly by the Head Governor, but did not participate in the meeting in any way other than observing it. The meeting revealed some information which further accentuated my research – for example, I was surprised to learn that £25,000 had been spent on replacement glass windows due to vandalism in the last term. Similarly, permission was requested to write off a number of items which had been stolen, which ran to several sides of A4.

The meeting was also extremely useful as it was one of the last meetings to be held before the school was due to be closed and reopen as an Academy. I found it particularly interesting to witness the way in which the current – and outgoing – Head discussed his departure, including reference to having been ‘sacked.’

o) Interview with former Headteacher

As detailed in Chapter 1: Introduction, Chestnut Grove closed and reopened as Chestnut Academy during the course of my research. This happened during a period when Academies were becoming increasingly widespread, and were receiving a significant amount of negative press. I felt that it would be extremely useful to interview the former Headteacher to gain his perspective on the school and reflections on the change to an Academy. I particularly hoped that interviewing him after he had left meant that he would perhaps be more open than he might have been if I had interviewed him while he was still in post.

I contacted him via the school and was delighted when he contacted me to invite me to visit him at home to conduct an interview. From experience, interviews conducted within the school were usually hurried affairs so I hoped that a home interview would be more relaxed for both me and the interviewee. This proved to be the case and I was able to obtain a lengthy and extremely useful interview.

p) Interview with new Principal

When the school re-opened as an Academy, I felt that it was essential to meet with the new Principal, Hector, to find out more about Academies, his perception of the school, and his priorities for the school – I was interested to compare his perspectives with both the previous Headteacher, Tom (pseudonym), and the Government party line on Academies. I wrote to him, outlining my research, and met with him six weeks after the school closed and re-opened as an Academy.

When I conducted the interview, I introduced myself and my research and covered a number of key areas including how students would be selected to attend the Academy. I also discussed public perceptions of Academies and had to be extremely careful to ensure that I did not present my questions in a critical manner – although I had reservations about the Academy movement as a whole, I was concerned that if I appeared to be critical of the Academy's parent body or the Academy itself, he could halt my research within the school.

Retrospectively, I wondered whether this was dishonest, and a breach of my commitment to undertaking my research in an ethical manner. McNamee (2001) notes that *'deception may be justified where the deceptive methods are exclusively necessary'* (p.318). This was a concern that I felt I never resolved with myself,

although I felt that my approach was the correct one to use in the circumstances as it was vital that I obtained the interview.

As with other interviews with school staff, the interview was shorter than I would have preferred, but extremely useful. I later found that I was very lucky to have conducted the interview when I did – a few weeks later he left the school abruptly, and after a prolonged absence, which was presented to other staff as sick leave, Hector's manager Edward, the Executive Director of Academies in Walton, took over this role.

q) Interview with new Principal – number 2

Around three months after the transfer to an Academy took place, I found during one of my observation sessions within school that Hector had formally left and had been replaced by Edward. I felt that it was essential to interview Edward as this represented a unique opportunity to find out how successful he felt the new Academy was, and also compare his views to the other two Headteachers that the school had had within the previous six months.

Fortunately I was able to obtain an interview fairly easily and, as previously, introduced myself and my research while attempting not to sound judgemental about the Academy movement.

I was also keen to address a number of issues that had come to my attention, including the situation regarding a number of teachers who had 'disappeared' in the same manner that Hector had, without appearing to judge or criticise the school. I was able to conduct a long and detailed interview that was invaluable to my research.

Edward answered all questions in detail, including those which were perhaps a little sensitive, and most importantly, he agreed to allow me to continue to undertake research within the school.

r) Interview with EAL Teacher

I met Mavis, an EAL (English as an Additional Language) Teacher, during one of my observation days within school, and felt that it would be extremely useful to interview her to gain further information about the situation faced by the significant number of pupils within the school who spoke English as a second language. I

suspected the majority of these students would be from families living in poverty, and felt this would be an extremely useful opportunity to ensure I did not lose touch with what was initially the key theme of my research; the cost to families living in poverty of attending school. The interview was very helpful as the teacher gave me a good insight into the special circumstances typically faced by EAL children, who were largely from refugee families. She was then able to illustrate this with case studies of students who faced significant financial and other hardships in their home lives, which she felt inevitably impacted upon their experiences at school.

While I considered approaching the families of some of the EAL students to request interviews, on balance I decided not to. As with the students labelled as NEET, I was extremely interested in these students, and felt that learning more about them had enhanced my understanding of the school. However, they were not the main focus of my research and I felt that it would not be the best use of my time to pursue this particular line of research.

s) Interview with Church Leader

Chestnut Grove had a Church Leader based within the school who, along with two volunteers, undertook a range of activities including one-to-one support for students, and the provision of a breakfast club. I felt that it would be extremely useful to meet with the Church Leader, Sebastian (pseudonym) as he had a unique role based within the school, and provided it with a service in the form of the breakfast club, while not being employed by it.

In addition, Sebastian was the Chair of the Governors' Board. As with the interviews conducted with school staff, I found that the interview was extremely illuminating – Sebastian's role as Chair of the Governors' Board was particularly useful as he was able to give me his perspective of the school, and his understanding of the transfer to an Academy, from an extremely knowledgeable point of view.

t) Ongoing meetings with Inclusion Officer

Throughout the period of my primary research, I had regular meeting with Shane, the Inclusion Officer, which frequently took the form of informal interviews. Over the years we got to know each other very well and Shane was extremely open and honest with me – I felt that he trusted me and that this trust was implicit so he did not feel the need to say that the information was confidential, similarly I did not feel

the need to repeatedly cover the issues of anonymity etc. as I usually would have. These meetings were invaluable in providing me with information which I used to progress my primary research.

This was particularly the case when the transfer to an Academy took place – as detailed in Chapter 4: Findings, a number of changes were made to the school at this time, particularly staffing changes, and it became obvious that a number of teachers did not feel that they were being fully informed about what was going on, or what had happened to their colleagues who left abruptly. This information was obviously very sensitive, and I took care to ensure that when I discussed this with the school's Headteachers or other staff, I presented my questions in such a way that they were related to general information publicly circulated.

While I would have preferred to be completely open in asking about what was happening, and why, I felt that it was essential to protect Shane, and the trust that I felt he had in me, and I therefore prioritised this above explicitly using this information in discussions with other participants in an attempt to enhance my research.

u) Breakfast Club

Part-way through my research, I became aware from discussions with Shane that the school operated a breakfast club for students three times a week. I was surprised that this information had not previously become available through discussions with Shane or other school staff, or via the students and parents questionnaires which explicitly asked what provision the school made for students who needed assistance with the cost of attending school.

While breakfast is not a cost of attending school, I still felt that the club was of relevance, due to literature previously cited which links diet to educational attainment. (e.g. see Lynn, 1991). This made me wonder how many students were actually aware of the club, as the school did not seem to publicise it.

The Breakfast Club was part-funded by Kellogg's and part-funded by Sebastian's church. It was located in a spacious building adjacent to the school which was equipped with a large kitchen and spacious dining room. The club opened at 7.30am three times a week, and was open to all students, who were able to place orders for a range of drinks and breakfast items, free of charge.

I attended the breakfast club on a number of occasions, over a period of approximately a year. I initially attended as the opening hours fitted well into my full-time job. However, once I had attended for the first time, I felt it was an extremely useful resource, and decided to attend the club on a regular basis from then on. I generally took an informal approach to my research at the Breakfast Club. I spent time in the kitchen talking to the teachers and church workers – this presented a good opportunity to find out about what was happening at the school as well as see how the teachers and church staff interacted with each other and the students.

I also spent time in the dining area, observing students and talking to them. I did not feel that it was necessary to gain their parents' permission to approach the students – Shane advised that he felt it was fine for me to talk to students attending the Breakfast Club, and I introduced myself and my research before asking the students if it would be OK for me to talk to them for a few minutes. I always spoke to them in groups and did not raise topics that I felt may be sensitive or the students may not be comfortable discussing, e.g. relating to poverty. I did select some students who I wanted to interview – this is detailed in section v), below.

v) Interviews with attendees at the Breakfast Club

After having concentrated on interviewing school staff and related professionals, I felt that it was important to undertake further interviews with students – particularly in light of the fact that the transfer to an Academy had become a key part of my research, and I had not to date explicitly discussed the change with any students. I had discussed the change with a number of students informally at the Breakfast Club, but wanted to explore students' perceptions of the change more thoroughly via structured interviews.

I identified six students who I wanted to interview; students who had been extremely talkative when I had met them and who had expressed a range of perspectives about the Academy. Unfortunately my sample was all males in years 1-5 – this group made up the vast majority of attendees at the Breakfast Club and I had had difficulty engaging with the very few female or older students who occasionally attended. I wrote letters to the students' parents, introducing myself and my research, and asked them to take them home and give them to their parents straight away.

A week later I attended the Breakfast Club and, as I hadn't heard from their parents, I asked the students to confirm that they had taken the letters home. Three said they had, and that their parents were happy for them to be interviewed. However, the other three said they had forgotten to give the letters to their parents. I suspected that in fact the students did not want to be interviewed, but did not feel comfortable telling me this. In the circumstances, I decided to undertake interviews with three of the students, and not pursue the other three students further. I felt it would be unethical to pursue the students who I suspected did not want to be interviewed. To do so would have abused my position as both researcher as adult, and would have breached the ethical guidelines that I set when I commenced my research.

w) Interview with Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services

Towards the end of my period of primary research, I decided that it would be helpful to interview the Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services for Walton LEA, Christopher (pseudonym). Christopher had chaired the board which agreed that Chestnut should become an Academy, and I was interested to find out what his reasons for doing so were. I was also interested to find out what Christopher thought about the Academy movement as a whole, particularly the areas in which they had been widely criticised, e.g. the teaching of creationism instead of evolution. I also wanted to ask how successful he thought the Academy had been, almost one school year since its inception.

I was extremely fortunate in that I was able to obtain an interview with Christopher two weeks before he left Walton LEA for another post. As with the interviews with the three consecutive Headteachers of Chestnut, I felt that it was important to probe areas of irrelevance to my research without appearing to criticise the LEA, school, or even the Academy movement. However, I found that, perhaps because he was close to leaving Walton LEA, Christopher was extremely frank with me and gave me potentially sensitive information relating to Chestnut and his reasons for supporting the change to an Academy.

This interview was the last piece of primary research I undertook, although I continued to keep a watchful eye on developments on Chestnut Academy, via the local press, from personal interest. My research had ended, but I could not end my interest in the school so easily.

6. Analysing and interpreting the data

As is by now apparent to the reader, I collected a huge amount of data over the period of almost five years during which I visited Chestnut Grove/Academy on a regular basis. This included the responses I received to the questionnaires I issued at the early stages of my research, interview transcripts, and my copious notes from interviews, shadowing students and school staff, and general observation sessions around the school. Together, I feel that these paint a vivid picture of a school in extremely challenging circumstances undergoing a significant period of change.

As detailed in Chapter 1: Introduction, I had a clearly defined starting point for undertaking my research, however, in practice, my research took a number of twists and turns as it progressed, and I often pursued multiple lines of enquiry concurrently. I obtained a wide range of rich data which, although generally interlinked, was deserving of consideration in its own right. I therefore initially found it difficult to establish a starting point which would allow me to unravel and present the varied data I had collected with the care it deserved. I needed to decide which tools I would employ to sort and analyse this, otherwise this chapter would consist of nothing more than dozens of transcribed interviews and pages of field notes.

There are many different approaches used by researchers to sort data. As an initial step I found myself employing a very similar method to one of the steps described by Ball (1991):

When I have a significant amount of data which I have worked through highlighting and developing commentary I photocopy all the pages of data and then cut these pages up into data-bits. I then put these bits, according to initial categories into separate files or envelopes. (p.183).

My data consisted of a high mound of papers, and I decided to physically move it into initial complementary heaps, then feed the smallest piles into those other piles which best related to them. As simple as it sounds, I found the process of cutting and piling data to be very effective, as the physical nature of the task meant that I could clearly see the key themes of my research emerging as the heaps of my findings gradually grew.

The routine task made the complex job of identifying my key themes much more effective than might otherwise have been the case.

7. Conclusion

I undertook primary research at Chestnut Grove, later Chestnut Academy, over the course of almost five years, exploring the barriers to education experienced by pupils living in poverty and attending a school in a deprived area. I used a wide range of research tools, primarily interviews and observation, and felt that the methods that I employed were very successful in that I obtained a wide range of rich data relating to both my initial research area of the financial costs of education, and a wider set of areas relating to barriers to education.

I felt that the interviews conducted with the three successive Headteachers of Chestnut were of particular value. Placed in the context of my research – a story of a school during a time when it underwent an extremely topical change to an Academy – I felt that obtaining interviews with the former Headteacher (both before and after he was deposed), the new Principal (who was later apparently also deposed), and the second Principal gave me a unique and possibly unprecedented insight into the introduction of Academies. Similarly, I felt that the interview with Christopher, Executive Director of Children and Young People’s Services for Walton LEA, was extremely helpful as he was able to give a high-level overview of the introduction of Academies, with a particular focus on Chestnut.

I was also fortunate in that the prolonged nature of my research meant I developed good relationships with staff at the school and felt this meant that certain members of staff were perhaps more frank with me than they might otherwise have been, and they also put themselves out of my way to assist with my research. An example of this is the former Headteacher of Chestnut allowing me to interview him in his home after he was ‘sacked’ (to use his own choice of word). If these members of staff had not been so helpful and generous with their time, my research would have been very different and, I feel, lacking what turned out to be extremely rich data.

While I felt the methods employed were successful in that I obtained a variety of rich data, which seemed to me to ‘knit’ together to provide a comprehensive story of Chestnut Grove, I had to assume that the information proffered to me was truthful. It is possible that the research participants gave me incorrect information but, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, I take it at face value. I am aware that there is no way of knowing how representative the picture of Chestnut Grove really was – who could tell me, or decide, such a matter? Similarly, I had to

go on what my research participants told me as fact, even if this was not entirely truthful; I took the position that it was a version of truthful in that it was what they wanted to tell me, and the research is accurate in the respect of capturing and conveying this.

In terms of improving my research, one omission I do feel, was interviews with parents. I initially hoped to interview parents, and asked parents who completed the questionnaire if they were willing to be interviewed about the cost of education. However, I then decided to focus on student interviews as I felt that this had been neglected by other studies in this area.

I later asked my contacts within school whether they were able to recommend any parents who it may be helpful for me to interview but they were not able suggest anyone. By this time, I did not feel that issuing a further questionnaire would help my research in any way, as I did not have an obvious route through which to contact parents as I had previously.

In retrospect, I feel it would have added extra depth to my research if I had persevered and approached parents to participate in my research, beyond the questionnaires. However, as I had always intended that students would be a major focus of my research, and it later became evident that I also needed to focus specifically on school staff and other professionals, I felt I had covered the key bases upon which to draw the research account, although the addition of interviews with parents would, of course, have been additionally valuable.

In summary, I felt the research tools used were appropriate to the subject I was researching, and I obtained a range of rich data. In retrospect, if I was undertaking the research again, I would make some changes, but I feel overall the tools I used and approaches I took were successful in that they enabled the creation of a story of Chestnut Grove/Academy which I, personally, found hugely informative, illuminating and compelling, and that I hoped that others would find of interest too.

In the next chapter I will detail my findings at Chestnut Grove/Academy, which resulted from the varied research methods I employed, as detailed in this chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

1. Introduction

This chapter details the findings of my research within Chestnut Grove school, which later became Chestnut Academy. I have detailed the varied themes which emerged from my data, and my findings within each theme, which naturally overlapped to an extent.

2. The emergence of themes

At the end of the sorting process described in Chapter 3: Methods, four clear themes emerged, all of which were interlinked and related to barriers to education for families living in poverty:

- a) the surrounding area and students' families
- c) the cost of education
- b) the school environment
- d) the school's priorities and approaches.

I feel that themes a) and b) predominantly related to poverty and education, while c) and d) predominantly related to government priorities in education. While the area of the school environment very much spans these two overarching topics, I have chosen to include it under the banner of government priorities, due to the elements of this area which naturally gained prominence in my research; these are detailed later in this chapter.

Using the four areas above as my key themes, I have further split these areas into sub-sections as appropriate, where further sub-themes have naturally emerged. The findings are presented below, and an analysis and discussion of my findings is presented in the next chapter.

3. Analysis and presentation of findings

Once I had established a set of key themes, I needed to consider how to analyse the data.

The analysis and presentation of qualitative data is arguably less straightforward than the presentation of quantitative data; quantitative data typically relates to numerical data, which can be presented in charts and graphs, while qualitative data is usually less able to be generalised (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Due to the qualitative nature of my research, I felt that statistical analytic tools were inappropriate as they would not allow me to obtain the nuances contained within this data. Much of the richness of my research was contained in interviews I held, or episodes I witnessed, and I felt that I could not effectively convey this and maintain the power of the research findings via statistics alone. I did, however, decide to use percentages to partially analyse the questionnaires I initially distributed to students and parents at both schools as this enabled me to see what proportion of respondents selected each of the potential answers to each question. I felt, though, that percentages have but a very limited role to play in meaningful data analysis as people cannot be grouped like so many beads on an abacus. However, using percentages as a very early, illustrative tool did allow me to calculate the number of responses to closed questions, and I used this as a starting point to identify students I wished to ask to participate further in my research.

The data obtained was very different to that which I expected when I started my research journey, due to the expansion of my research topic. I found that a natural choice to analyse my findings was Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded Theory is a tool which focuses on generating theory from data – researchers choose a field of study, then allow theory making to naturally emerge from the data. Effectively, the data leads the researcher down a path of the data's own making and the researcher does not necessarily know the destination.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) argue against selecting a theory in advance in case this negatively impacts on the analysis of the data. This approach turns on its head the traditional quantitative method of selecting a theory and then seeking data within the constraints of that theory. Ironically, I started off on that path myself before my data outgrew the scope of the theory that I initially selected.

Considering that Grounded Theory is very much a qualitative tool, its application is structured and almost quantitative in style – coding processes are typically used to systemically sort the data by topic; the topics are then grouped by theme (Strauss,

1987). Categories are then sought which, considered together, generate an overall theory.

I feel that the key benefit of Grounded Theory is its flexibility. Rather than requiring the researcher to stick rigidly within the constraints of their original research question, Grounded Theory analysis recognises and values the fact that research should be fluid and the researcher should allow themselves to be led down a path that they may not have originally considered (Strauss, 1987). This was a huge benefit for me; I found that there was so much more in my data than I had ever envisaged linked to my starting point of the financial costs of education, and I was eager to see where my research led me. This meant that I retrospectively widened my research focus in response to the data, but I feel that my research is so much stronger as a result of this.

I feel, however, that there are potentially disadvantages to using Grounded Theory as an analytic tool, and these are linked closely to its benefits. While I personally valued the journey that Grounded Theory took me on, I believe that it could conversely be seen as a disadvantage that an important research question may not be answered if stronger data relating to a different area emerges during the process of analysing the data gathered.

Similarly, Grounded Theory could be criticised for suggesting that observations are free from bias, and therefore not based on an existing theory, when I would argue that in fact everything stems from one's own existing perceptions or ideas. Grounded Theory has also been criticised as it '*signals a return to simple Baconian inductivism*' (Haig, 1995). Baconian inductivism prescribes that data is collected, and recorded, free from theoretical preconceptions; the data collected is then used to generate a hypothesis or theory. This simple, straightforward approach is, in my opinion, a strength, and therefore Grounded Theory was my tool of choice for analysing the data that I collected.

