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Parenting teenagers as they grow up: values, practices and young people's pathways beyond school in England

Abstract

Parents' values and practices are central to theorising the reproduction of inequality across generations. Where researchers have explored how parental values and practices relate to class circumstances and their combined influence on children's outcomes, the focus has been largely on younger families, with limited evidence on *parents' perspectives* at the point children approach and pass compulsory school leaving age. The trebling of university tuition fees in England, the insecurity which characterises many non-academic routes into the labour market and concerns about economic recession make this a particularly significant historical moment to investigate parental influences on *childrens' pathways* through post-compulsory education and training. This paper draws on research into parents' perceptions and practices whilst their children were growing up through their teenage years between 2008 and 2014. In particular, it examines classed differences in how parents frame their young adult *children's* decision making, assess their pathways and accord markedly differing value to academic and vocational pursuit. It evidences temporal dynamics through showing how diverse values and *resources underpin young people's evolving biographical pathways*. In these ways, the analysis contributes to theorising *parents' values* and practices and their complex relationship with social class at a time of some significant social structural changes.

Introduction

How do parents perceive and relate to their children's educational and training options in the context of recent change in education policy and labour market opportunities? This paper responds to calls to examine experiences at the end of compulsory full time schooling at age 16, and the influences on young people's pathways and transitions at 16 plus (Snee and Devine 2014).[1] Such experiences mark the pursuit of diverse pathways by young people, and are therefore a particularly useful analytic focus for research into the reproduction of inequalities across generations. The paper focuses on parental values and circumstances and their link to the pathways pursued by young people growing up in a context of important changes in the structure of education, training and labour market opportunities.

The paper explores evidence on parents' values and practices as their children grow up through their teenage years and pass key educational decision points at 16+ and does so through an analysis across diverse classed contexts which include professional middle classes and positions within 'the missing middle' (Roberts 2011), reaching across parents in lower professional, intermediate, skilled and semi-skilled occupations. The evidence offers insights into parents' ethics and values at this key juncture and explores how they relate to, and seek to influence, their children's routes towards higher education or into vocational training. The analysis draws on a qualitative longitudinal project run from 2008 to 2014. It is set within a context of significant changes in the education sector and in employment demand. Long run occupational restructuring has undermined the idea that children in the western world can expect higher standards of living than their parents (cf. Pew 2014) and has engendered greater precarity in vocational routes to work (Keep and Mayhew 2014). The recent increase in higher education fees and concerns about graduate employment alter the context of decision making in respect of pursuing a university education. These developments mean it is especially timely to understand how parents influence the pathways being followed by their young adult children.

The analysis presented in this paper focuses on how parents perceive and frame their young adult children's options and pathways as they pass through the 16+ transition stage. Across the classed sub-groupings represented in the sample we see evidence on the inheritance of academic and vocational values across generations, as well as the mobilisation of differing resources in support of linked pathways.

Parenting values and practices: class, diversity and social change

An established tradition of research shows the importance of family economic, social and cultural positioning in childrearing values and practices, and in the reproduction of inequalities across generations. There are two distinct bodies of literature here, one of which focuses on parenting and the socialisation of primary and secondary school aged children, the other of which focuses on youth and transitions beyond compulsory schooling. Bourdieu has been very influential in both traditions, perhaps most especially through his theorisation of classed cultural capital (1986), a key concept for describing the inheritance of social dispositions and capacities which are consistent, or at odds, with the culture and practices of formal schooling (e.g. Reay 1998, Lareau 2011). Quantitative researchers who operationalise Bourdieu's concepts through variable analysis have sometimes critiqued his arguments foregrounding diversity within, as well as across, social classes and positing a lack of clear cut classed cultural differences (see Irwin 2009 for a review). In contrast, qualitative researchers have operationalised Bourdieu's concepts through fine grained interrogation of lived experiences and of the enactment of power through everyday interactions. They have been bolder in insisting on distinct class groupings and causal processes engendering the reproduction of inequalities (e.g. Reay 1998 in the UK, Lareau 2011 in the USA). The different emphases and sometimes divergent conclusions across quantitative and qualitative research

(Irwin 2009) were part of the original conceptual underpinning for the research project discussed here (and elaborated in Irwin and Elley 2011).

The debate about if and how values, practices and class relate to each other continues to animate research. Lareau's work has been something of a touchstone for research on parental values and practices (e.g. Hartas 2012, 2014, Henderson 2013, Vincent and Ball 2007 in the UK, Bennett et al 2012, Chin and Philips 2004 in the USA, and see Weininger, Lareau and Conley 2015). Through her ethnographic study in America in the 1990s and followed up in the 2000s, Lareau concluded that there were two distinct cultural repertoires of childrearing: 'concerted cultivation' amongst middle class families and an 'accomplishment of natural growth' amongst working class and poor families. These she predicted would be associated with very different futures for their children, in part due to how they imbue different social psychologies and bearing. Her research has been very influential and was relevant in designing my own project. In it I explored diversity within, as well as across, social class groupings and evidence pointed to the salience and complexity of people's backgrounds, biographical experiences and trajectories, and their situated outlooks and expectations in shaping their ethos as a parent. Classed resources were important influences on children's pathways as they grew older (e.g. Irwin and Elley 2013). In the analysis to follow I draw on data as children grew up, and focus especially on the important role of values as well as resources of various kinds in how parents influenced their children's pathways post-16.

In her follow-up study when the children were young adults, Lareau illustrated continuities in classed practices, with the middle class parents intervening in strategic ways, helping their children negotiate higher education (Lareau 2011, Lareau and Cox 2011). This is unusual since much literature on young adult transitions focuses on young people themselves

and reveals parental perspectives indirectly. The literature here also shows the role of class, resources and family socialisation in influencing young people's decision making (e.g. Hodkinson et al 1996; Ball et al 2000, 1999, Power at el 2003, Devine 2004, Winterton and Irwin 2012). In their study on higher education choices, Ball and colleagues (2002) describe parents as strong or weak framers of their teenage children's options, according them differing degrees of autonomy. Such framing, they posit, is not coterminous with class, but strongly overlaps with it. Ball and colleagues too, drawing on Bourdieu and Hodkinson, argued the importance of experiential knowledge within families helping explain the inheritance, across familial generations, of ideas about valued kinds of work (Ball et al 1999), an issue which has received little research interest of late. Work values have drawn interest, for example Hoskins and Barker (2016) explore the ways in which values of happiness, job satisfaction and societal contribution eclipse social mobility aspirations in young people's thinking about future work. However, interest in vocational education and training routes has fallen away over the last two decades, displaced by a more singular research emphasis on routes to higher education, and on severe disadvantage. Indeed, the phrase 'missing middle' has been used to denote the relative dearth of research evidence on those following vocational education and training pathways (e.g. Roberts 2011). Recently Vogt (2013), in Norway, explored positive values which attach to practical vocational commitments amongst some families, but this is a rare counterweight to current research emphases. Two themes of particular relevance emerge from the wider literature: class variation in the autonomy accorded to children (Ball et al. 2002, also cf. Kohn 1959, Lareau 2003), and the possibility of differing ethics regarding valued kinds of work (Vogt 2013), although values and decisions relating to the pursuit of vocational training and academic education have been quite minimally explored. There has been a growing valorisation of academic pursuit within knowledge economy and social mobility discourses and policies. In this context (how) do academic and vocational options hold traction and value with parents and

in the advice they give their children? How tightly do they cleave to social class and frame divergent trajectories?