A key element of the data I obtained was narratives, and I have used different techniques to convey these, including directly quoting research participants, sometimes at length, as I wanted to let their own words shine through. I have also added my own perspectives on the data where I felt this adds value, predominantly in Chapter 5: Discussion.

A number of educational researchers have used both narratives and the construction of stories as key tools in educational research, and in retrospect I have found a number of approaches to presenting such work that mirror my own. For example, Walker (1991), writing about research into a teaching programme, spent a significant amount of time observing lessons, and directly quoted a number of exchanges between teachers and pupils, followed by analysis of these situations, to add meaning to the research. Walker noted how some exchanges are, to an observer, meaningless as they do not have the benefit of prior experience due to what is usually a time-limited exercise. Walker, therefore, relied upon teacher and pupils to explain the significance of exchanges to him afterwards – he effectively asked them to tell him their story. I have taken a similar approach in trying to avoid over-analysing my data.

4. Findings

Below I have presented the findings of my research at Chestnut Grove/Academy, divided into the four key themes detailed above which organically made themselves known to me via the Grounded Theory approach to analysis which I employed.

I have referred to ‘Chestnut Grove School’ or ‘Chestnut Academy’ depending upon whether the research I refer to took place before or after 31 August 2006. Similarly, I have referred to some staff members as ‘Head of Year’ or ‘Head of House’ depending upon the date on which the interview took place.

a) The surrounding area and students’ families

I chose this area as a huge amount of the data that I collected included reference to both the area in which the school was located, and students’ family backgrounds, and the impact that these factors were perceived to have on the educational experiences of students. I have looked at these together as I feel that they both fall under the area of the environment experienced by students. I divided this data into the following subsections as I felt that key sub-themes emerged which each required individual consideration:

- i) Poverty amongst Westgate* families negatively impacts upon their children’s education
- ii) English as an Additional Language (EAL) families face special difficulties, which negatively impact on students’ experiences of education

- iii) A number of students do not engage in culturally rich activities outside of school, which places them at a disadvantage.

**Pseudonym for the area of Walton in which Chestnut Grove is located.*

Each of these findings is detailed below.

i) Poverty amongst Westgate families negatively impacts upon their children's education

Poverty may initially bring to mind money matters, but it is about so much more than that (e.g. see Hirsch 2007a). While the financial cost of education is clearly a key issue, there are numerous other costs which arguably have as high an impact on families living in poverty – these include poverty of both ambition and educational awareness, mental health issues specifically linked to poverty, and lack of cultural activities (e.g. see Wilkeley et al, 2007).

As detailed in Chapter 1: Introduction, the area of Walton in which Chestnut Grove was located was undoubtedly deprived in relation to both other areas in the city, and also in terms of the UK.

The huge scale of the negative impact of poverty on students' education was referred to by a number of research participants, typically school staff and other professionals associated with the school, during the course of my research. I came across much evidence that many students attending Chestnut Grove School/Academy lived in poverty. This was made poignantly clear by a Head of House when she told me an anecdote to illustrate the circumstances that many students lived in:

We used to have the odd non-uniform days and it's been agreed that all it does is highlights which children are very poor, even more than wearing a uniform. I mean somebody mentioned the other day that last year when we still had sweatshirts, how many other areas in the country would you see children on Saturdays and Sundays wearing their school sweatshirts, when they're just walking around the local area? You could go out onto the estate at weekends and you would see children with their uniforms on, their school sweatshirts on.

[Head of House, Chestnut Academy]

A number of other school staff made similar observations about students' lives outside of the school. For example, Tom, who was Headteacher at Chestnut Grove School when I started my research, told me that he felt that children from families living in poverty were especially disadvantaged in the practical and emotional support they received from their families in relation to their education:

I do think that having access to a computer, a room they can work in, when parents are well educated and can support you...there's probably an advantage over children who don't have these.
[Headteacher, Chestnut Grove School]

His successor, Hector, the initial Principal of Chestnut Academy, speculated similarly when I asked him to consider whether deprivation affected the school's students:

It's very difficult to say, I've not been in to student households. I would have thought that the deprivation would be an indicator that maybe they didn't have access to the resources, maybe the IT equipment, the books, maybe the experiences that other children will have had that will have led to a wider education. That may be anything from travel opportunities, additional leisure activities that they may partake in that will help them with their social development and their emotional and academic development.
[Principal, Chestnut Academy]

The theme of a perceived lack of parental expectation and support recurred in my conversations with the school's three successive Headteachers, other school staff and professionals associated with the school. Research participants told me time and time again that they felt that family support is a key driver in educational achievement, and that they felt that lack of such support was intrinsically linked to poverty. There was no suggestion that this lack of support was intentional, rather that it was borne through generations of poverty, and a resultant cycle of non-achievement.

A Head of House summed it up neatly when she discussed what she considered to be her biggest career challenge to date:

persuading children in a school where the parents haven't got many expectations that they can have these expectations...the assumption for so many of them is 'I will leave school; I will get a job' and some of the most able, if they had a background similar to us...it's trying to persuade some of the younger ones, persuade them that University is an option, they see it as something that's expensive, and that it's something for posh

people, it's not something for ordinary people, and actually getting them past that is very hard.

[Head of House, Chestnut Academy]

In specifically considering the school's role in tackling this situation, she noted that: *'one of our weaknesses is still our inability to persuade the poorest that they can aim for more.'*

This was supported when, Christopher, the Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services for Walton LEA told me that *'Pupils in my experience in challenging schools don't have the self confidence to go on to what they see as a large anonymous college...that's across the country.'*

The issue of choice was raised by a number of participants as also being of key importance in this area, with suggestions being made that this was strongly related to the family backgrounds of students. A Head of House summarised his perception of the typical Westgate family's approach to selecting a school:

The children who come here, they'll just assume that they're coming. There'll be some, as I said, on the other side of the catchment who will say 'well actually we don't live that far from other schools, and it's just as easy to apply to them.' So we do tend to get the parents' children who just go 'well they're going there' so they go there. And they don't put too much thought into it at all.

[Head of House, Chestnut Academy]

This was something that a number of school staff told me that they wanted to change; they were acutely aware that Chestnut Grove was not sought-after by local parents.

The school's staff's perception of choice was supported by a number of students who noted that they attended the school because it was closest to their house, even if their parents did not like the school - for example, Bethany stated: *'My mum doesn't like it [Chestnut Grove] that much because she thinks it can have a bad influence on children and things like that.'* However, Bethany attended Chestnut Grove: *'Because it were closest school to our house.'* (This is a useful example of the use and value of narratives in my research – Bethany told me what her mum thought, and I chose to take this statement at face value to add what I consider to be additional depth to my research).

The Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services for Walton LEA supported this when he told me:

if you actually analyse the catchment area, for Chestnut, if it admitted equally from all of its catchment areas proportionately, we'd have a normal distribution of ability. That's one of the reasons why I think that's very interesting, from a research point of view it's quite interesting because is the Academy going to be...and in the end to some extent its success will depend on whether it's able to attract back the aspirational parents who opted out to send their children to other schools.

[Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services, Walton LEA]

Chestnut Grove also admitted high numbers of students who had been excluded from other schools. At the beginning of my research in Chestnut Grove, Tom emphasised to me that he strongly believed in inclusion, and would welcome students that other schools would not take. This was seen as a problem by some other staff, as detailed later in this chapter.

Another key theme which repeatedly emerged throughout my research was that families living in poverty were frequently perceived as having particular emotional needs which impacted upon their behaviour, and consequently upon the level of special support that the school needed to provide to them. Speaking of other schools he had worked at, an Inclusion Officer, Shane said:

It's tougher, right, because students in the catchment are much more needy. We get a higher proportion of special needs students than I have ever experienced or encountered in any other school.

[Inclusion Officer, Chestnut Grove School]

Similarly, a Head of Year said: *'I think it's challenging, I think it's just the case that we've got more challenging students than some other schools.'*

Many of the professionals associated with the school who participated in my research also suggested that families in the Westgate area were somehow different to other families – at the most extreme it was suggested that they 'lacked moral standards'. For example, Tom told me after he was fired that that the Academy would be beneficial to students because it was:

bringing in, like with the Church of England, a clear sense of moral standards and guidelines I think will be helpful in the long term. One of the difficulties for some of the more troubled communities, there are no moral

standards. So you would get into arguments with...you would be surprised at the arguments you'd have with children over issues where they had no guidelines, you know.
[Former Headteacher of Chestnut Grove School]

He further expanded on this:

one of the strengths I think of faith schools is that they have very clear moral guidelines. And I think sometimes for communities which are struggling to establish that...I think it'll turn out to be quite an advantage. I mean I have to say not all Christian organisations are brilliant at being Christian towards everyone in the organisation, but nonetheless neither are non-Christian organisations.
[Former Headteacher of Chestnut Grove School]

His opinion was supported to a degree by his successor, Edward, who stated simply: *'A lot of kids come from very chaotic home lives'*. I found that Edward's perception was borne out through my time in the school – for example, during just one hour shadowing a Learning Mentor, Mary, she spoke to three students who all appeared have difficult home backgrounds:

- one student said that she was currently living with a friend; she said her mum gave this friend £10 a week living expenses. The student said that her dad was currently in *'a mental place'*, which she did not expand upon, but which I perceived to be a reference to a mental health facility
- one student sat in hallway in non-uniform. When Mary asked why she had no uniform, the student said that she was *'in care'*, and *'had a note'*. Mary said she already knew that – the student looked anxious and asked if other school staff knew. Mary said that they didn't
- one student told Mary that she was afraid to attend school as her dad had recently returned to the area, and she was afraid that he would try to find her.

These students did not appear to be in a minority. During the time I spent in school, I came across countless students who were living in non-standard family units for un-specified reasons, and who appeared to be not making high academic achievement.

The nature and impact of the surrounding area was also raised by several of the school staff and other professionals who participated in my research. A Head of House was extremely pragmatic when he noted that, while he felt that it was important to stress the positive aspects of the school, the reality was more complex:

I mean you say, 'look, it's challenging.' Because it'd be ridiculous not to say this, because everyone knows that there are some very, very difficult students and there are some very difficult families. But I think students if they came to school on their own and you just had to deal with them, you'd find it much easier, but because of the nature of the surrounding area, because of the nature of the people who live in the catchment, they bring lots of baggage with them. They bring their parents and their issues. You so often have to deal with things such as children have fallen out but they haven't fallen out at school, their parents have fallen out, so they're not talking. You know, so that's the sort of thing that perhaps at what you might consider a more middle class school is less likely to happen.
[Head of House, Chestnut Academy]

Relations between school and parents were not something that I personally witnessed during my research. As previously noted, I had relatively little contact with the students' parents. Yet this perspective was supported by another Head of House, who stated a little more starkly:

The kids that attend our school, on the whole a lot of them come from what I'd call poor areas and dysfunctional families and poor families. On the whole they're fine but they do tend to challenge authority to some extent. But that's just the background.
[Head of House, Chestnut Academy]

In practice, this did seem to ring true to an extent. For example, I noticed a number of students smoking around the school on a daily basis during the course of my research, and this was commented on by several teachers. The priority of some students and their families could be indicated by one student I shadowed; Jools. Jools, aged 13, told me that her father gave her money for cigarettes, and I saw her smoking on the school premises – however, I noticed that she did not have enough money to pay for the additional sum she needed to top-up her free school meal (her choice was chicken burger and chips) and had to borrow the money, 5p, from another student.

To give some context to the family background of Jools, she lived with her father and three siblings; her mother was absent for unexplained reasons. Jools told me that her father constantly complained about not having enough money, and a teacher later told me confidentially that he was a convicted criminal, and that Jools' brother was in the process of being tried for manslaughter. While this was just the family background of one student, I feel that it gives a useful insight of the circumstances potentially experienced by some of the students attending Chestnut Grove.

Several school staff and professionals associated with the school noted that, for many pupils, the school provided the only stability in their lives. A church leader associated with the school, who ran the Breakfast Club, stated that he thought that the fact that the majority of the students attending the Breakfast Club were boys was because most of the staff were male, and the students were unconsciously striving for male role models. While I saw no evidence to support this, it was certainly the case that male students vastly outnumbered the female students attending the breakfast club, by a ratio that I estimated to be in the region of 5:1.

While many adult research participants explicitly made reference to how students from certain family backgrounds were disadvantaged at school, Tom was the only adult participant to assign blame or consider the reason for the inequalities. Tom noted that the educational system was inherently unjust saying: '*I think the problem is the outputs are judged on a system that tends to favour children from better-set circumstances.*' However, he was keen to express his admiration for the coping abilities of families experiencing poverty:

I think many families and children are admirable, and have done a brilliant job, really, I don't think I could have...I don't think I could have coped with some of the issues they've coped with anywhere near as well.
[Headteacher, Chestnut Grove School]

ii) EAL families face special difficulties, which negatively impact on students' experiences of education

Chestnut Grove contained a relatively large number of students who spoke English as an additional language (EAL); 6%. From meeting several of these students and speaking to the school's sole EAL Teacher, it became clear these students faced particular difficulties in accessing education, as they commonly experienced specific challenges associated with speaking English as an additional language in addition to the issues faced by other students living in poverty.

I did not have the opportunity to interview any EAL students – they did not form part of the pool of students I selected to interview from the questionnaires they completed, and none were identified to me by teachers as living in poverty. Retrospectively, I realised that no EAL students had been asked to complete the questionnaires; it was randomly issued to one class of students in each year group whereas I later realised that the EAL students were all taught in one class, who had not been asked to complete the questionnaire. Arguably, these children were

effectively being placed outside most teachers' scope of experience. I did, however, meet the EAL Teacher, Mavis, on several occasions and she detailed the barriers to education faced by her students.

While I would have previously assumed that an EAL Teacher's key role would be to teach English to students, Mavis described her role as *'teaching them to cope'* and noted how just travelling to school was a barrier for many students – she gave the example of a Somali family with eight children, all of whom were attending Chestnut Grove or college. She noted how the students' father frequently told her that he did not receive enough money (in state benefits).

The cost of the students' journey to school was exacerbated by the fact that Walton City Council initially housed the family in two flats next door to each other, close to the school. They later moved them to a larger house at the other side of the city but the family did not want to disrupt their children's education, particularly as one daughter had started to study for her GCSEs. This meant that the three students attending Chestnut Grove had to each get four buses every day, at a total of £4.80 per day for all journeys for all three students; a huge sum for a family living on benefits. The family asked Mavis if she could help them, and she managed to obtain Zero Fare passes from the transport office. However, the third child's application for a pass was turned down, and the family did not know why, which meant that they had to pay £8 a week for her transport to and from school.

Mavis described how she was often asked to assist families with situations which were not directly linked to the students obtaining an education. She described a situation with a Liberian refugee family where a Year 10 student and her niece, who was in Year Eight, wanted to attend a school musical. They called Mavis on her mobile, who issued her number to all her students – *'sometimes, you know, they need to communicate with somebody who's going to understand'* - and asked if they could attend. Mavis described the situation:

I thought 'great, I really want them to take part', you know, join in the school. This is another problem, that they don't do that because it costs money to get here at extra times or if they come to the Summer Fair or to the Christmas Fair you know, they haven't got any money, so that's a problem. So I said 'OK'. She said 'the only trouble is my sister' .. because they live with her older sister, 'my sister says she can't come 'cause she's not feeling well and we can't come because it's dark and it'll be late when it finishes and we can't get back home safely' 'cause it's two girls'. So I

said 'alright' I know where they live of course because I've been round there several times, I said 'I'll pick you up and I'll take you back, OK'. And so that was all arranged and I was rush rush rush. And then 10 minutes later I got another phone call to say 'Oh miss we can't come because we haven't got any money.' I said 'Oh surely, I mean it's £2 each, haven't you got anything anywhere?' And apparently Muna's sister was saying she didn't have the money or she really didn't, I don't know. But so that whole idea was cancelled so they suffered in that respect because...for the lack of £4. I don't know if it was because it was a Friday night and, you know, she was going to get her benefit on Monday, and...I don't know.
[EAL Teacher, Chestnut Academy]

Mavis noted that she felt a dilemma at the situation, thinking should she pay for them or not? She decided that she should not as she was the girls' teacher, not their social worker. Although not explicitly stated, I perceived that Mavis was also concerned that paying for social activities for one family could potentially be the start of a slippery slope for her.

Mavis told me how she faced frequent requests for assistance from families who perhaps felt that they had no one else they could ask for help: *'I feel that half my job is teaching, the other half is like pastoral work and support and trying to get them Zero Fare bus passes or, you know.'* Requests for assistance were so pressing that Mavis proactively produced key information for the families of new students:

I've even done a little piece of paper recently about phone numbers for the child benefit office, tax credit office and benefits office, because you know some families come here and they just don't know what to do...they really haven't got much money, but they don't know the system and if there's nobody there to help them, you know, then I feel I ought to, if there's no support from their own community.
[EAL Teacher, Chestnut Academy]

Mavis noted that many of her students' families faced particular problems related to housing – some families of her students were housed by the Council in a hostel, with one family even having spent Christmas in a single room in a hostel. Other families had been repeatedly moved by the Council, often to areas which were a significant distance from Chestnut Grove. In the case of one student's family who had been moved several times, Mavis commented that the student was frequently ill, which made Mavis wonder how her situation had impacted on her health: *'It's not a smooth, nice existence.'*

Another particular difficulty faced by EAL families were issues related to lack of fluency in English. Mavis noted that some of her students originated from countries where English was the first language or widely spoken, so they did not experience difficulties. However, many other students did not speak English when they arrived at school, or were trying to learn while one or more of their parents – typically their mother - chose not to learn English.

Mavis noted how one of her students spoke no English at all, so she had to communicate through his brother, who had been in the UK for longer. This observation also showed, albeit indirectly, additional difficult situations potentially faced by many EAL students relatively new to the UK; broken families as the immigration process can be spread over a number of years while individual family members gradually emigrate when they can afford to, or when they are granted permission.

Mavis told me that she felt that her EAL students faced a double whammy of disadvantage – both the challenges of speaking English as an additional language, with the additional issues related to living in poverty and attending a disadvantaged school.

in a way I feel sometimes like a clucking hen, you know, protective mother sometimes, fighting their corner for them when something goes wrong or there's a fight or something
[EAL Teacher, Chestnut Academy]

On top of the external problems faced by EAL students, an issue internal to the school was frequent episodes of racism - Mavis noted: '*Out there it's the hungry jungle*'.

While it may appear that on the surface that EAL students had an extremely negative experience of education within the Academy, Mavis stated that, in contrast to other students from the local area, she felt that EAL students benefited from the value that their families placed upon education:

the kids here in this room, when they come here they have come from cultures where education is valued, where teachers are respected and luckily I benefit from that and I've lived in, well I've lived in a couple of Muslim countries so you know I can appreciate where they're coming

from, a lot of them, so you know that kind of understanding between the two is beneficial for all of us.
[EAL Teacher, Chestnut Academy]

As a final point on this section, I think that it is important to note that the research I undertook in this area was particularly evidenced through my own narrative records. As noted above, I did not speak to any EAL students or their parents, nor did I spend any time observing EAL classes. The entire scope of my research in this area was based on conversations with one individual. However, I felt that the data was rich beyond words. Mavis related to me, through the eyes of decade's worth of experience, her perspective on the experience of her EAL students. No, I could not compare her views with any other research, to check perhaps for 'external validity'. But I felt that the episodes she relayed to me were strong in internal validity and consequently as valuable as any number of statistical indicators in this area. It was, after all, human experience I was researching.

iii) A number of students do not engage in culturally rich activities outside of school, which places them at a disadvantage.