It is an interesting historical point at which to seek understanding of parental views. The past generation has seen a normalisation of educational routes for young people up to 18, now enshrined in law with a raising in England of the age of participation in education and training to 18, in 2015. Approximately 40% of 25-29 year olds have degrees (Blundell et al 2016). English higher education fees were raised to £9000 per year in 2012, but despite forecasts of declining young participation rates, these dipped temporarily then recovered, and even marginally improved amongst those from poorer backgrounds (Independent Fees Commission 2015). Evidence points to the ways in which economic costs and benefits are perceived differently across the population, complexly embedded in diverse, classed cultural contexts (Jones 2016), a theme I will take up in the analysis. The sustainability of graduate employment opportunity and reward is unclear, and some see a looming crisis linked to growing 'social congestion' (Brown 2013) in the graduate labour market. Recent evidence suggests that the relative returns to a graduate education have been sustained through periods of expansion but this is unlikely to continue into the future (Blundell et al 2016). Nevertheless, it seems likely that a widespread perception of increased competition for jobs only reinforces middle-class parents' desire for their children to pursue higher education.

Early school leavers and those not pursuing academic routes comprise a large group which confronts very serious difficulties given the complexity and precarity attached to many post-16 vocational routes and qualifications (House of Lords 2016, Keep 2015, Keep and Mayhew 2014). In 2011, Wolf estimated that annually one third of 16 and 17 year olds entered vocational programmes without any clear opportunities to progress (Wolf 2011). Across recent

decades economic restructuring has reduced opportunities in the middle of the occupational hierarchy, and further undermined school leaver and work-based routes to secure employment (e.g. Roberts 2011, Purcell et al 2011). In the project discussed below there were strong positive evaluations of vocational routes to work amongst some parents but also anxieties about linked insecurities. In exploring parental values and practices as children approach young adulthood, the paper offers new evidence on the generational reproduction of educational pathways to work and linked inequalities. It does so at a time when academic virtue is increasingly valorised, the value added of a degree comes into question and practical and vocational routes to work ever more problematic.[2]

Research design

'Family contexts, class and parenting values' was designed to research parents' experiences and perceptions of their role, their values and their expectations for their children's education and future work with reference to class related inequalities. A self-completion questionnaire survey of parents with children involved in organized activities, from a range of backgrounds, was undertaken in 2008 (n=564). The activities were typically leisure centre based sports activities but also included community based football and dance as well as other activities, including chess club participation. Thirty-four semi-structured interviews were run with parents who were identified strategically from the survey sample, with reference to both socio-economic circumstances and to perceptions of change in the importance of education for children's future success. This generated a sample which was diverse within and across socio-economic classes. Semi-structured interviews were run with parents whose child at the activity was of upper primary school age or lower secondary school age, so it would be more meaningful to explore reflections about children's future education and work at these ages. Twenty-two women and 12 men were interviewed in 2008 and 2009. Most were white British.

There was a fairly even spread of interviewees across middle, intermediate and working-class backgrounds (defined primarily with reference to occupation, although jobs and occupational backgrounds will be specified through the analysis). A second round of interviews was conducted in the summer of 2011, with 30 of the original participants, and a third round of interviews was run in 2014 with 21 of the original sample.[3] A more detailed account of the strategy and sample profile is detailed in Irwin and Elley 2011. The study was undertaken in Yorkshire, and as the English educational and employment policy context is distinct from the other UK nations, England should be taken as the relevant national context of the study.

Addressing the literature on parenting and cultural capital, the original study design sought to interrogate a tendency towards quite generalised class categories. The study's focus on diversity within as well as across social class groupings proved valuable in exploring commonalities and differences in parenting ethics, and in examining the intersection of such ethics with socio-economic circumstances, parents' own backgrounds and biographies (Irwin and Elley 2013). The analysis of longitudinal data over 3 interview rounds examines how parents' values and practices evolved as their children approached young adulthood. I organise the data with reference to a loose typology of the young people's trajectories as recounted by their parents, and describe parents' values and engagement with their children as they passed key educational decision points and embarked on divergent trajectories. As reported by other research there are many commonalities in values across parents, whatever their class circumstance. Parents in the sample provided a picture of constancy in their emotional support, tailored to their growing children's needs. The importance of 'being there' to listen to and talk with their children, most especially in their early teenage years, was a recurring theme across the sample, and one which for some was in poignant contrast to their own childhood experiences. When the children were in their early teens parents were often centred on formal

schooling as a route to doing well, and many valued the importance of drive and determination, again an ethic which transcended class divisions. This 'cultivation' ethic was often inflected with parents' own backgrounds, trajectories and beliefs about the difference they could make to their child's future (Irwin and Elley 2011, 2013). Below I analyse longitudinal data as children approached young adulthood, and explore two lines of cleavage in parents' values and practices as their children reached and passed educational decision points. These were the relative autonomy accorded to teenage children, and the differing values placed on post compulsory academic and vocational education. These differences are under-researched in literature on parenting. As their late teenage children were embarking on divergent pathways we see evidence of classed inheritances across generations. Exploring the inheritance of values 'in practice' I illuminate differing values and their contextual embeddedness, as well as the diverse ways in which recent changes in structures of education and employment manifest in parents' outlooks and in their concerns for their children's futures.

Academic trajectories: normative pathways to higher education in the context of increased fees

In a prior analysis of cross sectional data from this study published in this journal, I explored diversity in how parents engaged with their children, and characterised them as 'cruising, nudging or pushing' their children to a hoped-for future (Irwin and Elley 2013). Middle-class parents ranged from relaxed assurance to an overtly strategic orientation in respect of their children's futures. Over the years, as their children grew up, the data reveals very starkly how parents' involvement became strongly directional if their children appeared at risk of diverging from a valued pathway. Parents reflected on their children's evolving

capacities, interests and expectations for the future, and intervened at key moments mobilising resources which kept children 'on track'. (4)

The context of decision making around higher education altered significantly during the research. In 2011, the Coalition Government, newly in office, announced an increase in annual university tuition fees to £9k payable through a loan and directly contradicting the Liberal Democrat campaign pledge to not raise tuition fees. The new fees policy came into force for the 2012 university entry cohort. The announcement preceded the second round of interviews run in the research. It caused extensive anger amongst the middle-class parents in particular:

> I will never vote Lib Dem again! I will never vote for those buggers! I voted for them on the basis of that policy that they said they would not do anything (Jim, health professional)

> I think we should pay for [higher education] through our taxes and see it as an investment for the future. Absolutely ridiculous. I*t's just warped the way that we view* all of this (Gill, charity sector professional)

Extensive frustration did not deflect these graduate parents' expectation of a university route for their children. Clive was typical:

> I think it probably worries them ... whether they can afford to go to University or whether we can afford to support them. *I think that's a terrible state of affairs. But it*

won't affect us providing, it doesn't affect our opinions or desires for them to go away

in any way, shape or form (Clive, self employed businessman)

Some of these parents referred to their own parents as having been upwardly mobile through pursuing education. For Gill this was linked to a very strong positive evalution of academic pursuit:

it does matter to me the whole academic thing and I dislike myself for that... but that's because that's what I knew

This academic 'ethos' was repeated across several accounts. All professional middle class parents had children on anticipated A level routes, and being aged 16 was not a relevant decision point. Nevertheless, parents engaged closely with their children's evolving ideas about the future. I turn now to some of the longitudinal data to show how their thinking and practices evolved through time. Their accounts often appeared quite continuous, picking up in interview, three and six years on, from where they had left off. When Sally's eldest son Simon was 10 she spoke of his 'all-rounder abilities' and precocity, when he was 13 she saw Oxbridge as a possibility and echoed this again when he was 16. For Sally, there was an alignment between her strongly academic values and the road that Simon was travelling:

Well, the main thing I always say to Simon is, I think, when he looks back and thinks, *"What did* Mum and D*ad do?" er... I hope he will look back and think, "Mum a*lways *bought me loads of books"* (Sally, professional)

She possessed extensive knowledge, networks and confidence in seeking to help her son, her

partner had helped him secure work experience, she was 'obsessed with UCAS applications', and encouraged his volunteer work seeing various benefits in it, including an enhancement of his CV. If recession had made a difference in terms of decisions, she was pleased her son was likely to choose an area of study (such as maths) which would remain in demand.