It became clear during my time in school that many students came from rather more insular environments than might be expected of students from more affluent families. This became a recurrent theme of the interviews I conducted with students during the first year of my research - I asked each student what they liked to do in their spare time as one of my introductory questions, and the majority of students made reference to extremely home or area-focused activities such as playing on their computers, playing out on their bikes with their friends, or listening to music. Very few students made reference to activities outside of their homes or the surrounding streets, for example activities such as visiting museums or taking dance lessons.

While I did not undertake research in more affluent schools, I felt from my own experiences that the insular activities undertaken by the students I interviewed were those which could be typically associated with families living in poverty, and were as much due to a lack of experience of, or aspirations towards, external activities, as to a lack of money.

From speaking to teachers at the school I found that many of them reinforced my perception that the students and their families tended to lead very home-focused

lives. For example, a Head of House pondered: *'You think, 'But what sort of life is it where you're happy to have a big widescreen TV rather than be able to go out and appreciate living.' You know.'* She found that this lack of experience of the wider world negatively impacted upon the students' ambitions:

One of the other problems is persuading those that want to go to University that it doesn't have to be Walton, because so many...it's lack of security, 'well I want to go to University' 'well that's good', 'but I'm not leaving home.' You know, this idea that there's a big wide world out there. It really doesn't occur to the majority of them.
[Head of House, Chestnut Academy]

Another Head of Year, a languages teacher, also referred to this when she discussed school exchanges, and noted that when the school had tried to introduce these, it had been unsuccessful because students had been reluctant to invite host students back to Walton as they were embarrassed about their homes.

The lack of experience of a range of activities further impacted upon some students via their sports lessons. One Head of Year who was also a PE Teacher told how some students were unable to take part in the wider activities the school made available to older pupils:

In Year 11, they go out, they go bowling, they go skating, and some of the kids will come to me and say 'I can't go bowling or skating this week, I can't afford it, my mum's not got the money'. And we say 'You shouldn't have chosen it, you know what your finances are like. You shouldn't have chosen it in the first place.' And they want to be able to do it, but they have to come and say 'I haven't got the money this week.' It affects some of them. They're very embarrassed about it.
[Head of Year, Chestnut Grove School]

She did not, however, make any reference to assisting those students who told her that they could not afford the activities, and were embarrassed about this.

b) The cost of education

As previously noted, the financial cost of education was the initial driver for my research; for this reason, my research in this area was much more structured than research into other areas, which evolved more naturally.

Findings in this section:

- i) Many families have difficulty paying the cost of education, and feel that the costs are unfair
- ii) Students living in poverty experience physical and emotional hardship due to the cost of attending school.
- iii) A lack of consistency amongst school staff in providing financial assistance to students means that some students receive the assistance that they need while other do not.

i) Many families have difficulty paying the cost of education, and feel that the costs are unfair

Many of my findings in this area were obtained via questionnaires which I issued very early in my research. I initially issued questionnaires to 220 students and their parents and found that upon analysis that the answers given by students and parents were markedly different - in almost all areas of expense identified, parents identified a higher number of items that they had to pay for than students did. A higher proportion of parents than students also said that the school should do more to help children in need, at 80% of parents compared to 57% of students.

This may have been due to the fact that almost all the students the questionnaire was issued to completed it, because it was distributed and collected during a registration period. In contrast, their parents needed to return the questionnaires to me themselves (although I provided them with an SAE) so it is likely that those parents who felt most strongly about the cost of education completed and returned the questionnaire.

I specifically asked parents – but not students – whether they felt that the school pressured them to pay for things; 40% of parents said that they felt that it did. This was clearly a topic close to the heart of many parents; they provided a number of additional comments to expand upon their feelings about the cost of education. One parent noted that she felt that the school pressured her to make contributions to school trips:

The letters sent home are warped in a way that leaves you feeling without contributions trips would be cancelled and other children will miss out (guilt trip).

[Parent of student attending Chestnut Grove School]

A number of other parents noted that they were unhappy that their children were unable to participate in school trips due to the cost:

Children become upset and depressed when missing out on school trips, and when their friends are wearing the latest gear I can't even afford school sweatshirt because £21 which I don't have to spare.
[Parent of student attending Chestnut Grove School]

Sarah was supposed to go on a school trip to Germany and we couldn't afford it. Leaving both me and Sarah really upset and angry.
[Parent of student attending Chestnut Grove School]

£200 plus for a school trip for a week for one child is unrealistic to ask for when I can't afford a family holiday at a caravan for half that amount.
[Parent of student attending Chestnut Grove School]

The emotional impact on parents – as well as students - was clearly huge. One parent noted that:

I have had 3 children in Chestnut Grove and another one going in September all have been bullied because of the lack of named gear or school sweatshirts and missing out on trips, I feel like a failure as a parent.
[Parent of student attending Chestnut Grove School]

A number of parents also highlighted other impacts that the cost of education had on their families - one parent described how the high cost of a school bus pass meant that she had to move her daughter from her first choice of school to Chestnut Grove, as it was within the boundaries which entitled her to free travel.

When I considered the questionnaires completed by students, they appeared to be extremely aware of how the cost of education impacted on their parents. Overall, 19% of students said that they felt that their parents had difficulty paying for fashionable clothes for school, school trips and holidays. A number of additional comments were made, including one by a student who detailed the costs faced by her mother in a breathless torrent:

Yes, because she has the electric bill to pay, tax, rent and phone bill and provide for my family also she doesn't because she can cope very well, and also the trip would sum up to about £110 because new clothes and spending money
[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

A number of students expanded on how they felt the cost impacted on their parents:

I think it is difficult as there is three of us and if one gets money then the rest will

[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

Yes but they do it because they don't want their child to feel singled out

[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

Other students were more blunt and to the point:

Because some time we haven't got no money to buy uniform

[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

I asked the students whether they thought that their parents experienced any difficulties paying the costs of attending school. The areas which most students identified were:

- holidays with the school (29%)
- school meals (23%)
- materials for lessons (23%)
- days out with the school (21%)
- clothes for school (19%).

I also asked students whether they thought that their parents should pay these costs – a relatively high number said yes, with the highest proportions of students saying yes to the following areas:

- stationery (67%)
- day trips with the school (62%)
- materials for lessons (61%).

When asked if their parents had ever been upset by the cost of education 18% of students said yes while the majority, 82%, said no. Asked to provide more details, those who had said yes focused particularly on the cost of the school uniform, and money the students needed for daily expenses at school:

When she saw how expensive school jumpers are and you can get designer jumpers for the same price

[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

I think my Dad gets upset because he does not work and he has to pay £3 a day

[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

The dinner a lot of money

[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

We haven't got money to buy uniform every year

[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

This theme continued in the interviews I conducted with a number of students. Many students noted the difficulties faced by their parents in meeting the cost of attending school – one student stated that her father was a single parent who had to borrow money to pay for his children's clothes, shoes and stationery. Similarly, detailing the need for her mum to buy her three school jumpers, to ensure that one was always clean, Michelle observed that: *'It's just money going in, in, in.'*

Natalie noted that she felt that her parents were embarrassed by their inability to pay for school items, while Bethany told me that when she needed to ask for money to provide items for lessons: *'It makes her feel a bit upset 'cause she can't provide that money for me.'* Another student told how her mum was annoyed that she would have to buy a new uniform when the school changed to an Academy: *'My mum were a bit mardy that she'd paid all money for this one and in a few months time we're going to have to pay for another one because we're changing uniform aren't we?'* Another student said that when she asked her father for money for lessons: *'he'll groan and say he'll give you the money another time.'*

A number of students appeared to be acutely aware of the specific details of their parents financial situation – Jennifer told how on one occasion her mother was unable to give her the money for materials for lessons as *'she'd lost £6 and she had none left so she couldn't give us any money.'* Detailing how she often exceeded her free school meal allowance of £1.44, Jennifer noted that *'It's alright when it's not coming up to owt like Christmas and that but when it comes up to Christmas she can't really get things.'* Peter, who lived with his Aunt, noted how his cousin's requests impacted upon her: *'My cousin always wants pounds and stuff, sweets, and he's only in Year Four.'* Similarly, Rachel noted that her parents: *'probably struggle sometimes'.*

I specifically asked students about their feelings regarding whether the costs associated with attending school were fair or not. A significant proportion felt that it was unfair, and many students provided additional comments on the questionnaire they completed. One student, Michelle, felt that the cost of the PE kit was unfair:

I used to be 11-12 so it was £7. But now I'm 12-13 it's £12. If I lose that and I've got to buy a new one, which makes it £24, just for two tops. It should be cheaper than that, especially people that are like unfortunate that can't pay for a lot of things that other students can.
[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

Michelle also felt that the £3 cost of the school planner was unnecessary as she wrote in a little notebook when she didn't have her planner '*and my homework still gets done in every lesson*'. Similarly, speaking after the introduction of the Academy, a student in the Breakfast Club noted his outrage that the standard blazer had increased in price from £30 to £60 while the quality had deteriorated – he felt that it was not as thick as the one available in BHS for £40.

When asked if they had any comments to make regarding schemes the school ran to help students who required extra help to pay for things, a number of suggestions were made including the following:

We should get uniform free because other unfortunate people will have problems paying for it and it is too dear, also they want us to wear it
[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

I think they should let people pay it off bit by bit so it could be more helpful
[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

The school should provide everything we need for education and students who can't pay for things feel singled out when they can't pay
[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

Loan them a bit of money
[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

Do a fundraiser or something to help
[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

The school is too expensive and it is not even that good, they are like goldiggers because once they know your mum works, they want money. They just want more money for this school. Because they are all broke and have no money!

[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

However, a number of students felt that the costs of attending school were justified.

Comments provided in support of these costs included:

(re. assisting students) No school shouldn't pay because school has more other things to pay for example pens, books, pencils/colours

[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

What school is doing by teaching children is enough for them that is their business to pay for it

[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

Well, everything can't come for free so I think they [students who have difficulty paying for items] should pay like a little bit but not as much

[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

A number of parents and students felt that, despite the expense, the school uniform was desirable; Michelle said that she liked wearing a school uniform 'because we all look equal.' Another student Sarah, was strongly in favour of the school uniform as she felt that it afforded her physical protection:

when you're wearing a school uniform you're respected. If for example someone wanted to kidnap you, if you're in your school uniform he'll know that 'I can't do this 'cause this one is a student. If I kind of kidnap her or something, I might get to go to prison'...But when you're wearing normal clothes, you may be qualified as anyone, you know if you've grown up so quickly, he might think, that one's a woman, I can do whatever I want with her', when you're wearing your school uniform, he's going to know, 'no, I can't touch this one.'

[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

Similarly, not all parents felt the cost of education was too high – several comments were made such as:

schools do not have an endless supply of money – children need to be cared for – parental responsibility 1st

[Parent of student attending Chestnut Grove School]

More identification of genuine need is required
[Parent of student attending Chestnut Grove School]

I had anticipated that most of the respondents would suggest the school could and should do more to help students living in poverty; however, this was not the case. Just one parent suggested that changes could be made to assist families in need:

There should be a clothing grant for the very poor families with no wages or only one parent that have quite a few children. This may stop some of the bullying that goes on
[Parent of student attending Chestnut Grove School]

A number of teachers at Chestnut Grove acknowledged that many families faced difficulties meeting the cost of education. A Head of House noted that some parents had stated that they were experiencing difficulties buying their child/ren a school uniform:

some of them will say 'I don't get paid till next week, can I get them some black trousers then? But they've never said: 'I'm not buying them, I can't afford them.' And I'll say 'Look, they've got very expensive trainers on, if you can afford to buy them, you can afford to buy...' I have never seen any instances where parents have point-blank said 'I'm not getting them.'
[Head of House, Chestnut Academy]

Similarly, another Head of Year noted that families were unable to afford school uniforms:

We will get notes saying 'so-and-so's torn their shirt and I can't buy another one until next month' and it's not a lie, you know. 'Or until next week when I get my...' whatever sort of allowance they might be getting. So yes, and you see things like very dirty clothes, and quite often it's with children who are very proud of the fact that they've got their uniform, but they're still wearing the same shirt again and again.
[Head of Year, Chestnut Grove School]

Another Head of House told of 'deprivation' in the school:

an example is a child last year he was wearing black shoes and he said 'Oh my mum wears them at the weekend when she goes to work.' So he wears them through the week at school and she wears them at the weekend when she goes to do her job. You just wouldn't believe it at all.
[Head of House, Chestnut Academy]

The initial Principal of Chestnut Academy, Hector, was at pains to assure me that he was acutely aware of parents' financial circumstances and stressed that a blazer and tie would be issued free of charge to students when the Academy opened:

We certainly didn't want parents to have undue expense at the end of the summer. We wanted all of the pupils to start on a level, to take it in its broadest definition, we wanted them to look and be uniform. We didn't want any child feeling they couldn't start because they would be the outsider because they didn't have the uniform and we felt one of the best ways of doing that ensuring everyone had a smoother start would therefore be to provide them with some of the equipment and the uniform that could otherwise be a real prohibiter to that.
[Principal, Chestnut Academy]

However, an Inclusion Officer later noted that this generosity was short-lived – no items of uniform were distributed to students the following year, and if students need to borrow a blazer or tie, they had to hand in personal items *'like a pawn shop'*.

ii) Students living in poverty experience physical and emotional hardship due to the cost of attending school

A recurrent theme of my research was that a number of students experienced genuine physical hardship due to the many and varied costs of attending school. Much of the evidence collected was anecdotal. I surmised that this was either because I included a random pool of participants in the research, some of whom may not have experienced hardship themselves but knew students who had, or because some of the students experiencing hardship did not wish to discuss them with me personally due to distrust or embarrassment.

Several students mentioned that lack of adequate clothing was an issue for them or their friends. One student, Natalie, told me how one of her friends did not have a school jumper for a month because her mother could not afford to pay for one – I had experienced the chill of the school first-hand, and the poor heating had been mentioned to me by two Headteachers, so I felt that this would have been likely to have resulted in discomfort for the student. Similarly, Chloe said that sometimes when her school clothes became too small for her, her mother would have to wait until pay day before she could buy new items.

School meals also were an issue for a number of students. In the initial questionnaire issued to students, I asked if they were embarrassed about claiming free school meals. Just 5% said yes – however, as 26% of the respondents stated that were entitled to claim free school meals, with the school having advised me that 45% of all students were eligible, I felt that they were not in a significant minority, so perhaps this lessened the potential for embarrassment. However in the interviews, several students, including Alan and Lucy, told me that they wished they had money to pay for school dinners, rather than receiving free school meals, as they would be able to buy more food.

Other students told how some students would try to buy their free school meals tickets, offering £1 for tickets worth £1.44. Cindy told of the hardship experienced by her friend, a recent immigrant from the Congo: *'Her dad's not working and she's really having difficulty to pay for her meal....it's getting really bad.'* Similarly, in the questionnaire completed by the students at the start of the research, one student noted that: *'Some girls don't eat because they haven't got the money especially girls they'll say I'm on a diet.'* Another student, Carl, noted that his friends sometimes asked him for money for crisps and drinks – he felt that his friends were *'upset'* because they could not afford these items themselves.

Several students told me that they chose not to pay for the cost of items, in order to pay for other things – for example, Jennifer noted that she chose to walk to school rather than getting a bus because *'it wastes your bus fare.'* Others did not have a choice - another student, Rachel, told how she sometimes had to walk to school because she did not have the money for the bus fare. Similarly, Jools told me that as she was not entitled to a free bus pass, sometimes she had to walk to school when her father was unable to give her the bus fare. She said it made her feel *'bad'* because *'we're freezing when we get to school.'*

Bullying was another recurrent theme of my research. A number of students, including Tim, told how they, or other students living in poverty attending the school, were bullied or made fun of because they were unable to pay for their school uniform or school meals. Natalie told how students on free school meals were made fun of: *'some people go, are you free school meals, I'll go yeah, they'll start laughing at people.'* She told how some students swore at her when she could not afford to pay for items, and that even her friends laughed at her when she was unable to pay for pens and sweets at school.

Many other students spoke of students living in poverty being called names or bullied. Michelle noted that some children called students who claimed free school meals *'tramps'* and that students who did not wear fashionable brands were made fun of:

'Cause there's like some people who are unfortunate and like they might wear something that's not like Nike, or something like that, and people say 'Look at her the tramp she's got this she's got that I've got this and I've got that.' I don't think they should do that.
[Student at Chestnut Grove Academy]

She told me how one friend was bullied because she did not wear branded clothes or footwear:

My friend, she doesn't wear a lot of names and stuff, but I like her. And she always looks nice at school, always got a nice school uniform on and that. And everyone torments her, everyone. I don't know one person in my year that's in most of my classes that don't torment her, and never says nowt nasty to her.
[Student at Chestnut Grove Academy]

When I interviewed the student Michelle had referred to, and raised the issue of bullying in general, she confirmed this:

I've been getting bullied since I were in Year Five...everyone's been on about my trainers, so I'm thinking about getting some new ones at the end of this month...going 'Oh, Lucy, have you got any trainers? No, still got scruffy old trainers.'
[Student at Chestnut Grove Academy]

Similarly, Michelle told how some students made snap judgements about other students based on their appearance: *'If they've got like a hole in their trousers or something they just label them straight away, tramp, for no reason.'* Another student, Rachel, told me how some students living in poverty were treated by other students: *'They get tormented all time. There's one boy who wears trousers that are too small for him and everyone says that he's got ankles on.'* When I later interviewed this student, and specifically asked him if he had ever been bullied, he said no, which made me wonder whether he was reluctant to disclose this to me, or whether he was unaware that other students discussed and mocked his clothes.

Several other students told me how they were bullied. Jennifer spoke of feeling 'daft' when she no longer fitted her PE T-shirt and did not have one until her mother was able to buy her a new one. Jennifer also spoke about being 'called a tramp' by other students because of what she wore. Bethany told how she could not always afford to give teachers the money required for contributions to lessons: *'I feel a bit embarrassed 'cause everybody picks on my saying 'oh you can't afford it.'* Similarly, Jools told me how she felt 'shameful' when she was not able to pay her contribution towards their cooking lessons.

Some students intimated that they felt that their education was affected because of the cost of school, due to the actions of teachers. A number of students noted that teachers often sent home students who do not wear school uniforms; David told of students who experienced what could be considered discrimination against those living in poverty: *'sometimes they can't afford to get their jumpers and stuff, and teachers send students home if they haven't got their school uniform on.'* However, he noted how some students anticipate this and attempt to deflect it by bringing notes into school. David told me that his shoes were ripped on the soles so he had had to wear trainers to school all week: *'I bring a letter in. Like today I'm wearing trainers cause my shoes...I'm getting some new ones.'*

Similarly, speaking of cookery lessons, Michelle told me that:

if you don't bring your own decorations you either get rhubarb or something like that...if you don't bring your own stuff, they grade you, you know how good your buns look, and if you don't bring your own stuff you get a right low grade when really you could get a high one.
[Student at Chestnut Grove Academy]

A number of teachers confirmed that many students suffered hardship at school due to the poverty of their families. A Head of House told me:

I've seen many instances where students have come in hungry. To the fact that my colleague and I keep a stock of biscuits in the room so students who need a biscuit pop in here and get a biscuit, or a piece of fruit. I've given parts of my lunch away, I know David has as well. Another colleague who's in charge of the Food Technology Department always has food available or a drink, not everybody would use it. But I do know of students who have arrived in school hungry, these students are already very challenging and when they come into school hungry it just makes life doubly hard.
[Head of House, Chestnut Academy]

He also told of one family in such extreme poverty that the children had to share shoes: *'So one day one student would wear the shoes and the other would stay at home and then they'd swap.'*

iii) A lack of consistency amongst school staff in providing financial assistance to students means that some students receive the assistance that they need while others do not

Assistance with the cost of education was a key element of my research, and I addressed it in the questionnaire initially issued to students and their parents. I found a number of inconsistencies in what assistance students, parents and even school staff perceived to be available to families living in poverty. For example, relatively low numbers of students and their parents knew about the schemes the school ran to help children who needed assistance with paying for the cost of school – 34% of students who completed the questionnaire said that they knew about schemes, compared to 10% of parents.

A number of students did provide details of cases where they or someone else at school had received such assistance. For example, Bethany told me that a teacher had allowed her to bring in the money for woodwork the following week when she could not pay. Another student, Lucy, told how her sister was able to go on a school trip to Scotland at a greatly reduced cost: *'It were £240 but she only had to pay £40.'* Cindy received assistance on request when she went on a trip to Scotland the year before the interview but was unsure of what would happen next year:

we had to pay £50 or something like that. And my mum couldn't afford it, so I talked to Miss Walker, she's one of the teachers, and she said that school can pay for me. But I'm not so sure about this year, if they're paying for me or not. I don't know.

[Student at Chestnut Grove School]

However, assistance was not always given on request - one student, Peter, noted that he had hoped to receive assistance with a school trip: *'My aunty asked for...we were supposed to be getting it cheaper, but they didn't end up giving it to us.'*

The staff who participated in my research had a wide range of perspectives on whether assistance was available, and their attitude towards students who required assistance. In an interview with Tom at the beginning of my research, he stated

that the school did not exclude children from educational trips or visits if they could not afford the cost. He noted that a number of families could afford all, or part, of the cost, and that the school budget was limited. In terms of how the budget was spent, he stated:

We also are quite, well hopefully anyway we're quite, sensitive to individual needs, there was a family in distress, and they had to move house or be re-housed, we can loan them or give them school uniforms, so we can do that, we've got a certain amount of flexibility, we've got to be really careful about that, it's done on an individual basis.

[Headteacher, Chestnut Grove School]

However, the Heads of Year had different perspectives on whether assistance was available – one advised that students needed to provide ingredients for her cookery lessons, but noted that: *'if it's not there I provide it, it's never a barrier to their learning.'* She also noted that in cases of *'hardship'*, the school tried to make provision. Another Head of Year said that there were no lessons for which financial contributions were required, while another noted that students needed to buy a school uniform and be equipped for lessons, although pens were pencils were provided. She noted that in her area, students were not prevented from taking part in lessons if they did not have the appropriate equipment or materials.

In contrast, another Head of House said that *'formally'* the school was not able to make any financial provision to students, apart from assistance with the cost of uniforms. However:

There have been occasions where students have been unable to access school because they've just not had the right equipment or uniform and school has gone out and bought pairs of trousers and shoes and shirts for our students who we have identified, just to support the families we have identified who needed massive amounts of support. In terms of some of those lessons, I know that a colleague of mine who's Head of the Food Technology Department is so very generous that she doesn't chase students who have failed to pay that very small contribution in order that they would not miss out on their lesson. I think I do have colleagues who definitely make sure that every student is able to access.

[Head of House, Chestnut Academy]

One Head of Year did state that she recognised that more consistency in providing financial assistance to pupils was required, due to issues with students who were not wearing uniform being sent home. She did however note that the school was

aware which students genuinely could not afford uniform, and in those cases, they bought uniforms for the students.

The new Academy took what could be considered a more direct and transparent approach to providing assistance to families living in poverty – Edward outlined his approach to me:

every pupil in years 7,8,9, 10, 11, they've all had uniforms which is blazer, shirt, tie, trousers, and PE kit. We'll continue to give it to new year 7s, the whole uniform costs about £60, which we don't think is too unaffordable, particularly supermarket chains, Asda, Tesco, you can get very good value for money, you can get t-shirts for £3 so that's fine, what we will do is at the end of Year 11 when pupils leave, if they want to, we'll set up a shop for uniform. We've had a commercial washer and dryer installed to make sure they're all clean, we won't feel it's going to be an issue and the blazers seem to be wearing well, we're happy with that, and the trousers and shirts aren't very expensive, you can get them quite reasonably. We have spares already and we have uniform that's been washed and cleaned.

[Principal, Chestnut Academy]

A teacher commented on the purchase of the washer and dryer: *'So you know we're becoming a launderette service as well. Some kids need it.'*

c) The School Environment

The findings in this area are split by subject area as follows:

- i) The school environment negatively affects students' learning experiences
- ii) A number of students challenge management structures and misbehave, which impacts on the learning experiences of other pupils
- iii) A serious incident which was widely reported in the local and national media had huge and long-standing implications for the school and its students.

i) The school environment negatively affects students' learning experiences

The school environment was a key aspect of my research – I felt that it was all-pervasive, from the poor physical condition of the school, to the way in which students interacted with each other, and the environment created by teachers, both within and outside of classrooms.

Chestnut Grove was in a truly appalling physical condition prior to its rebuild as an Academy. I noted in my research diary in the first year of my research: *'The school*

appears to be falling down! Not in a good condition at all.' The school's corridors and classrooms were scuffed with peeling paint, windows were cracked and the school simply looked aged. The poor physical condition of the school appeared to encourage students to vandalise it further – there was frequently graffiti throughout the school, and at one Governor's meeting I attended, it was reported that £25,000 had had to be spent on replacement glazing due to vandalism in the last term alone.

Christopher, the Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services for Walton LEA was frank with me regarding why there was little funding available for capital schools projects in Walton:

Well I think...what somebody in my position has to do is, particularly in a place like Walton, where there isn't much money, one of the league tables we are very, very down on is funding for our schools and there's very little capital available...this is to do with historic decisions that were made years ago. The refinancing of the student games, £26 million goes out of Walton's accounts so you've started with that cliff...so we've always had to have an eye to where there were funding opportunities and how we could use them to tackle some of these deep-seated problems. This does lead to the Academy programme obviously.

[Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services, Walton LEA]

It seemed clear from this conversation that a key driver for the change to Chestnut Academy was because Walton had chosen to host a worldwide sporting event some 20 years earlier, which had left the City's finances permanently in the black.

Tom also told me that he felt that the Academy offered the opportunity to improve the school, including a new building, which would otherwise have taken years to implement. A different perspective was taken by Christopher, who later told me that that the choice was taken out of Tom's hands, and was implemented as behaviour in the school was simply out of control. Walton City Council agreed the change in the hope that this would transform the school into a school that people from outside the area would want to choose. What was not addressed, however, was what would happen to those children unable to attend the school because of oversubscription, and what choices would be available to them.

One Head of Year spoke passionately and at length of his hopes that the rebuilding of the school as an Academy would allow the students to feel a sense of pride in their school:

They don't feel a sense of pride here. They don't see the benefits of not adding their name to a wall that's already covered in graffiti. They tell other students, you know, 'you don't tell other kids' that's the general story, 'you don't catch anybody else, you always catch me.' That doesn't make it any better, it still brings the school down, it brings the appearance of the school down. I talk a lot with the students in my house about a sense of pride, about a sense of belonging, they have a family they belong to. Their homes...would they go and graffiti at home? You know, why come and bring it to an establishment that really is some attempt to give them a better life if they choose to access it, if they choose to take part in what the school has to offer. And just the amount of damage, the amount of vandalism that's caused around the school, I just want the students to think really that that building is something that they could aspire to. I really want them to own that building and take pride.

[Head of Year, Chestnut Grove School]

A number of staff also made reference to how the physical environment of the school impacted on teaching; it was often cold and could be wet. I noticed that during cold months, staff often resorted to using portable electric heaters, although these did not appear to be available to the students. This was commented upon by the second Head of Chestnut Academy, Edward, who stated frankly:

Well the buildings are terrible, absolutely shocking. Heating doesn't work, everybody sits in their coats in winter, so things like that which are just impossible, and there's nothing you can do about it so you've just got to accept that.

[Principal, Chestnut Academy]

This was echoed by Walton's Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services who stated starkly: '*these are third world conditions*'. Similarly, the initial Principal at Chestnut Academy, Hector, made reference to how the school building impacted upon the education that the school was able to provide:

The buildings really are not suitable for education in the twenty-first century long-term. We will make the best of what we've got for the next eighteen months. But the sheer fact that that a new build is occurring must be an indicator that the current buildings are unable to provide the standard of education that we want.

[Principal, Chestnut Academy]

Several of the teachers I spoke to also made reference to the physical condition of the school; an indicator, perhaps, that they felt that it was a key factor in the pupils' behaviour. One Head of House told me how he felt that it was important that the school had pursued, and achieved, Academy status, as it meant that the school would be rebuilt:

I mean you look around our building and it's just...it's falling to pieces. And alright, we would have a new building eventually, but we're talking about five years down the line. And teaching children in a pleasant environment helps them to learn, it's been proven, so there's no point saying 'It's a tacky old building but it doesn't affect their behaviour.' Of course it affects their behaviour. If you see somewhere nice, you'll keep it nice. If you see somewhere that's looking a bit the worse for wear, you don't feel any inclination to look after it. It will certainly help our student's sense of wellbeing. I think it's certainly going to improve morale generally.
[Head of House, Chestnut Academy]

The physical environment of the school caused practical problems for students and teachers, which I considered to have been likely to have impacted on the quality of teaching and support provided. For example, an EAL teacher noted that when she started work, she had to share a classroom with a class for registration, and had to vacate the classroom twice a day. Similarly, I spent time with a Learning Mentor, who was trying to provide one-to-one support to a student – she wanted to find an empty classroom as she told the student she knew she would not want to go through the exam paper in front of other students. They had to walk the corridors for around 15 minutes then when the Learning Mentor did find an empty classroom she and the student were interrupted several times by students bursting in – then a teacher brought in a group of students and they proceeded to talk loudly and play mobile ringtones.

It is interesting to note that when I asked the students I interviewed whether Chestnut Grove could be improved in any way, the majority mentioned the school environment. Michelle focused on furniture, stating: *'There's not a decent table I've seen since I've been here.'* Similarly, Chloe noted *'Well I think like better classrooms and computers that haven't got damaged or anything so I think that would be a bit better.'* The school building clearly preoccupied them, as well as school staff.

Although a number of criticisms were directed at the original school building, even once the Academy had been built, design-related weaknesses occurred with the new building, albeit on a lesser scale. Students in the Breakfast Club told me about new fire alarms which had a lid labelled *'lift here'* – a number of students often apparently took this at face value without waiting for a fire, which disrupted a number of lessons. This design flaw is reminiscent of the Tuscan-style Middlesborough Academy, as detailed in Chapter 2: Literature Review, which was criticised for poor design which proved to be a case of style over substance.

Another noticeably negative aspect of the school environment was the mention of frequent intruders. As there were no barriers around the perimeter of the school, former students and other youths frequently entered the school grounds, sometimes bringing dogs with them. On one occasion when I was shadowing Shane, he noticed a classroom was exceptionally noisy. When he went in to investigate, he found that there was no teacher. The students informed him that the teacher had walked out and gone home as three intruders had entered the classroom and refused to leave. In the interim period, the students had decided to turn all the furniture in the classroom upside down. This did not seem to surprise Shane; I got the impression that such episodes were fairly commonplace for teachers on yard duty.

To tackle the intruder issue, and keep students where they should be, the school adopted some security measures which reminded me of a prison – they erected huge steel barriers across the bottom of all stairwells at lunchtime which were locked to prevent students and intruders from gaining access to classrooms. Similarly, some teachers locked their classroom doors at the start of each class to prevent students from leaving, which was generally endemic.

The students I spoke to were largely unhappy with these measures – when I asked one student, Joe, if he thought that the school could be improved in any way he said: *'Get teachers not to lock doors so it's easier for us to get out if we need to calm down. People wind me up and teachers won't sort it out sometimes.'* However, despite this widespread commitment to reducing the number of intruders entering, and students leaving, the school, I was never asked for proof of my identity although I regularly asked teachers if I could remove students as young as 11 from classes to interview them.

The behaviour of both students and teachers also made for a negative learning environment for students. I noted in my research diary one day: *'When I got here today all hell broke loose when a fight started and a boy had to be pulled in to the office. He was kicking and screaming.'* Later that same day I noted: *'There are forever students milling about in corridors when they should be in class. They're noisy, uncontrollable and rude.'* These were daily events in the school. Some students were so hostile that I actually felt afraid when I was walking around the school on my own.

One event I witnessed thoroughly shook me up. I was shadowing Shane on yard duty one afternoon when a group of around 50 students came running round a corner chasing and screaming at a small female student who was crying hysterically. Shane had to run alongside the students to break the mob up, and he escorted the student to an empty classroom to find out what happened. She told us that she had become embroiled in an argument with some girls and they started chasing her; other students then joined in. While perhaps an extreme example of the type of behaviour that the school found difficult to manage, it does indicate the type of event which students and teachers experienced on a regular basis.

ii) A number of students challenge management structures and misbehave, which impacts on the learning experiences of other pupils

A key feature of the time I spent in school was disruptions to lessons caused by pupils behaving in a way which teachers found difficult to manage. A large number of students chatted loudly amongst themselves during lessons, answered their teachers back, arrived late for lessons, or left early without permission. It appeared to me that many students had no respect for their teachers – and vice versa.

The language used by both students and teachers was extremely interesting - in one lesson I observed, a student declared: *'I'm bending the rules, I'm going to go.'* The teacher said: *'If you go, you know what the consequences are.'* It was almost like watching a carefully choreographed dance, where each party knew both their and their partner's role and played it perfectly. The student mocked the teacher's French accent then left the class, only to return later. In the same class a student cheeked the teacher: *'Yes Miss, no Miss, three bags full miss.'* I noted in my research diary during the lesson: *'It's actually depressing watching how disruptive the students are.'*

In another lesson, with a supply teacher, only half of the students turned up. Other students interrupted the lesson by tapping on the windows. The teacher said that it was her third week teaching in the school, and she thought that it was *'the school from hell'*. She told me that she thought that it was a terrible school and the students were very badly behaved, and that after every day she spent in the school she told herself that she would not return.

I noticed that teachers handled disruptive students in distinctly different ways – some ignored them and spoke over them, some engaged in banter with them,

while others screamed at them – in all cases the students undoubtedly interrupted the lessons, and thus the learning experiences of their classmates. This was acknowledged by a Head of Year who stated that: *'there are many many challenging students in terms of behaviour who make it largely impossible for students within the class to learn.'* Students were philosophical when considering their own behaviour at school - one student I interviewed, James, said in response to my question regarding what his teachers thought about him: *'A bit of both. Sometimes I can be a mad, mad person, sometimes I can't. Sometimes I can be behaved.'*

Not all disruption appeared to be malicious – it appeared to me that misbehaviour was actually a norm for a number of students; a benchmark they had set themselves, which was accepted by their teachers. In one English class which contained a number of low-achieving Year Nines with low self-esteem, a number of students disrupted the lesson – in most cases, good naturedly – bantered with the teachers and each other, impacting upon the lesson.

Tom told me after he was fired that Ofsted had advised that the school was simply not doing well enough, despite the efforts of its staff:

The conclusion they'd come to, and it was a team effort of 15 inspectors, all of my age or a lot older, very experienced, was that they couldn't do any better in the circumstances. But what we were doing still wasn't quite good enough. So if you've got a lot of good people, you need to say 'how can we change the conditions in which the school works?'
[Former Headteacher of Chestnut Grove School]

I perceived that the key implication from this discussion was that the backgrounds and behaviour of the students, coupled with the poor buildings, meant that the students were only ever going to do so well, and that was judged as not good enough. Chestnut Grove was seen to have failed its students.

The fact that a number of pupils exhibited behaviour that the school found difficult to manage was flagged as a key reason for the change the status of the school to an Academy. Christopher stated that: *'the school had lost its grip on behaviour'*. Issues with student behaviour had previously been acknowledged by Chestnut Grove. The Governing Body Minutes for one meeting I attended included the following note in the Head's Brief Report to Governors: *'Range of sanctions to deal with those who constantly challenge the system'*.

Similarly, Tom, the former Headteacher of Chestnut Grove, spoke to me after what he starkly called his 'sacking' of a minority of difficult students:

the so-called 'job culture' is actually a very small number of children, but they make themselves very heard. There used to be more of them that were out of the loop, but the ones that are out of the loop are less, but they stand out more.

[Former Headteacher of Chestnut Grove School]

I feel that it is important to note that the transfer to an Academy did not magically transform the behaviour of pupils - an Ofsted report from June 2008 – almost two years after the school changed to an Academy - stated that '*some students' misbehaviour was deliberate with instances of unacceptable language. Some students expressed frustration with the malicious or silly behaviour that disrupts learning*' (Ofsted, 2008).

Perhaps, then, this was an issue that was outside the scope of the school – and therefore could not be attributed to failings of Chestnut Grove.

iii) A serious incident which was widely reported in the local and national media had huge and long-standing implications for the school and its students

Mid-way through the period of my primary research in the school, an incident occurred which brought Chestnut Grove into the national consciousness. While I have chosen not to detail the incident, or cite references, due to my commitment to maintain the school's confidentiality, I feel that it is important to note details as the incident was widely reported in both the local and national media and there were calls locally for Tom's resignation.

The incident occurred in the middle of the time I spent in school, and although I did not witness the incident itself, it clearly deeply affected students and teachers as it became a recurrent theme during my conversations with them, and professionals associated with the school. This was a clear case of the power of narratives – although I did not witness the incident, it was relayed to me by so many research participants – including many who did not witness it either – that I felt that I gained a much clearer view of the incident, and its impact on the school, than if I had personally witnessed the incident but had not discussed it with anybody afterwards.

A Head of Year spoke of the long-term impact of the incident:

For a few weeks everyone, the students, the staff, the parents, were walking on eggshells. Everything from just one happening...it was a very serious happening, just from one incident that happened in school, the school then seemed to be in the newspapers for lots and lots of things and people were looking for a way just to talk about the school, badmouth the school, bring the school down. It took an awful lot of strong-willed students, awful lot of strong-willed staff just to try and carry on. And after a number of weeks it did die down. We weren't going to get rid of the situation, we probably will never get rid of the situation, that happening will always be here, the students will always know about it.

[Head of Year, Chestnut Grove School]

The school's staff were in no doubt as to the impact that the incident had on the public perception of Chestnut Grove – a Head of Year noted that: *'Probably for people on the outside looking in thinking 'Oh no, that's very dangerous.'* Certainly, the newspaper reports about the incident were predominantly extremely negative and blamed the school, and Tom, in particular, rather than considering the wider issues which could have contributed to the incident. However, staff also stressed that they felt that the public perception was incorrect, and that students were largely aware of this; a Head of Year noted that:

they were very much aware that there was more to this story than was being presented to the press obviously. We couldn't say anything because there was a court case, and yet the students were very much aware that as far as Lacey was concerned, she was not the completely innocent party, whereas she was presented as a little angel. So actually I think a fair bit of resentment towards that family built up rather than sympathy for them.