Earlier evidence and analysis from the study revealed an assuredness of some middle-class parents but strategic interventions came into play if children diverged from valued pathways. Jim was generally very confident his children would 'find their way', and anticipated them doing so when first interviewed, when his children were in primary school. When I interviewed him again in 2011 his older daughter Sophie was in her early teens and Jim described her growing passion for arts and acting and potential interest in following this later on. He reflected that this might lead her away from a university route and was ambivalent:

> *I'll be surprised if she doesn't go to University......, but if she chooses a different path, as long as it's something that she's committed to then* I would go with that. You know, she would like to do more acting; w*hich doesn't quite fit in with, (my wife) and I have* got very academic backgrounds.

However, by the time she was 16, Sophie's interests had come more into line with his academic values, and university was much more clearly in view as a destination, a 'natural' path onto which he strongly encouraged her, for example warning her of the financial risks of a performing arts career and helping her to secure work experience in a professional setting. These sorts of interventions all seemed to contribute to Sophie deciding on a professional, and therefore university, career. Jim described this as happening in an almost tacit way:

We really haven't talked about it, we've pretty much ignored it, to be perfectly honest, because we didn't really need to because she had come round to that view before we needed to get into it.

Jim had always appeared confident about his children's futures and, in the longitudinal data, we see him watching over and ensuring they remain on the valued educational pathway. Sophie's interest in performing arts was set to be a factor in her choice of university (in respect of extra-curricular options) but not more.

What happens when children do not 'fall into line' as readily? The next two parents had sons they felt were not academically motivated. Richard, another health professional, felt that his eldest son was lazy and at risk of not achieving his potential. In our second interview Richard described his ongoing efforts at incentivising Scott so he could pursue his interest in engineering at university. Richard drew on extensive resources: arranging work experience with members of his extended family and sending his children to private school. Unlike many middle-class parents who were furious about the increase in university fees, Richard suggested the cost of university might help his son focus more effectively in securing a good qualification. Tracy too reflected on ensuring her son, David, followed a university route even though he was not strongly motivated academically. When he was 14 the importance of high academic expectations animated her discussion, and had influenced her parenting style and a family move to a house closer to a preferred school. When David was 17, Tracy recounted how he had failed to do well in his AS levels, putting in jeopardy his chances of a university education. Tracy and her husband had pressed the school to allow him to change his A level choices and restart year 12. She accepted her son had a more practical leaning, but she never explicitly reflected on a

non-university route for him, supporting his choice to apply for a vocationally oriented degree at university:

> I have looked at all the boys in our family from both sides and they are all the same, they cannot pass exams, but they can actually do something (practical), so in the longer term I am not worried because we are a family of do-ers. So he will find his place but it might take him longer (Tracy, local government manager).

Being a do-er was a cultural motif which ran through many interviews but it is notable that within these professional middle-class contexts, where parents were themselves graduates and envisioned professional futures for their children, a non-university route was not valued, indeed rarely contemplated.

The data echoes other evidence on the 'strong framing' (after Ball et al 2002) of children's educational futures by professional middle-class parents, and the mobilisation of resources in firming up trajectories towards HE (cf. Power et al 2003, Devine 2004). For many parents, there was a mutual reinforcement of their positive evaluation of academic pursuit as valuable in its own right and the degree requirement for a professional career. The data reveal how parents' practices evolved through time. Teenage children who in parents' accounts were not always wholly committed to university routes were pressed firmly in this direction and would have needed to take a strong stand to resist it. Where teenage children showed an inclination to vocational or applied pursuits, parents framed this in ways which were consistent with, or even required, higher education, thereby enabling access to future professional pathways. A number of parents referred to 'being academic' or valuing books and learning, an ethos which related to their own educational backgrounds and with which they identified and

sought to encourage in their children. Across the professional and graduate level educated parents in the sample there was extensive anger and frustration about the increase in annual university tuition fees to £9k, but this did not deflect their vision for their children's futures and the almost inviolable necessity of following a university route to a professional, and valued, career.