[Head of Year, Chestnut Grove School]

Some staff speculated that the school's students were negatively affected by the public and press outcry – one Head of Year noted that:

The main issue at the moment is obviously the fact that the school has got itself a bad name, without wanting to, and wrongly so, and some of the kids are trying to play up to that as well. Like two kids came up to me today and said 'Do you know Miss, we're the worst school in Yorkshire.' I said 'Where did you get that from?' They said: 'It was on TV last night!' So it's a struggle when you've got people fighting you.

[Head of Year, Chestnut Grove School]

Tom also spoke at length on the impact on the school's students:

If there's anything the children are like, apart from all the bravado, is that they don't have very good self-esteem. And that's why when we have like the Lacey Smith incident, and all the bad publicity around the school, I've said to people since, they said 'how did the children react,' I said 'the really keen children, the supportive children, were very protective of the school, and the ones who were a bit disaffected, it just proves what they always thought, not that the school was rubbish but that they were rubbish.' The kids aren't daft, they know in their heart of hearts, I don't mean to be arrogant, they don't think I'm rubbish, they don't think most of the teachers are rubbish, the school is rubbish. When you talk to the kids, it's mainly the kids they criticise, one or two members of staff but mainly the kids. The kids are difficult, who they criticise. It's very difficult really.
[Former Headteacher of Chestnut Grove School]

The incident arguably also had a significant impact on Tom himself, who was shortly afterwards effectively fired when he was the only member of staff not retained when the school became an Academy. He explained how he was blamed when I spoke to him the year after he left the school:

Nothing could have...I could never have predicted how that would spiral out of control, totally out of control. What I couldn't have predicted was what I felt was quite a vindictive and unpleasant approach by the local paper, on me personally. And then of course...it's very difficult...when I didn't get the job, what was difficult was staff couldn't and parents couldn't understand why the person who had been the strongest supporter of this change was being booted out. And it was very, very difficult.
[Former Headteacher of Chestnut Grove School]

Several interviewees felt that one of the students involved in the incident had been unfairly presented as the victim, when this was – in their view - not 'the truth'. Christopher noted that, in reference to the situation within school at the time:

that was a very good illustration of how bad the school had got because...I don't know if you know...Lacey Smith's a bully, not the tiny little 12 year old Turkish girl. In one really dramatic...I did an enquiry afterwards, there was one incident where Lacey Smith...this was the day before [the incident], she was in a yard and Lacey Smith in front of 50 or 60 screaming kids belted the living daylight out of her.
[Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services, Walton LEA]

I had also heard this version of events from several school staff; however it received little mention in press coverage of the incident which seemed to prefer the 'Lacey the victim' slant.

The incident was to have a long-standing impact on the school – although behaviour was consistently bad for the entire period that I spent in school, Shane noted that behaviour in school had been much worse since the incident. Students had also started to vandalise the school to a much worse degree than before, and it was rapidly deteriorating.

d) The education provided to students

Findings in this section:

- i) The dynamics between students and teachers negatively impacted on lessons
- ii) The school's new incarnation as an Academy meant that superficial changes were made which do not represent the best use of time or resources
- iii) The Academy's aim of increasing educational attainment meant that it excluded both teachers and students who it did not feel would attain highly enough.

i) The dynamics between students and teachers negatively impacted on lessons

I noticed throughout my time in school that the relationship between students and school staff was very different to that I had experienced in other schools (as a student, and later a voluntary classroom assistant) to the extent that teaching was regularly affected. Some teachers spent a significant amount of their lessons shouting at students, who often reacted noisily, which appeared to be frustrating to the students who were not misbehaving. Edward, the new Head of Chestnut Academy, made reference to this:

Where there are issues of poor behaviour then you need to tackle it creatively, that can be a problem where, again speaking in general terms, my experience is people become far too adversarial, so a kid will do something wrong and they'll just have to shout and scream, the kid shouts back, and it escalates all the time. Whilst that has its place the reality is when that is occurring everywhere, that is not the most appropriate way of dealing with a situation. So you have to teach both staff and pupils how to act appropriately in a volatile situation.

[Principal, Chestnut Academy]

The volatility he referred to may have been because a number of students felt that their teachers were unfair, or did not respect them, and behaved accordingly. One student, Jools, summarised her attitude to teacher eloquently:

most of the teachers in my school don't like me. In Year Seven I used to be a sensible girl. 'Cause my dad always said, if you respect them, they'll respect you. And in Year Eight I did the same. But they just treated me the same and didn't respect me, and I was still respecting them. So then I changed it, if they respect me, I'll respect them. And they don't respect me, so I don't respect them.

[Student at Chestnut Grove School]

She also noted that she felt that there were inconsistencies in whether teachers allowed students to go to the toilet.

Another student, Michelle, noted that: *'some of the teachers sometimes, they can be nice but if they're having a bad day, they take it out on some of the students.'*

Sarah also noted that she felt that teachers treated students unfairly:

I really don't like this punishment, when people talk during the lesson, instead of the teacher punishing those who are talking, he punishes everyone, you're staying in detention. I don't think it's fair, I think that he should take those who were talking, say 'you stay there' when the quiet ones are going, instead of keeping everyone, and my mum told me, if there is a way I could talk to the teachers or anyone, cause I get home late, 'cause I've been kept in class for detention, this year it's not happening very much, but last year it was like you all kept in thirty minutes or ten minutes people are talking, and the teacher doesn't blame those that are talking. I don't think that's fair.

[Student at Chestnut Grove School]

It was also interesting to note how students evaluated their teachers – for example, Alan said: *'Miss Brown's alright, she's right nice, and she doesn't shout mostly.'*

I found that a number of teachers could themselves have been considered to contribute to the disruption of lessons. In an English class for low-achieving students, one student said that he had not been able to get something he needed from another student. A teacher shouted to the class: *'I think you should beat him up at break!'* Three girls came into the lesson late – when the teacher saw them, she told the class to clap loudly when they came in. One of the boys shouted: *'She looks like she's come from a pigsty!'* No comment was made by, or action taken by, the teachers. When a student asked a teacher how she could bear to wear a short skirt in cold weather, she replied: *'It's because I've got such beautiful legs! The other teachers petition me when they haven't seen my legs for a while.'*

The students also spent a considerable part of the lesson loudly discussing Shane's love of tomato sausages, with one student suggesting that he speared them on his horns to cool. When a student asked if they could have one of the teachers to teach them again next year, the teacher responded loudly: *'You'll have to have a whip round, see if you can afford me!'* Later, when a student answered a question correctly, she shouted: *'Thank you! Curtis gets it! Curtis gets the surreal world of Jones!'*

While this interaction with students may have been intentional on the part of the teachers, perhaps to improve the self-confidence of their students, it undoubtedly negatively impacted on the educational experience of students in the class – it seemed to me that painfully slow progress was made through the lesson due to frequent interruptions.

In terms of the teacher's approach to academic work, Mrs Jones stressed to the students: *'Doesn't matter about your spelling, I'm not interested in your spelling.'* This approach and language contrasted hugely with the approach taken once the school transferred to an Academy. I sat in on a study day at Walton University for students who had been identified as potentially achieving at least 5 A-C grades. Two LEA consultants led the day, and launched the study session with what one of them described as *'what I think are very, very inspirational quotes'*:

Ghandi: 'You must make the change you wish to see in the world' (The consultant added: 'You must be the change, you as individuals. You want to see success in your GCSEs, you must have a responsibility')

Michaelangelo: 'The danger for most of us is not that our own aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it.' ('Think positively, positive thoughts are very, very powerful. If you think 'I can do this' then the chances are that you will')

I found that some teachers took a 'third way' between 'dumbing down' or shouting. One teacher took a casual approach to teaching and did not shout at students but instead took a slightly offbeat approach to teaching which seemed to engage his students. Introducing the topic of his lesson he said: *'Today we're doing Romeo and Juliet. Which is fun because it's got both naked people and sex jokes.'* There were a number of interesting exchanges between teacher and pupils, e.g.:

Teacher: 'Anybody know the most recent word to come into the language and stick?'

Student: 'Twat!'

Teacher: 'Bling.'

Student: 'Want to see bling you should get Danielle Smedley. Bleedin' hell! Shall I go and get her Sir so you can torment her?'

At one point during some banter the teacher told a student: 'You're a bit of a pussy, you're a bit of a puss.' A number of students then made homophobic comments, unchecked by the teacher. I found it interesting how the teacher introduced me to students: 'This is Mrs Dee. She's observing. She's from Sheffield City Zoo.' This mirrored Shane's earlier comment to me regarding the class: 'They're almost tame today.' The teacher was also very open in discussing a student with me in front of the student: 'This is a typical example of a lower-set pupil. He's capable but he needs to learn to start to work.'

ii) The school's new incarnation as an Academy meant that superficial changes were made which did not represent the best use of time or resources

Chestnut Grove successfully applied to become an Academy three years into my research, with the aim of providing students with a new school building, improving behaviour, and increasing exam results. Academies were relatively new at the time, and the school staff and associated professionals I spoke to were very positive about the benefits which they envisaged that the Academy would bring to Chestnut Grove.

Tom told me retrospectively, after he had been fired, the reasons why he pursued the Academy, noting that he felt that the school simply could not do any better in the existing circumstances, no matter how good its staff:

the school had improved, but so had all the other schools around it. So it was like we weren't catching up fast enough, and so at that stage I realised we needed to do something quite drastic, and something quite drastic could be to reduce the pupil number and get rid of all the difficult children. In a way that would have been the worse thing to do because if we're going to be part of changing that area, we've got to try to find a way of meeting the needs of everybody in that area, and that's why we pursued the Academy.

[Former Headteacher of Chestnut Grove School]

He further asserted that he was sure that it was the right choice to make for the area:

I had real difficulty with some of the people who opposed it who didn't live in the community because many of them had had successful educational experiences themselves in the more privileged areas where there were well-established, successful schools, so why would they want to deny this to this area. I mean I felt, no matter how much bashing we got over it, I felt very confident that it was a fair thing to do, and when people said to me, 'well all schools in this difficult area should have this opportunity' I would say 'yes, but that's not a reason for this one not having it', you know that was just an excuse.

[Former Headteacher of Chestnut Grove School]

Christopher, Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services for Walton LEA, similarly told me how he had faith in the Academy, having ensured that it met Walton's needs: *'we weren't interested in an Academy programme which would succeed by filtering out the objectionable and the unwashed. So we've done that.'*

I spent a significant amount of time in school during the period immediately before and after it transferred to an Academy, and saw first-hand a number of changes that were quickly made by Hector, the new Principal, and Edward, the Executive Director of Walton Academies (who later replaced Hector as Principal). These changes did not seem to me to fit the profile of the school, and I felt that they were probably part of a programme of changes introduced in all, or at least most, new Academies as part of a general improvement plan.

A number of teachers confided to me that they felt that the changes were ineffective, and gave the impression that they had not been well thought out and were, retrospectively, a waste of time as many were quietly dropped within weeks or months of being introduced.

Attendance figures

One topic which recurred again and again was the Academy's trumpeting of its increased student attendance figures. I was told by a teacher that the school achieved this partly by giving whole classes a credit when they went on a field trip, etc even when many students were actually absent from school that day. Another member of staff spoke of the school *'fiddling'* attendance figures by *'massaging'* them. Also, another teacher advised me that on a tour of the new 6th form the day before our discussion, the parents were told that no students were out of lessons – this was in fact untrue as the school's computer records showed that 110 students

were out of lessons on that day. It is interesting to compare this claim with an Ofsted inspection report the following year:

Attendance has risen significantly this year, up by six percentage points to just over 90%, although this remains below the national average. Rigorous systems have also led to improvements in punctuality, though a few students persist in not being on time and well prepared to learn. Exclusions have been cut substantially from high levels: 65 days of learning have been lost this year. (Ofsted, 2008).

My research experience made me wonder how accurate the figures provided to Ofsted actually were.

In a similar vein, a number of teachers seemed to think that the school focused a little too much on its public image rather than on actually achieving change - another teacher commented cynically regarding the school's aim to increase GCSE achievement: *'I mean, blinking figures, you can massage them and do anything you like with them.'* Similarly, official figures for registrations in the new 6th form was, a few months prior to its launch, 45 (of a capacity of 550). I was told by one member of staff that this relatively low number included one student who never attended classes and another who was permanently excluded two years ago. Of the remaining 43 students, only three of them were not from Chestnut Academy, and one of those was a teacher's son.

Remove

Along a similar vein was Chestnut Academy's new 'remove' facility – this was a large room where students who had behaved in a way that teachers found difficult to manage were sent to spend a set amount of time to work silently. The feeling amongst Learning Mentors seemed to be that the facility was being vastly overused; a member of staff showed me that the school's computer system showed that on the previous day (in October 2007), 34 students had been removed from their lessons and sent to the remove facility. Some students I spoke to asserted that they enjoyed being sent to remove as they could mess about when they were there.

Behaviour Consultants

I noticed two Behaviour Consultants on several occasions during the final months of my time in school. From speaking to a Learning Mentor, and Edward, the new Principal, I gained two very opposing perspectives. The Learning Mentor felt that

they were a waste of money, and spent their time in school writing reports to justify why they should spend more time in school. In comparison, Edward presented them in rather a more positive light, stating that '*they've been great.*' Although I did not see them in classes, I saw them interacting with students during mealtimes and they appeared to be extremely aggressive. Although I was not close enough to hear the exchanges I witnessed, I felt that the physical stance of the Behaviour Consultants towards the students was, frankly, extremely intimidating. This was at odds with Edward's previous assertion to me that he felt that staff could be too adversarial, and that shouting at students could escalate matters.

Houses

A major change made by the school was the introduction of four 'Houses' spanning the five year groups – each House contained students from each year. From speaking to teachers and students, the general perception seemed to be that having Houses did not make any difference, except to the colour tie worn by students. In fact, some teachers told me that they found that Houses particularly confused matters with regard to awarding merits to pupils – as one teacher explained:

they made a bit of a mess of it at the beginning because in the planners there was only place for House points not merit marks which we had last year so everybody's been carrying on with the merit marks because we've all got the stamps but they've been in separate books. And we knew it from before. Now house points, no-one's given them because we weren't really sure what they were supposed to be, so I'm not surprised that it's just disappearing...five different colours, we don't have to worry about that.

[Teacher, Chestnut Academy]

However she was rather more positive about the systems' perceived benefits:

It's going to be a lot better for discipline and management of discipline in years rather than going that way, we're going across so it's all the same age, one person knows the whole of Year 7 and another person is the head of Year 8, it's going to make a big difference kind of from admin point of view and those people getting to know those kids I hope that next year they'll go up with their years so they'll have five years of getting to know those particular students and then they'll start at the bottom again, that's how it happens in some schools and it does seem to work. But again, there's that stability again there.

[Teacher, Chestnut Academy]

One change a number of students told me about was the introduction of House-themed ties. I was told that Hector, the new Principal, was afraid that students would attempt to hang each other if proper tie-on ties were introduced, so clip-on ties were issued instead. This caused a craze among students of ripping the ties off instead, meaning that many students became tie-less and the School Receptionist was required to hand out replacement ties freely. Within a few months the school back-tracked and re-introduced ordinary ties.

Many students I spoke to at the Breakfast Club were scathing about the House system, noting that, apart from the ties, it had not made any significant differences to the school. School staff seemed to be cautious about overtly criticising the House system, however, a Head of House I spoke to noted that: *'I'm not sure that it's made any difference to the students themselves.'* In time the school decided that the House system had not made a significant difference so it was abandoned.

Reward systems

A teacher told me about a new incentive; merits were being issued during lessons for work, and at the end of the school year students who obtained at least 500 merits would gain a free place on a school trip. Students who attained 300 or more merits would get 60% of the cost of the trip paid for, 100 or more would earn 20%, and 50 would earn 10%. Students who attained less than 50 merits would still be able to go on the trip but would have to pay the full amount. However, I felt that it would be extremely difficult for students to obtain the magic 500 merits in practice. The teacher explained how it would work:

you can get five a day, plus there's registration obviously, so that's 25 a week, and you can gain them for example, you can get them for being in the school play, and so on. Plus you're allowed to give them for homework. So I suppose in theory you could get 10 a day if you got one for a lesson and one for homework.

[Teacher, Chestnut Academy]

Other teachers and students I asked about this system were dismissive, noting that most teachers did not bother handing out merits so there was no chance of students gaining enough to obtain a free trip.

iii) The Academy's aim of increasing educational attainment meant that it excluded both teachers and students who it did not feel would attain highly enough

It is well documented that a key reason for the change from Chestnut Grove to Chestnut Academy was to increase educational attainment. However, I came across both anecdotal evidence from staff members, and local media reports, that students who were not anticipated to achieve highly were excluded from school to raise the school's formal attainment.

In a related area, I was advised by a member of staff that a number of teachers were also quietly fired; while this does not on the surface relate directly to barriers to education, I feel that it is important to include this information as it formed a key theme during my time in the Academy. Also, there is evidence (e.g. see Dolton and Newson, 2003) that, ironically, a high turnover of staff can negatively impact upon students' educational attainment.

Exclusion of students

It quickly became obvious to me that students were being excluded on a relatively large scale once the school became an Academy. Shane made frequent reference to students '*disappearing*', and I began to pick up on oblique references from other teachers and students. I was confidentially informed that there was a difference of c.88 students between start and end roll for 2006/7 school year – the teacher who divulged this information was unable to account for this discrepancy but speculated that it was mainly due to exclusions. Similarly, there was a difference of 25 students between the number of students who enrolled at the start of Year Nine and those still in school for GCSEs at Year 11 – it was suggested that this discrepancy was also due to the exclusion of students who were not expected to attain highly in their GCSEs.

I asked another teacher about the number of students who had been excluded and she showed me a long list of more than 20 students, noting that this level of exclusions was new to the school:

It never happened before. I put this up the other day. I photocopied it from the bulletin. The ones who were on final warnings, right so all those people have been permanently excluded, given back to the LEA, who are then making other arrangements for them to teach them in special stage 3 exclusion inclusion units and key stage 4....And that's quite a list, isn't it?

[Teacher, Chestnut Academy]

The school's teachers fell into two distinct camps regarding the impact of the exclusions. Several of the teachers I spoke to felt that the students were being treated unfairly; excluded because the school wanted to increase its exam results. Others felt that the exclusions were beneficial to the remaining students:

they are not here and everyone, all the kids know they are not here. And that is going to have a beneficial effect on the rest of them. They're going to say 'OK, this Academy means business, these kids didn't mean business, they didn't want to learn, they stopped everyone else from learning, but now they've gone, somebody else's responsibility.' I have heard though that other schools are annoyed at us. I think well why, they're going to units, they're not going to other schools.

[Teacher, Chestnut Academy]

When I asked a teacher why she felt that the majority of students excluded were in Year 11, she said *'I suppose by Year 11 whether they are...if there's a chance they're going to get serious, because they've got their GCSEs in Year 11 so you know by the beginning of that.'*

She asserted that she felt that this was a positive move:

now the management here is in a position that they're going to say look, we're running this school, we are laying down the rules, not these kids, we want all the kids who stay here to learn, so these kids are preventing us from doing that so...years and years they've run the school and now they're not able to any more.

[Teacher, Chestnut Academy]

Another teacher, a Head of House, agreed that the change was beneficial:

We were always known city-wide...we were known as the school that would take...we were so inclusive that we would take students in be they just students that were excluded from other schools, a managed move, a managed move of a student from another school, and sometimes it just seemed to fuel the fire almost, we already had enough challenging students, we were just about coping with the students we had ourselves and then some student who came with an awful lot of baggage. Students in this school are very very street smart and they soon pick up on any change...I think it's a massively positive move. I think the students here...many, many, many students want to do really really well and I think they saw that as a drawback, their education was being interrupted by someone who they didn't even really know, and someone coming out of

the area, you know, and perhaps coming from a more affluent area in some circumstances.