Contingent trajectories: evolving plans and weighing alternatives

Some parents were changeable in their ideas about their children going to university, and more open to alternatives. They were in a more intermediate social class positioning, and had not themselves been to university. Interestingly, here we see cost-benefit assessments of higher education come more clearly into view. Kirsty was a full-time homemaker married to a police officer. She left school at 16 with O levels, as had her husband. They both went directly into work. Interviewed when her older son was 13 she envisaged that he would go to university and in our second interview, when he was 16, she still envisaged this as a route and repeated a wider motif: that achieving at a higher level allows 'more options'. However, unlike the parents discussed earlier, alternatives were still in view, here related to the reasonably successful route taken by her husband:

> ... *if it doesn't work out* (laughs) he can fall back on being a police officer! *... there's worse jobs aren't there, than being a police officer?* (Kirsty, homemaker)

In our third interview in 2014 she explained that her son had decided against going to university at the last minute, despite being offered a place at his first choice:

He just wants to be a police officer. .. there was no point coming out of University ... *fifty seven thousand pounds of debt to do a job he really doesn't want to do* ... he was like '*I don't even want to* [do that] so *... I said you've got to live the life you wan*t to live

For Bev:

I mean it's only a minimum payment that they have to pay back per month isn't it? But *it's for a long time. It, it can be slightly offputting. And I, when I spoke to* Emily about *it, she didn't want that. She didn't want that financial commi*tment for many many years. (Bev, pre-school teacher)

These framings of higher education in terms of a cost-benefit analysis suggests its value is seen to be marginal, and points to its non-normative nature amongst these families. Economic calculus varies by circumstance, its contours shaped by cultural value. For some, contingent pathways led not away from, but into, university. For example, when Rachel's eldest daughter was 17 she said "I'm not going to say you can't go to university but I don't think it's the right thing for her"; yet 3 years later she recounted how her daughter had chosen to go to university (and was flourishing) and the younger was applying. She was very happy with the routes they were following. These parents allowed their children more autonomy in their educational decision making, and tailored their advice in line with their children's evolving plans (cf. Winterton and Irwin 2012; Ball et al 2002). Other parents in intermediate and working class families followed a similar pattern but, as we see below, where they themselves had close links to manual work they were likely to value vocational pathways even more highly.

Vocational trajectories and uncertain outcomes

Several motifs animate the accounts of parents in this grouping, many of whom were originally recruited through having sons at community football venues. Again, unlike the middle-class parents, they were more likely to accept the relative autonomy of their 16 and 17 year old children in making choices about education and work. These parents had previously emphasised the value of their children doing well in education. Some employed tutors to support their children's education. Duncan, like others, had provided extensive support to his children in their schoolwork and also taken evening classes so he could help them. However, the extensive support of children's academic work at school (cf. Dermott and Pomati 2015) sat alongside a positive evaluation of vocational routes to employment. There was some scepticism about formal academic credentials, and how they are no guarantee of doing well:

U*nfortunately in this last twenty years is there's* too many people getting certificates and getting things. But what can they really do, you know? (Duncan, self employed service worker)

(a distant relative), her son has just passed at University*.. And he's the first one in the* family. But funny enough *he can't get a job* (Tom, semi-skilled operative)

I've got friends with A levels coming out of their backside and any qualification going and you find them labouring on jobs (Derek, self employed plasterer)

Several participants also described possibilities for doing well without formal qualifications.

You hear in a lot of cases whe*re they've not passed any exams they've still gone on to* do well for themselves .... there is always some that do well, they have their personality to do well in other ways (Susan, teaching assistant)

Duncan recounted how his daughter 'bumped off' college, and then moved through a series of jobs until she secured a job as a secretary: So without really getting a massive e*ducation she's* done pretty well.