[Head of House, Chestnut Academy]

The volume of student exclusions did not escape the attention of the LEA; the school was later reprimanded for illegally excluding students. In the Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services for Walton LEA's own words:

There was a row about them taking some pupils off the roll. Actually we went to the press about that. Partly because that's actually illegal, and I think they had poor advice. But we saw it as our role as a Local Authority to go to Chestnut and say that was illegal. Actually it's illegal for any school, whether it's an Academy or not. And after I tussled with them they took back kids who were still of statutory age for school. But we went to the press. Partly because we wanted to make it absolutely clear to people that we, the Local Authority, would not tolerate that, and it was a bit bumpy, but in a way it's an illustration of the fact that we expect to have agreements with these partners, but also that the Local Authority is reactive really in representing the interests of children.

[Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services, Walton LEA]

The school officially responded that it had removed 17 pupils from its roll when they did not turn up at the start of term, and stated that it did so as it had not wanted to over-claim funding for students that it genuinely believed had left school at the time.

The following year a further student was ruled to have been illegally excluded – the mother of the 13 year old boy was quoted in a local newspaper as saying: *'I know of other pupils at the Academy who have been unlawfully excluded and who are only attending school for an hour each day.'*

Staff

I was told on many occasions by a teacher that many staff were feeling extremely demotivated since the school transformed to an Academy. The 'old school' of teachers were unhappy with the way that they were been treated by the new management team since the transfer. A team of teachers were appointed to monitor the lessons of other teachers – one teacher apparently told another teacher that he was going to leave at Christmas because if he got another bad review, it would go on his employment record. A Business Manager was also employed – I saw one extremely brusque email he had sent to a teacher asking if he could meet them at *'1300 hours re. contractual matters'*.

I asked another teacher how she felt morale in the school was following the change to the Academy, and in particular with respect to what was at the time a very uncertain management structure. She replied at length and I have quoted her in full as she covered so many areas of interest:

It's really a...if you want to do a graph it's been like that [indicates up then down] perhaps going back even to before the summer, you know, we knew we were going to become an Academy, there were lots of meetings and lots of information about it, and then we learnt that the Head wasn't going to be the Principal, so that was a bit of a kind of a blow, especially as he worked so hard for it. I've heard he's doing alright. But then at the beginning of September, kids came in their uniforms, they were given blazers and ties and sports stuff and planners and off we go, and here are the rules, and I think it started on a high, school had been repainted, refurbished, it was little bit better than it was, because it was dreadful before...well it's not much better now. So the academic year started on a high with the Academy opening, and then the cracks started to show and behaviour...they really tried it on because of all the new rules that were being imposed and 'where's your blazer' and 'have you got your tie on' and 'you've got to have your planner' and so on. So, you know, lots of bucking of the system, and I think that after three or four weeks I could say that morale really took a nosedive. And certain measures were brought in, changes were made, and then we had half term, and then after half term it was kind of up and down, OK these changes, that's going to help, so morale up a bit, and then it didn't work so that kind of thing. It was kind of bouncing along the bottom. And then Hector [original new head] disappeared and shortly after him Rebecca [Deputy Head] disappeared... And Sheila's disappeared, Sheila Brown, she was Assistant Head last Year and she's Head of Inclusion this year. And they've just...nobody's said anything about them, they've just gone. So those two kind of...big ladies, in terms of status, and nobody's said anything about it, just says ill. So you know I think, what's going on, what's going on, and that's a bit worrying for everybody, and also we're not being told the full story, so Hector's not here, Rebecca's not here, Sheila's not here, and nothing's been...really truthfully told to the staff about the true situation. Have they been fired, are they really ill, are they coming back or are they going to be demoted, or are they going to be shifted to another school, what's going on, we just don't know so, of course there's a lot of speculation and gossiping and rumour-mongering and so on.
[Teacher, Chestnut Academy]

I spoke to another teacher regarding the uncertainty surrounding Hector's absence and he noted that Hector had been off work for three weeks with no explanation – he speculated that it was possibly due to a stress-related illness; all he knew was that a get well card had appeared in the staff room for staff to sign the previous day.

The feeling among staff was that the organisation who operated the Academy had taken on too much without having an infrastructure in place. I could not help later recalling this when I read an Ofsted report about the Academy: *'Morale among staff is positive; one student observed, 'Teachers seem so much happier – they seem to enjoy teaching us now.'*

When I asked Edward, the new Principal, about staff turnover, he did not appear to think that there was a problem:

Here at Chestnut I can't think of anyone who chose to leave before September. Let me think...so in that sense, to me that's a great sign. In any school you would expect at least 10% turnover, people seeking promotion, and for other reasons, so it's natural and it's quite a positive thing to have. But I honestly can't think of anyone who's left deliberately.
[Principal, Chestnut Academy]

This choice of language such as *'chose to leave'* gains greater significance when considered in light of a meeting held by a Scrutiny and Policy Development board in Walton, which reported:

Mr [Edward] Bates added that he had, along with the Heads of Faculty, attended each class daily in order to provide an informed judgement on each teacher. A traffic light system was designed to categorise each teacher with red being highlighted as poor teaching skills. As a result of this system, discussions were held with poorly performing teachers and consequently, approximately a quarter of staff (15 teachers) decided to leave the Academies to take on a less challenging position.

Christopher, Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services for Walton LEA was very supportive of the changes made and stated that he felt that morale had actually improved:

I think morale has gone up, there's been a big change in staff, a change that was needed before, I think we have in Edward Bates from the ULT a very strong, experienced leader
[Executive Director of Children and Young People's Services, Walton LEA]

5. Conclusion

As I hope this chapter has shown, my research findings were many and varied, but ultimately came back to two key themes: poverty and education, and government

priorities in education, which both fall under the scope of barriers to education. I feel that my findings very much reflect my experiences within school, and hope that I have presented them in a manner which gives readers an insight into what it was like to spend time within Chestnut Grove/Academy. Similarly, I hope that I have conveyed a taste of what it was like for students and members of staff within Chestnut before, during and after its transfer to an Academy.

Discussion of the findings presented in this chapter, with consideration of their significance and relation to existing literature in this area, follows in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

1. Introduction

As detailed from the outset of this thesis, while my research was initially focused on the financial costs of education, by following the path that opened up during the course of in-school fieldwork, a range of wider issues became important in my project. These paint a vivid picture of the barriers to education experienced by children living in poverty, going beyond my original interest in specifically the financial costs associated with attending school. In addition, although this was not foreseen at the start of the project, the data gathered also allowed for insights into how the changing of a school to an Academy, so that it was no longer directly funded by central government but became a state-maintained independent school outside of the local education authority's (LEA) funding control, impacted on the experience of children living in poverty. As there has long been unease about the existence of Academies (Lipsett, 2007) few researchers have enjoyed extended time within them making this thesis a relatively unique research account.

Barriers to education were clearly articulated by the students, staff and parents involved in the research and were readily identified through my research activities. I feel the data reveals affinity with the findings of Reay (2004, 2006 and 1997), Gewirtz (1995, 2000 and 2001), Ball (1997 and 2000) and Beckett (2007). Much of Ball's writing focuses on the marketisation of education, while Beckett focuses on the introduction of Academies, and Reay and Gewirtz both concentrate on the impact that social class has on education. All of these themes resonate with my research project. I found that my research data substantiates the claims of these previous researchers and adds fresh insights into the multiple barriers facing children within a school which transformed into an Academy. The central finding I have drawn is that, in the focal school, students living in poverty face a number of barriers to education and that giving the school Academy status did not eradicate the experience of these barriers.

In the previous chapter I have presented the findings leading to these conclusions in detail. I now extend my thoughts on these findings within the two topic areas

which have provided the overarching framework throughout the thesis: i) poverty and education, and ii) education policy in practice.

2. Poverty and education

As other researchers have shown there is evidence from my data to show that poverty brings barriers to education for students. The evidence gleaned from student, parent and staff comments, also suggests that a '*cycle of deprivation*' as described by Joseph (1972) still exists, in which experiences of education for children living in poverty can contribute to poverty of future generations. The importance of 'breaking the cycle of child poverty' cannot therefore be underestimated (see also Sharma, 2005).

My research encounters indicated very early on that many of the focal school's students were likely to be experiencing difficult home lives, which meant that their educational experiences were arguably negatively affected even before they set foot through a school gate. This was something that many of the school's staff were very aware of, and which they felt impacted upon their students experience of education in profound ways. There is a significant amount of research in the area of how the families and home circumstances of students living in poverty impacts upon their education, which echoes my findings.

Previous research amongst low-income families has shown that '*children growing up in poor families are likely to have adverse home environments or face other challenges*' (Dahl and Lochner, 2005, p.2). These challenges were evident in my study where school staff perceived that the families experiencing poverty they worked with were less likely to be able to give their children the support they needed to succeed academically, particularly practical support such as somewhere quiet to do their homework, and access to a computer which was mentioned in data presented in the previous chapter. Various comments made by the respondents suggested that the home environment of children involved in the study fell short of ideal requirements.

I gained the impression that many of the families who contributed to my research were struggling to keep themselves afloat financially. Some said they could not pay for basic items of school uniform and therefore I perceived that the provision of a desk and computer was not likely to be a key concern for them. Certainly, very few of the students I spoke to made references to doing homework when we discussed

their activities out of school, although it is of course possible that they considered homework to be a 'school', rather than 'home' activity, wherever they did it.

The importance of factors such as access to a study space is endorsed by a study undertaken by Twist, Schagen and Hodgson (2007) who noted that:

*access at home to a computer, a desk or table to study at, books of their own and a daily newspaper were all strongly associated with higher achievement in PIRLS' (p.50)
(PIRLS is Progress in International Reading Literacy Study).*

One thing that really stood out to me was the fact that Hector, the first Principal of Chestnut Academy, told me that he did not know whether deprivation affected his students, commenting that he had '*not been in to student households*'. I personally felt that it was concerning that the Principal of a school in one of the most deprived areas in the country (Walton City Council, 2007) did not claim any familiarity with students' homes, and therefore would say he did not know what circumstances they lived in. On the basis of my data I had formed the strong view that those concerned with effective management of the Academy needed to be familiar with the circumstances of their pupils' lives in order to be able to develop, implement and manage policy and practice that would respond to the real barriers children living in poverty were facing. It seems that without such first-hand insights there is a risk that school management teams cannot pursue school improvement in a way which meaningfully responds to the ways in which growing up in poverty affects children's experience of school.

I also felt that the Principal and members of the senior management team should pursue a closer relationship with families and their home backgrounds because the data showed that many of the school's students suffered from poverty of expectations. One Head of Year, for example, had made reference to students assuming that they would get a job straight after school as University was outside the scope of experience and expectations. Just one member of staff I interviewed explored this in terms of the school's role, noting that: '*one of our weaknesses is still our inability to persuade the poorest that they can aim for more*'. These observations added to my impression that there is a requirement for senior members of the Academy staff team to have greater familiarity with the children's home backgrounds.

Chestnut Grove was notorious in Walton for the low academic achievements of its students. Walton Futures (pseudonym), a local publication, noted that Chestnut Grove produced more children labelled NEET (school leavers not in education, employment or training) than any other school in the city except one, with 22% labelled NEET, compared to a city-wide average of 13%). Similarly, for Chestnut Grove, the percentage of students entering Further Education after Year 11 was just 41.7% in 2004 compared to a city-wide average of 66%. (Walton Futures, 2005). The same publication noted obstacles to young people's education including the kinds of barriers my data was revealing such as '*lack of parental/guardian support*' and '*being caught in the benefit trap*'. (Walton Futures, 2005, p.2). As MacInnes et al (2009) note: '*NEETS receive a lot of media attention, being seen as a 'lost generation', or some sort of indicator thereof. Being NEET may, in fact often will, have negative long-term implications for a young person, but the majority do have some form of family support.*' (p.68).

While I did not specifically explore the concept of poverty of expectation in my research, it cropped up as a theme several times, supporting previous research that indicates poverty of expectations presents a barrier in the education of children living in difficult circumstances. Attree (2006) for example, stated that poverty directly impacts upon the aspirations of children. My data reflected this, illuminating ways in which poverty of expectation can lead to self-exclusion where, for example, children said they knew their parents could not afford to pay for activities, so they simply do not ask. I found evidence that many families were unable to meet the costs of school-related activities which meant their children were effectively excluded. As detailed in the presentation of findings in the previous chapter, several teachers and Heads of Year suggested that students did not have access to the range of activities outside school that other students from less disadvantaged homes enjoyed. This was supported by interviews with students, the majority of whom told me that they spent their spare time playing with their friends, playing on the computer (for those who do have access to IT in the home) or watching TV. Just a handful made reference to other activities.

It was also shown in the data that staff felt local families living with poverty tended to lead rather insular, home-focused lives which they suggested might impact negatively on post-school destinations, leading pupils not to consider Higher Education options.

It was evident from my research that while some staff recognised the importance of sensitivity in relation to family poverty, others were not supportive. I was surprised, for example, by the attitude of a Head of Year who criticised children for not understanding the financial implications of participating in school activities - *'you shouldn't have chosen it, you know what your finances are like'*. Such comments suggest there is a need to address the issue of how much awareness teachers have of the problems of poverty experienced by many of their pupils and of the ways in which this impacts on their experience of school. By the same teacher's own admission, students were known to be embarrassed by their family's financial situation and it is clear that a teacher's insensitive response to this will compound a child's personal, social and educational difficulties. The teacher's comments were also at odds with the fact that the school's three consecutive Headteachers all emphasised that no student would be excluded from activities due to cost, suggesting a mismatch between school policy and practice which need to be addressed to avoid oppression of children from families experiencing poverty.

A number of previous studies found that children living in poverty have less access to out of school activities than their wealthier peers, including studies undertaken by Redmond (2008) and Davies et al (2007). This can impact upon children's learning experiences (Hirsch, 2007a, p.6) and should therefore arguably be of key concern to policymakers and practitioners in this area.

Another area where barriers to education could be seen in relation to the experience of children living with poverty could be seen in a lack of consistency amongst school staff about provision of financial assistance to students who needed it. As previously noted, I was told by the school's three successive Headteachers, as well as by a number of other school staff, that financial assistance was available to students who needed it. However, in practice, it became obvious that many of the school's teachers took an ad-hoc approach to the detail of funding matters. One teacher informed me that none of the school's lessons required contributions, in direct contrast to the responses given by all of the other teachers I interviewed. Similarly, one Head of Year asserted that, apart from assistance relating to uniforms, the school was unable to offer any assistance to pupils. There was an evident lack of clarity about policy amongst staff which could lead to the marginalisation of some pupils if their entitlements to support were not recognised by staff. A Head of Year did recognise that more consistency was required in providing assistance to families, particularly linking this to concerns

about students not wearing school uniform being sent home from school and indicating that a direct relationship between poverty and exclusion was self-evident for some staff. A lack of consistency in the approach taken by teachers towards dismantling financial barriers wherever possible could be seen as a reflection of inconsistencies in the wider social welfare system; in 2001, the Citizens' Advice Bureau found that 29% of local authorities did not offer families living in poverty any assistance with the cost of school uniforms (CAB, 2001) indicating that a lack of consistency around financial support is evidently systemic. Nevertheless, where financial support is available to pupils living with poverty it seems imperative that teachers should be equipped to give reliable information about this.

Perhaps due to the lack of consistency amongst teachers at Chestnut Grove, a relatively low number of students and parents were aware of schemes of help students in financial need; just 34% of students and 10% of parents who completed my questionnaire. This indicated that the school was not employing appropriate strategies to convey details of the assistance that they were able to provide. This was certainly the case with the school's Breakfast Club - relatively low numbers of students attended, only about 10 on the many days that I attended, and I did not see any of the students I was aware lived in families experiencing poverty attending.

When I asked the teacher who volunteered in the Breakfast Club about how it was publicised, he advised that it was word of mouth. A number of the students I spoke to were unaware of the Breakfast Club and thus it was clear that the method of advertisement was ineffective. This was an issue which could presumably have been sorted out fairly easily by a senior member of staff, and which could provide a much-needed resource for many families, and ensured that all students had equal access to this provision.

In the early stages of my research I began to consider ideas about 'absolute' and 'relative' poverty. It was clear to me from my research that many of Chestnut Grove's students lived in genuine, absolute poverty in the sense that their families could not always afford to meet their basic entitlements.

I was told of students who came to school hungry, having not eaten breakfast, and to whom members of staff gave food items. It has been reported that the stigma of claiming free school meals means that a number of pupils choose not to claim

them (CPAG, 2001, cited in Garner, 2001). I did not find evidence of students at Chestnut Grove being bullied because they were entitled to free school meals, and surmise that this may have been because a very high number of pupils were entitled to school meals at 45%. However, I was told of students who couldn't afford to eat at school: *'some girls don't eat because they haven't got the money.'* I wondered retrospectively if those students who missed lunch were amongst the students who sold their free school meal vouchers to other students, although I did not obtain any evidence to support this theory.

Other students told me they wished that they had money to buy school meals, instead of receiving free school meals, as they wanted to buy more food; a clear indication to me that a number of students were potentially going hungry at school because of a lack of money. This cost of school meals was one of the first considerations in my research because entitlement to free school meals was one of the indicators I used to identify the poorest schools in Walton. 45% of Chestnut Grove's students were entitled to a free school meal when I started my research. It is interesting that the free school meal is the only widespread benefit to have survived the post-war education welfare systems of the 1940s – this suggests to me that it is one benefit that remains vitally important to children living in poverty.

Food is a basic need and its link to children's experience of education is undisputed by researchers and policy-makers, including David Blunkett, who has said: *'If you are hungry and you have a poor diet it is difficult to concentrate and to learn effectively'* (O'Leary, 1997, p.8). The DfES' own statistics show that pupils entitled to receive free school meals are half as likely to gain five 'good' GCSEs or equivalent as other children (DfES, 2006b). This suggests that some students at Chestnut Grove arguably had the odds stacked against them regarding their educational attainment from the very beginning. Findings concerning children having insufficient food also point back to the importance of widening access to the Breakfast Club.

Spending available for clothing also posed difficulties for some Academy pupils. I heard of a mother and son who shared a pair of shoes: *'he wears them through the week at school and she wears them at the weekend when she goes to do her job.'* Such experiences echo Beresford's (1999) research, which cited a parent who told how she responded to a letter from her child's school by writing back to advise that it was not yet her son's turn to have shoes (p.108). Reference was made by a

number of students to their parents struggling to find the money required for items which I would consider to be basics such as school uniforms and bus fares.

As detailed in the previous chapter, students made reference to those who did not wear full school uniform as their parents could not afford to buy it, and some students themselves told me about the difficulties their own parents experienced buying their school uniform. As noted in previous chapters, the Chestnut Grove buildings were in a poor condition and could get extremely cold. I wondered whether some students were suffering actual physical hardship because of a lack of clothing, exacerbated by poor heating within the school. This reminded me of a Head of House's anecdote about students wearing their school jumpers at weekends; the clear suggestion here was that they did not have adequately warm, non-uniform items of clothing to wear at home. Lack of warm clothing is likely to constitute an impediment to engaging with learning. These observations were supported by a comment from a teacher who said some students were '*very poor*', and she had noticed that they did not have out of school clothes so always wore school uniform at weekends. In addition, some students spoke of bullying relating to the clothes they, or other students, wore to school.

The financial situation of EAL families raised further issues about the barriers poverty can create for children in school. In the focal school it was said that children from EAL families tended to be living in extreme poverty, and experienced significant hardships at home, such as those related to living in temporary accommodation. Indeed, research in this area has established that living in temporary education negatively affected the educational performance of children (DfES, 1990, cited in Kumar, 1993, p.147).

Relative poverty was seen through my data in the sense that a number of students made reference to the emotional hardships suffered by them, their friends or other students. This included reference to issues already examined such as bullying of students who did not wear fashionable clothes, or who claimed free school meals. I remember from my own experience that such encounters are harmful. Being bullied or teased by other students about the experience of living with poverty is extremely hurtful and embarrassing and makes any hardship endured seem many, many times worse.

As the data presented previously has also shown, my findings support previous research in this area, which suggests that many parents work hard to do their best for their children, despite financial and other difficulties. Redmond (2008) for example, reviewed a number of studies in this area and found that there was a supportive relationship in families which worked both ways as has previously been referenced.

Nevertheless, I encountered conflicting views about the nature of support families offer children from respondents within the focal school and where professionals expressed deficit views about families, this suggests scope for staff development activity.

3. Educational priorities and practice

The previous section considered some links between poverty and education, and the barriers that this presented to students from families living in poverty. This section considers how current educational priorities and practice create further barriers to education for students from families living in poverty.

There is a long and eventful history of education policy and practice, briefly summarised in Chapter 2: Literature Review, which I will not revisit here. For the purpose of discussing the significance of my research I feel that it is important to focus on *current* priorities in education policy and practice. In particular, I will consider how current government educational priorities and policies created barriers at Chestnut Grove (quite literally the 'old school'), how they contributed to its change to Chestnut Academy (the 'new school') and how they created new, but different barriers, to students attending Chestnut Academy. The key theme of my discussion in this area could therefore be considered to be the relationship between changing priorities and changing barriers.

A key example of change introduced by the government to 'improve' schools in deprived areas is the setting up of Academies, as has been covered in some detail in the Introduction and Literature Review chapters. For the purpose of this discussion, it is important to note that while Academies have been presented as benefiting deprived areas, in practice they have been criticised on a number of fronts and have faced accusations that they are actually exacerbating, rather than addressing, disadvantage for students in such areas (e.g. 'Academies 'failing'' 2004, and Chitty, quoted in Anti Academies Alliance, 2007). Much of my data bears

out the view that turning a school into an Academy does not alleviate many of the barriers to education which children living with poverty face.

The following sections consider in more detail my findings in relation to how New Labour's educational priorities affected 'the old school', Chestnut Grove, and how a number of new barriers were subsequently experienced by students after the solution of an Academy was introduced: 'the new school'; Chestnut Academy.

While the educational focus of the government at the time of writing is attainment, and expanding choice available to middle-class families (e.g. see Gewirtz, 2001), my findings indicate that little thought has been given to what hinders the educational attainment of children living in poverty.

Many schools in England are in the unacceptable, crumbling state that Chestnut Grove was before it was rebuilt as Chestnut Academy (Asthana, 2008). No resources were available to Chestnut Grove to undertake a large-scale renovation or rebuild, and this was a key factor in the school applying to transfer to an Academy. Schools such as Chestnut are expected to be in a position to market themselves effectively to families across the city and hope that families will choose them, perhaps raising exam attainment. My feeling is that they don't stand a chance – which motivated parent would choose a school like Chestnut Grove, crumbling, chaotic and consistently close to the bottoms of the GCSE league tables for Walton? Here we see an example of where changed education policy is unlikely to help dismantle barriers to education for pupils living with poverty.

Chestnut Grove very much felt like an old, worn out school. It consisted of a network of dull, unlovely concrete buildings, which appeared to have randomly sprung up over the years, and the interior bore the marks of many years of neglect and abuse. Its students routinely achieved GCSEs that were amongst the lowest in Walton, and as the reader knows, the school had been put into special measures – and later, taken out – a few years before I started my research.

I felt the appearance of the school reflected a sense of rot which had set within the school and a number of students felt that the school felt old too, with the dilapidated state of furniture and equipment having been mentioned by several students. Similarly, school staff pointed out that the poor material condition of the school impacted on the students physically as they had to wear coats inside in

winter due to inadequate heating. Staff also argued the conditions were psychologically detrimental saying children were more likely to vandalise a school that was already in poor condition. Most stakeholders including Headteachers stressed the poorly maintained condition of the school and adopted the view that this had a negative impact on the experience of pupils. The design of the school meant intruders could easily gain access and unemployed former pupils were often in the school yard and sometimes in the school building itself causing disruptions to teaching and learning. Previous research in this area has confirmed that the condition of school buildings does impact on learning and that poorly maintained schools affect the health and morale of students and teachers (Frazier, 1993).

I found it perturbing that several teachers attributed the increasing vandalism of the school to its existing poor state. This is another example of a finding which emerged through the construction of a multiply informed narrative. The view was linked to the wider problem of behaviour which the school found difficult to manage by several respondents. As detailed in the previous chapter, I felt that the school's response to behaviour was inadequate and in some instances there were connections to be made between behaviour the school found difficult to manage and the state of the school. A routine stand-off between pupils and teachers occurred, for example, when students would not remove their coats when asked by a teacher. I retrospectively realised that this was linked to issues with the lack of heating in the buildings.

A study carried out for the NUT found that 2/3 of teachers said their lessons were disrupted every week by 'badly behaved pupils' ('Teachers report', 2001) and this easily equates with impressions from lessons I witnessed at Chestnut Grove. I also felt that a number of teachers themselves disrupted lessons by screaming at students. I observed that one of the school's newly appointed 'Behaviour Consultants' took an extremely aggressive attitude towards students by shouting at them. It seemed several members of staff felt that shouting was the only way to manage pupils. Previous research in this area indicates that this issue appears to be worse in disadvantaged schools (Horgan, 2007). Conversely, many of the school's teachers treated students with respect, but I did have concerns about the culture of teacher behaviour witnessed and felt children living in poverty, like all children, were entitled to respect from all of their teachers. Changing policy on behaviour was not seen to change behaviour for the better.

Explanations for turning the school to an Academy invariably came round to the same issue – it was said the school had urgently needed change and new resources and these were simply unavailable unless the school converted to an Academy, which seemingly made the choice straightforward. Yet my research suggests that changing the school to an Academy did little to address barriers to education for students living in poverty, but instead, significantly added to them.

Gewirtz and Ball (2000) undertook research into a school that they called Beatrice Webb which mirrored the changes I witnessed at Chestnut Grove/Academy. They noted that the school's appearance was very neglected, and that the intake was very similar to that which I perceived at Chestnut Grove:

The majority are there for one of the following reasons: they have failed to get in anywhere else; they have been excluded from other schools; or they belong to refugee or homeless families that have been placed in temporary accommodation near the school. (p.256).

They noted that the school had moved from welfarism to new managerialism, and stated that welfarism has a public-service ethos, is consultative and co-operative whereas new managerialism has a customer-oriented ethos and is authoritarian and competitive (Gewirtz and Ball, 2000). This all struck a chord with my research findings. Consider this statement about Beatrice Webb school:

its inner-city location and characteristics, its poor market position and the apparently strong welfarist orientation of the Headteacher. We were interested to find out what was happening within schools whose culture and values were, at face value, at odds with the hegemonic discourses of management and the market. Six months into the project the welfarist Headteacher, Susannah English, resigned and was replaced by a new head, Brian Jones, who displays many of the characteristics of the new managerialist Headteacher outlined above. This chance event in the research presented us with the opportunity to compare the two Headteachers. (p.257).

This could have been written about Chestnut Grove/Academy, albeit a few years before Academies were launched. It is the case, then, that the events I researched at Chestnut Grove/Academy were not new, but were simply taking place under a different policy guise.

What I found particularly noticeable during my research in the school was that the Academy resulted in the introduction of additional, new barriers that had not

existed in Chestnut Grove. While the original school clearly had problems, including with management of staff and pupil behaviour, an inconsistent approach to financial assistance, inadequate buildings, and low academic attainment, some of these problems were arguably out of the hands of the school itself. Demolition of the school and the replacement of its Headteacher intimated that the problems were embedded in the fabric of the school, when, as detailed earlier in this chapter, there is evidence to suggest that many of the problems were actually social problems entrenched in the local area, generations of poverty and associated lack of aspiration and cultural wealth.

Considering that the rebuild of schools is mooted as a major advantage of opening an Academy, it is ironic that a Government adviser, Sir Cyril Taylor, has had to say: *'The whole building side has been a nightmare ... Most of the 27 already open are OK. There are some outstanding ones, but there are some we shouldn't repeat.'* (Woodward, 2006).

While the new building was clearly the most visible symbol of change, a number of additional changes were implemented shortly after the school changed to an Academy. Some level of change was of course to be expected – after all, the school would not have transferred to an Academy if it was not felt that it needed to be changed in some way – but it was clear that some teachers felt that a number of the changes were unnecessary, and that time and resources had been wasted implementing them. This will, have course, have indirectly impacted on the education provided to students as resources were diverted from teaching. I have detailed each of the changes in Chapter 4: Findings, which relate to attendance figures, the 'remove' room, appointment of behaviour consultants, system of houses, new reward systems, exclusion policy. Although not explicitly stated by the school, my perception from statements within the research data was that these changes were intended to improve attainment. However, without attention to the level of poverty many pupils came to school with, these new interventions seemed of superficial significance as I will now discuss.

Attendance is an area which has been a key area of attention for schools for many years. It is no surprise, therefore, that increasing attendance was seen as a key priority in Chestnut Academy. However, methods of doing so raised question marks over their accuracy or, indeed, legality of attendance figures. The school's

efforts to control attendance figures was brought to my attention by a teacher who felt that it constituted '*fiddling*'.

I had already become aware during my time in school that missing lessons appeared to be second nature for a number of pupils, largely because the layout of the school meant that they could freely leave the premises. A guard was placed on the school gate in an attempt to tackle this once the school became an Academy, although students could easily leave the premises by walking across the playing fields.

According to two of the staff I spoke to, the Academy's attendance figures were artificially inflated to make it appear that the school was improving attendance. Absence from school is likely to compound disadvantage experienced by pupils living in poverty and it seemed to me that maintaining a rhetoric of good attendance, as several respondents indicated was a priority for the new Academy, concealed a lack of attention to the urgency of changing the culture of the school so that pupils living with poverty might actually want to be there.

The operation of a 'remove room' was another change made for the new Academy. This consisted of a bare room, bordered by white booths, and presided over by a manager who had been employed specifically for the purpose of managing the facility. Students were sent there for a set period to work in silence when they misbehaved in class. The teachers I spoke to were scathing about the facility, they felt that far too many students were being sent there, and when they were, they were not encouraged to do anything useful such as catching up on their work, they just had to sit there quietly.

Whilst I found no literature about the use of remove rooms, as this seems to be a relatively new, Academy-specific development, I did feel that the aim of the facility was to get disruptive students out of classes rather than try to tackle the root of their behaviour – there appeared to be absolutely no interaction between students and the Remove Manager, and students were not offered any assistance with their work. I do not know if pupils living with poverty are over-represented in the numbers of those sent to the remove room but there may well be issues to investigate in relation to this.

That the issue of behaviour was firmly prioritised by Chestnut Academy reiterates emphasis made by Cowley, who wrote of an initial teacher training course at a London university:

None of the set texts are sociology of education texts, and none engage with social class as an educational issue. Unsurprising then that a focus group of London initial teacher trainees felt that the most useful book that they had read over the year was one called 'Getting the buggers to behave' (Cowley, 2001, quoted in Reay, 2006, p.302).

Two Behaviour Consultants were employed in an attempt to specifically address the issue of behaviour which the school found difficult to manage. As detailed in the previous chapter, the consultants were viewed with open cynicism by school staff who seemed to think that they were generally ineffective.

One member of staff commented that the consultants simply spent their time writing reports to justify why they should spend more time in school. The opinions of teachers may, of course, have been influenced by the fact that the employment of the consultants indicated that the Principal believed that the existing staff were unable to deal adequately with behavioural problems, which may have been demotivating for them. I saw one of the consultants on two occasions during the significant time I spent in school exhibiting an extremely aggressive approach and shouting at students. This was concerning, not least because the school management team were working at the same time on trying to give teachers alternatives to shouting back at students during confrontations.

The introduction of Houses was one of the biggest changes made in the transition to the new Academy. Students were each put into a new House, which spanned all year groups, and given a new tie to show which House they belonged to. The staff I spoke to felt that the introduction of Houses had made no difference to the culture of the school other than in the visibility of children by colour-coded ties. The system was quietly dropped within a year of its introduction. I felt that this was an example of what a professional associated with the school called '*the school biting off more than it could chew*' in its attempts to improve school culture and effectiveness.

The Academy made a huge amount of changes within a very short period of time without making the necessary changes behind the scenes to ensure that the changes would succeed. It could be argued that this was because the school was

more focused on its public image than on making changes that, although would not be easily visible to observers, would ensure the long-term improvement of behaviour and academic attainment.

The reward system introduced by the school could also have been said to be an instance of style over substance. Students were given the incentive of a free school trip at the end of the school year, or a discount, if they earned enough merit points. I was initially dubious about this idea as I had not seen any merits being issued during lessons, or even heard them being referred to. The numbers needed to earn a trip seemed to be unrealistically high to me - when I broached this with a Head of Year, she calculated that in practice, students who got a merit in every class and registration could earn 10 a day towards the 500 needed. I did not see any evidence of any merits being handed out and concluded that this was an incentive which was unattainable for students.

As detailed in Chapter 4: Findings, the exclusion of students seemed to be a priority for Chestnut Academy. I was told by several members of staff that students were being excluded at a far higher rate than ever before, and there was speculation that this was due to the drive to increase the school's GCSE attainment rate. This rate of exclusion could be said to be an intensely troubling hallmark of the new Academies – it has previously been noted that Academies exclude twice as many pupils as state schools (Perkin, 2008).

Similarly, staff had started to leave the school at what seemed to be a relatively high rate and members of staff indicated that several teachers had been 'pushed' - forced to leave - and that staff morale in the school was at an all time low. There was a clear indication that staff who did not follow the new regime were the ones feeling forced out of their posts.

Although specific figures were not available to me at Chestnut Academy, I gained the impression that an ever higher proportion of students had been excluded in the first year of operation. As previously noted, Chestnut Academy was publicly reprimanded by Walton City Council after it had been found to have illegally removed 17 pupils from its roll at the start of term – and the following year yet another student was ruled to have been excluded illegally.

As Academies are so new, evidence on exclusion rates is not yet well documented but concern was expressed by a range of stakeholders that exclusion at Chestnut Academy was being used as a vehicle to manipulate examination results. Evidence which is published for other Academies in respect of this is worrying; for example, Beckett cites King's Academy in Middlesborough which, in its first year as an Academy it excluded 10 of the 285 pupils on roll. Of the remaining 275, only 30 sat an exam (Beckett, 2007) and questions remain unanswered about access to examinations for other pupils. This scenario is similar to that conveyed by anecdotal evidence I gained at Chestnut Academy of students, and teachers, said to be 'disappearing.'

It is deeply ironic that the Academy apparently chose to exclude pupils in the aim of increasing exam results when considered in light of Tom's assertion about why he had pursued the change to an Academy:

we needed to do something quite drastic, and something quite drastic could be to reduce the pupil number and get rid of all the difficult children. In a way that would have been the worse thing to do because if we're going to be part of changing that area, we've got to try to find a way of meeting the needs of everybody in that area, and that's why we pursued the Academy.

[Former Headteacher of Chestnut Grove School]

4. Were barriers explicitly recognised by staff, students and parents?

I feel that it is important that consideration is given as to whether the barriers I have identified through this research were actually recognised by the main groups I included in my research – namely, school staff, students, parents, and other professionals associated with the school.

I raised the question of specific barriers throughout the duration of my research in the forms of the questions I included in questionnaires and interviews. I was, however, particularly careful to avoid stigmatising the issue of poverty and the cost of education as I did not want to be responsible for making the students or their families feel embarrassed or self-conscious about their poverty. As Kellett and Dar (2007) note: '*Numerous research studies (e.g. see Hastings and Dean, 2000) attest to the harm and distress that can be caused when children realise they are being stigmatised as 'poor'*' (p.12). In the case of students, many did acknowledge a number of issues that they encountered at school including the cost of education,

issues with the behaviour of other students, the crumbling physical condition of the school, and perceived problems with the new Academy.

Many students were extremely outspoken about what they perceived to be shortcomings of the school, teachers, or their peers. But they stopped short of actually explicitly recognising the issues as barriers to their education. None of the students actually made reference to how the issues they discussed actually impacted on their education, with the exception, perhaps, of one student, who stated that students who did not bring in their own ingredients to cooking were given what she perceived to be poor quality ingredients by teachers:

if you don't bring your own stuff, they grade you, you know how good your buns look, and if you don't bring your own stuff you get a right low grade when really you could get a high one.

[Student attending Chestnut Grove School]

This could be interpreted as implicit recognition of a barrier if a student's lack of resources results in down-grading.

Similarly, the parents who participated in my research did not make explicit reference to barriers to their children's education. A number did focus on what they clearly felt were unfair aspects of the system – including what they saw as pressure from the school to contribute to trips, and the fact that their child was left out of activities due to the cost. One parent also mentioned that all of her children had been bullied because they did not have named clothes, or could not afford to go on trips. She stopped short on speculating how this had impacted on their education, but did note how it had affected her personally saying '*I feel like a failure as a parent.*'

As regards school staff and other professionals associated with the school, they were more forthcoming about the issues, but this was probably because I explicitly asked many of them how they felt that deprivation impacted upon the school's pupils. I did not feel comfortable raising this with the school's pupils and families – particularly because on the one occasion I did slip it into a conversation with a student, it backfired somewhat. I was speaking to a student at the Breakfast Club when I asked him about deprivation in the area – he appeared to be annoyed and shot back '*well I come from Cainer's Gate, and you can't really call that deprived, can you?*' In fact, I did consider Cainer's Gate to be a deprived area, but I realised

that I had offended him, and decided at that point that it would be sensible – and ethical – to avoid directly asking parents and students direct questions about deprivation and barriers to education due to the potential for harm.

I did not feel that this was an issue for staff and other professionals associated with the school though, and included questions related to barriers and disadvantage throughout all interviews. They were generally unanimous in agreeing that barriers did exist – most made reference to the poverty that many students lived in, and how this affected their access to education in practical ways as has already been described.

5. A culture of blame?

In addition to the multiple themes which have been discussed above, another key barrier to the education of students living with poverty which emerged during my research had to do with a culture of blame. It is not disputed that children at Chestnut Grove did not attain highly academically. Furthermore, the school found behaviour difficult to manage and this did escalate to attacks between students. What is debatable, however, is whether anyone was to blame for these issues and incidents and, if so, who?

The issue of blame arose at an early stage in my research – when I was reviewing the responses given in the questionnaires, I noticed that a number of comments had been made by both students and parents which implicitly criticised the school. These included comments relating to the cost of school trips, bullying, and the cost of required items including school planners. This theme continued in the interviews I conducted with students; many made comments criticising the school in general, e.g. because of the poor state of equipment, while others criticised specific teachers for treating them unfairly or shouting. Furthermore, a number of students also criticised other students, particularly for bullying them or other students.

This theme really gained prominence with the publicly-aired incident mentioned earlier in this thesis, as both local and national attention turned to the issue of who was to blame for the incident. The school was widely portrayed as ‘out of control’ in both the local and national press, and one Head of Year told me how two students told her that Chestnut Grove was the worst school in the county. When she asked who had told them that, they said: *‘It was on TV last night.’*

The next person who was castigated was Tom, then Headteacher of Chestnut Grove. He was widely criticised for allowing behaviour within the school to sink to such a standard that a serious incident could take place. There was even a petition started locally, publicised in a newspaper, to have him removed from his post.

Finally, teachers also blamed students and their families. They blamed students for misbehaving in and out of classes, and blamed their parents for not giving them a supportive home environment. Although the blame was often very subtle, it nevertheless was clearly there – comments were made about ‘*chaotic*’ family lives and the impact that this had on students. More explicitly, Tom, the Headteacher of Chestnut Grove School, told me how many families had ‘*no moral standards*’.

Most of those involved in my research did not make any mention of central or local government – it was clearly felt that any issues that existed locally were to ‘blame’ locally, that is, with the school itself, parents, students. The exception was Tom, the original Headteacher of Chestnut Grove. He noted that he felt that the educational system was inherently unjust: ‘*I think the problem is the outputs are judged on a system that tends to favour children from better-set circumstances.*’ Interestingly, Tom was also the only person to blame himself for the barriers to education that existed at the school. He told me a year after he was removed from his post that he felt that he and the school’s staff were responsible for pupil’s relatively low achievement at GCSE level:

this is a terrible admission to make, really – but I don’t think until we’ve been faced with the possibility of having a 6th form, we’ve taught the children to get their GCSE’s. We haven’t really thought about making sure that they’re also ready for the next stage. And an awful lot of children at Chestnut who have done well at GCSE have fallen out at the next stage, and we’ve arrogantly put that down to the quality of what they were moving into, and I think a lot of it is that we did not prepare them for post-16 work in our teaching.

[Former Headteacher of Chestnut Grove School]

Clearly this research shows that there are complex and invidious issues facing those seeking to reduce barriers to education for children in difficult circumstances. But I conclude that a discourse of who is to ‘blame’ for the barriers children face in their education is far from productive. I found the words of Pringle (1998) salutary, who in his writing on children and social welfare asks us to remember ‘*the pain of children in distress*’ as the ‘*central fact amid all the complexities*’ (p.195) so that the

dismantling of barriers that children living with poverty face in their education remain the focus of our attention at all times.

6. Reflection

I feel that my work is very much a story of Chestnut Grove/Academy, albeit over the course of almost five years rather than the school's entire life. However, although my research was a snapshot of the school and in no sense a complete story, I was present at both the closure of Chestnut Grove and opening of Chestnut Academy. I feel that seeking to construct my own narrative account of events and experiences within the research period has enabled a useful research contribution to be made. Of course my contribution mirrors concerns expressed by John Mortimer, who wrote when considering autobiography:

That is how it was, a part of life seen from a point of view. Much more happened that I cannot tell or remember. To others it would be, I am quite sure, a different story. (Mortimer, 1983, p.256, quoted in Goodson, 1991).

If I had spoken to a different group of students and school staff, attended on different days or viewed the in-schools experience through any other eyes, I would have obtained a different set of impressions and possibly constructed a different story. This complexity however, seems to me to be at the heart of all research, and so I present my research as one story of one school and the people I researched, during a specific time period. It does not claim to be, indeed could not be, a definitive guide to the barriers to education faced by children living with poverty in a changing school. This position acknowledges the reflection of Goodson and Sikes (2001) that this type of research can be nothing other than '*a representation*' (p.40). In this spirit, my research reflects what I saw and heard about Chestnut Grove/Academy during the period that I spent undertaking my research – nothing more and nothing less.

In terms of improving my approach to future research projects, I found during my research that the many exchanges that I observed seemed to have clear and obvious meanings, therefore I did not explore them further with the participants. However, this assumption meant that there may have been further hidden layers of meaning which I did not uncover. In retrospect, I felt that, given the opportunity to undertake such research again, I would try to build in the chance to speak to participants about the observations that I undertook, to give them the opportunity to

add their understanding of the situation/s and thus add additional richness to my research.

7. Conclusions

I feel that my research has provided insights into the barriers facing children living in poverty attending a school in changing circumstances in a deprived area of England. I have shown something of the detail of multiple barriers to education that students attending the school face. My research shows that students living in poverty experience multiple barriers to education, some of which have been introduced in the guise of equalising access to education. The barriers are wide-ranging and, while my research shows the immediate impact, such as physical discomfort, it does not – could not – measure the longer-term impact on students.

I feel the research has been important because it tells a unique story of a school in changing circumstances and reveals barriers to education faced by many of its pupils who were living with poverty. I am not aware of any similar research which has previously been undertaken, particularly as:

1. I involved students very widely in my research, which is relatively unusual for research into the barriers to education faced by children living in poverty (e.g. see Hazel, 1996)
2. I gave students, their parents, and school staff the opportunity to tell the story of barriers to education in a deprived school, in their own words
3. I spent several years consecutively in one school (although a number of studies constitute a story of one school, it is uncommon for research to span such a length of time, with the story of Hackney Downs being a notable exception (O'Connor et al, 1999))
4. I spent time in the school before, during and after it transferred to an Academy. While much media interest has focused on Academies, I am not aware of any other research published by researchers who have gained access first-hand to an Academy during such a critical period.

I also feel that the fact that my themes found me makes my research particularly strong, as I learned to allow issues in the school to emerge themselves, rather than stifling them with my own agenda. For almost every element of my findings, I found that previous research in this area had come to a similar conclusion. However, my research went one step further in:

- a) providing an up-to-date snapshot of the key issues covered – much previous research in this area, including that which inspired me, was undertaken a number of years ago (e.g. Middleton and Thomas, 1994, and Gewirtz et al, 1995)
- b) researching multiple barriers to education together in one study, in one school, and cataloguing the many themes that emerged,
- c) witnessing first-hand the impact of the transfer to an Academy.

Together, I hope these findings make a valuable addition to debate in the area of barriers to education, the impact of poverty on students and the introduction of Academies.

When I started my research, Chestnut Grove was just another ‘failing’ school in a deprived area which could have been any one of hundreds of secondary schools in the country. However, a serious incident which met with public outrage and was swiftly followed by the successful application to transfer to an Academy, meant that the institution gained notoriety. This left me with a dilemma I had not expected when I began my research – the individuals who had participated in my research, as well as the school itself, became at risk of *greater* notoriety because of the assistance they extended to me for the production of this thesis.

I strongly feel that my findings are too important to suppress, and that to do so would let down those who contributed to my research *because* I had committed to trying to add understanding to their situation by sharing research findings. The risk of professional harm to key players in the story is slightly dissipated as people have moved into other jobs. I have taken steps to conceal the identity of my research participants where possible, although this is barely possible for individuals who held key and publicly debated roles. I remain committed to disseminating the research findings through academic and practitioner oriented outputs in order to try to advance day to day practice in ways which the research respondents have signalled.

8. Recommendations for future research

I feel that my research has opened the gates to several other research topics which would be very valuable. In particular, I feel that further in-school research on Academies should be undertaken. While I understand that Academies are very protective of their position, and anecdotal evidence suggests that they are

increasingly barring researchers from visiting schools, this only makes me more convinced that there is a place for research into the following issues:

- the long-term impact of Academies on the exclusion of students, and how this affects these students
- how a change to Academies affects staff morale
- how students perceive that a change to Academies impacts on them
- how parents perceive that a change to an Academy impacts on their children.

While these areas are obviously Academy-focused, I feel that there are gaps in research in this area as Academies are still relatively new.

As the current government is committed to expanding the number of Academies, regardless of the concerns that have been raised from numerous quarters about virtually all aspects of the Academy programme, I feel that it is important that further research takes place to establish what is fact, and what is rumour, and explore other, currently unknown areas. This is especially the case as, as my research has shown, families living in poverty are less likely to actively select schools than middle class families are – perhaps not least because they could not afford extra travel costs of out of neighbourhood schooling, and are therefore likely to have little option but to keep their child in school if it converts to an Academy.

I also feel that the area of the cost of education, and its impact on families living in poverty, deserves further research. The main areas which I feel would benefit from further research are:

- how students feel that the costs associated with education impact on them
- how parents feel that the costs associated with education impact on their children
- what influences schools to provide assistance to students and families, and what benefits they perceive this assistance has.

9. Overview

My research journey has ended in quite a different way to my initial expectations, but shifts in the planned enquiry happened due to unforeseen circumstances. Nevertheless, I feel fortunate that I was able to find, and follow, a line of enquiry which allowed me to find interesting and valuable data that I hope broadens the

understanding of readers about the educational experiences of students living in poverty and attending a school in a deprived area during a period of major upheaval as the school was changed to an Academy. I am extremely grateful to the many people who were willing to engage with me, and share their thoughts and experiences of Chestnut Grove/Academy, for the purposes of the research

My findings provide a multi-faceted picture of the everyday educational experiences of students and of the barriers to their educational experience in the context of a school's transfer to an Academy. These barriers are many and varied and created and further impacted upon by a number of different agencies including central government, local government, the management team of a school, and the families of students themselves. The project of dismantling barriers will therefore need to be addressed at multiple levels.

There is no reason to believe that the experiences of students at Chestnut Grove/Academy are isolated. The future of pupils at Chestnut and their contemporaries in similar situations is dependent upon critical reflection of their experience and I very much hope that this thesis makes a contribution towards this.

EPILOGUE

While I ended my primary research in Chestnut after almost five years, I could not end so easily my deep interest in the school, and curiosity about whether the Academy would deliver on the promises it made to the city and local students.

Over the months that followed my last visit to the school, I followed its progress via local newspapers and online, as I no longer had any contact with any of the school's staff and students.

I was not altogether surprised to learn that Edward went on long-term sick leave the year after my primary research ended, and shortly before the school's first Ofsted inspection. He was replaced by a principal from another Academy operated by the same organisation. This meant that the school's fourth Headteacher in as many years was appointed, a huge contrast to the nine years that Tom had been in post before he was removed from his post.

An Ofsted inspection undertaken almost three years after the school transferred was generally not positive – the school scored 3 (satisfactory) and 4 (inadequate) in all areas of assessment, with particular concerns being raised about learning and teaching, which were described as 'inadequate'. The school was, as a result, given formal notice to improve. The response to this from Walton City Council was relatively cool, with the cabinet member for Children's Services in Walton, stating:

Three years ago I was sceptical that becoming an Academy would lead to sustained improvement

adding:

The Academy route can provide access to extra Government money for school buildings, but what this report reminds us is there is more to education than the quality of the school buildings.

In addition to the poor Ofsted inspection, concerns have continued to be raised regarding the level of exclusions at the school. Following the '*misunderstanding*' whereby the Academy illegally excluded 17 pupils in its first year of operation, the school has continued to attract negative publicity regarding student exclusions, with one family winning an appeal against the unlawful exclusion of a student the autumn after my research ended. An independent appeal panel ruled that the

student's behaviour was not serious enough to justify permanent exclusion, and that a 15 day suspension would have been more appropriate. A specialist education lawyer who defended the family made what I consider to be an extremely pertinent point, which strongly related to my findings – he noted that while the school had been praised in its most recent Ofsted report for cutting exclusion levels, with only 65 days 'officially' lost during the 2007/08 school year: *'If David's* lost time had been included in the records, that figure would have increased by at least 150 days'* *pseudonym.

This gives a new light on the ULT's official statement regarding the 17 exclusions, when it stated: *'We inherited a school with a very poor attendance record and student data that appeared to bear little relation to what was happening on the ground.'* Arguably, the school was still operating a system whereby the official statistics did not reflect the reality.

Despite the ongoing issues with leadership and exclusions, it should be noted there is no doubt that GCSE results have steadily improved at Chestnut, rising from 10% (A*-C) including Maths and English in 2006, the final exams at Chestnut Grove, to 23% in 2009 at Chestnut Academy.

My final thought on this is, although the school's exam results have improved, improved at what price? I struggle with the question of whether the barriers to education faced by children living in poverty are being addressed within the Academy. My data suggests not; this Epilogue suggests not, and clearly further interrogation is required.

Addendum

Shortly after I completed this thesis, a coalition Conservative/Liberal Democrat government was elected. The new government announced within weeks that it planned to expand the academies programme to enable an additional 2,200 schools (500 secondary and 1,700 primary) to convert to academies by summer 2010 (Coalition's schools plan, 2010). This was later supported by the surprisingly speedy passing of an Academies Bill, which became the Academies Act 2010 (Great Britain, 2010). The intention of the Act is to: *'raise standards for all children, while narrowing the gap between the attainment of the most and least advantaged.'* (DfE, no date).

My research suggests that considerable urgency must be attached to keeping the growth of Academy schools under careful and critical review.

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* *Pseudonyms*

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Student Questionnaire about the Cost of Attending School

Appendix 2 Letter to Parents

Appendix 3 Research Information Sheet

Appendix 4 Parent Questionnaire about the Cost of Attending School

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE ABOUT THE COST OF ATTENDING SCHOOL

This questionnaire asks about what you and your parent/s pay for so you can go to school. Please fill in all the sections you can, and use the spaces to give more information. I will use the information that you provide, but will keep it confidential.

Your teacher will not look at the completed questionnaire. They will put it in a sealed envelope, marked 'private and confidential', which I will collect.

Name:

Form:

1. Please fill in (ticking boxes):

Which of these costs do your parent/s have to pay for so you can go to school?	Do you think your parent/s ever have difficulty paying for this?	Do you think that your parent/s should have to pay for this?	If you don't think that your parent/s should pay, who do you think should?
Bus or tram fare <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
School meals <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Clothes for school <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Materials for lessons <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Day trips <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Holidays with the school <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Books for school <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Stationery <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	

Are there any other costs which your parent/s have to pay?

Please write down any other costs your parents have to pay so you can go to school	Do you think your parent/s ever have difficulty paying for this?	Do you think that your parent/s should have to pay for this?	If you don't think that your parent/s should pay, who do you think should?
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	

2. Do you know about any schemes that your school runs to help students who need extra help to pay for things? For example, reduced cost items of uniform, or school trips?

Yes No

If yes, please give details:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3. Do you think that your school should do anything else to help students who need extra help to pay for things? Yes No

If yes, please give details

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

4. Do you ever ask your parents to pay for fashionable clothes for school? Yes No

5. Do you ever ask your parents to pay for school trips and holidays? Yes No

6. Do you think that your parent/s ever have difficulty paying for these things?
Yes No

If yes, please give details:

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

7. Have there ever been any times when your parent/s have been upset because of the cost of things for school? Yes No

If yes, please give details:

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

8. Do you claim free school meals? Yes No

If yes, do you ever feel embarrassed about this? Yes No

If yes, do you think that your school could do anything to help you feel better about this?

Yes No

If yes, please give details:

.....
.....
.....

9. Is there anything else that you would like to mention about the cost of going to school that this questionnaire has not covered? Please give full details:

.....

.....

.....

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.....

Thank you for filling in this questionnaire. Please give it to your teacher.

Appendix 2

Letter to Parents

Dear Parent

My name is Frances Howell and I am a research student in the School of Education at the University of Sheffield.

I am writing to ask if you would be willing to become involved in a study I am conducting, about the increasing cost of gaining an education up to the age of 16 in England and how this affects students and their parents. I hope that you will participate in this project as it really could make a difference to you and your child/ren, and the school that they attend.

The attached document outlines my study in more detail. I would be grateful if you would complete the attached questionnaire and return it to me by **Thursday 12 June** in the enclosed pre-paid envelope. I may then get in touch to ask if I can interview you and your child/ren, at a location and time to suit you. Please be assured that participation is entirely voluntary, and you can stop your involvement at any time.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if there's anything at all that you'd like to ask. If you would like to verify my identity, you can contact my supervisor, on telephone no:XXX..

Please complete the attached questionnaire, it will only take a few minutes.

Yours sincerely

Frances Howell
School of Education
University of Sheffield

Appendix 3 Research Information Sheet

Pay as you learn - the increasing cost of gaining an education up to the age of 16 in England, and how this affects students and their parents

My name is Frances Howell and I am a research student in the School of Education, University of Sheffield.

I am interested in looking at the ways in which the increasing cost of gaining an education up to the age of 16 in England is rising, and how this affects students and their parents. This is a three-year study which is not being funded by the Government or any other body, but is completely independent. I hope that I can use the findings to influence policy.

The study

This is a very valuable study as nothing like this has been done before. It will focus on a small number of schools and will involve interviews with headteachers, students and parents in order to find out about the kinds of costs faced by schools, students and parents.

Confidentiality

I will ensure that the data gathered will be treated with sensitivity and that no one will have access to this information apart from myself. I will ensure that any material which is used in my thesis will be anonymised, and where possible will not include identifying features of students, parents and schools.

The outcomes

I hope that the study will be beneficial to students, parents and schools. I will share my findings with all who participate in the study. This should improve awareness of the issue, and give schools the chance to make changes that will benefit their students, parents, and the school. I will aim to make the results of my research as widely available as possible in order to help greater numbers of people.

Please be assured that all involvement will be entirely voluntarily. I will abide by the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association and will do my best to minimise inconvenience to all participants.

Frances Howell
School of Education
University of Sheffield

Appendix 4

PARENT QUESTIONNAIRE ABOUT THE COST OF ATTENDING SCHOOL

Name:

I will ask some parents and their child/ren to participate in a short interview. Would you be willing for me to interview you and your child/ren? Yes No

If yes, what are your child/ren's names and what form are they in at school:.....
.....
.....

1. Please fill in (ticking one box):

Which of these costs do you have to pay for so your child/ren can go to school	Do you ever have difficulty paying for this?	Do you think that you should have to pay for this?	If you don't think that you should pay, who do you think should?
Bus or tram fare <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
School meals <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Clothes for school <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Materials for <input type="checkbox"/> lessons	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Day trips <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Holidays with <input type="checkbox"/> the school	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Books for school <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Stationery <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	

Are there any other costs which you have to pay for?

	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	

2. Do you know about any schemes that your child/rens' schools runs to help child/ren who need extra help to pay for things? For example, reduced cost items of uniform, or school trips? Yes No If yes, please give details:

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3. Do you think that the school should do anything else to help child/ren who need extra help to pay for things? Yes No If yes, please give details:

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7. Do your child/ren ever ask you to pay for fashionable clothes for school?
Yes No

8. Does your child ask you to pay for school trips and holdidays?
Yes No

9. Do you ever feel that the school pressures you or your child/ren to pay for things?
Yes No If yes, please give details:

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7. Has there ever been any times when you and/or your child/ren have been upset because of the the cost of going to school? Yes No If yes, please give details:

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8. Is there anything else that you would like to mention about the cost of sending your child/ren to school that this questionnaire has not covered? Please give full details.

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I would be grateful if you would answer the following questions as they will give me an idea of your situation. You can leave blank any questions that you don't want to answer:

9. Is your child entitled to free school meals? Yes No

10. How many adults are there in your household?

11. How many work full-time? How many work part-time?

12. Do you think that your income is enough for your family to live on?

Yes No

13. If you would like to make any other comments about the cost of educating your child/ren then please do so:

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Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire.

Please return it in the enclosed stamped self-addressed envelope, or pass it to the school office, marked: Frances Howell, School of Education, University of Sheffield.