Alongside this scepticism about the singular value of post-secondary level academic routes, several parents felt their child would not be happy 'behind a desk' or indoors all the time in their future work, and positively valued vocational training routes to work. This sentiment tended to correspond with parents' own educational and employment experiences and the positive evaluation of having a practical outlook. There was no necessary link between children's academic capabilities and these values. Indeed, some young people had been encouraged by their school to stay on and do A level studies, even where this appeared to not suit them, a pressure which may be exacerbated by school performance frameworks. Tom described how, because his son did well in his GCSEs, "he got pushed to go for his A levels" by the school, but he got frustrated, left school after a year and successfully applied for a 3-year training position as an electrician, with college day release. Tom had long valued a good education "so he can get into any job", but this meant doing well at key examination points, and understandably when his son secured the apprenticeship having left school at 17 Tom was "proud as punch". However, more typical was parental uncertainty regarding their children's futures.

Duncan had himself left school without qualifications, but very quickly secured a 4-year engineering apprenticship. In adulthood, as an engineer, ill health prevented him working for some years and he then did other service sector jobs. In 2008 Duncan described his son, George's, driven nature and his ambition to develop a career in the armed forces. George did well in his GCSEs at school and stayed on into the sixth form. Frustrated, he left and looked for work and accepted a training position as a forklift truck driver. Duncan described how within six weeks George had got his license and was working full time. Duncan had always been very strongly supportive of his son, enormously proud of his achievements at school, valued his 'all-rounder' abilities, and saw his ambition to pursue a career in the armed services as laudable. George's future hopes were not at all guaranteed and in the meantime he was in a low skilled role. Duncan reflected on the meaning and value of the apprenticeship, offering a personal perspective on the decline in valued apprenticeship opportunities:

I said to him when I was an apprentice for four years when I first started back in the seventies I was on twenty pound a week and that was all I got.. I had that for four years *and I said that's what apprenticeships are you know. I think with the* [fork lift truck] apprenticeship.. although he got it through this company (who) do come in and see *what he's doing, I don't feel they do enough... I think he's doing a job rather than being* trained. *I don't think he's learning much now.*

Concerns about the risky training and job market into which their children were stepping were shared by other parents. Amy had left school at 18, achieved some success in office administration in days when "you could walk into any job" before she had children, and subsequently worked part time in junior unskilled work whilst caring for her growing children.

Not liking school, her son Ed had followed a diploma course at college. However, he was on the point of leaving without completing the diploma to Amy's extreme irritation:

> H*e'd been going on the internet and he says, "Oh, I'm going to… I'm applying for jobs, I've had enough". I thought, "He's done two years. He's done two years!" (customer* service worker)

He did secure a two-year work based apprenticeship and was allowed to complete his college diploma alongside. However, Amy was pessimistic about the future:

> B*ecause they've started laying em off. H*e*'s come back to me and said, "Look, mum, you know, they're laying loads of people off and things are not really good" and we're* just hoping that he carries on through to the end of his apprenticeship.

With limited resources Amy's account was dominated by her frustration about a lack of control she wanted to hold over her own life and that of her children, a frustration which was sharpened by her perception of the insecurity which attached to her son's current training position.

Jodie, too, was always extremely driven on behalf of her children, a motif which corresponded with her sense that she had, through determination and hard work, been successful despite very difficult circumstances. Jodie described herself as mixed race, she left school with few qualifications and became a single mother as a teenager, but in time managed to study and gradually build a career. Working and studying she wanted to be a role model for her children. Her son did less well in his GCSEs than she hoped. Jodie had long been keen for him to do an apprenticeship or a job with prospects for progression. After his GCSEs he chose to follow a BTEC. She referred to his choice as "him having a bit of time out to think about

what he actually wants to be" and so, she said, she insisted on him working at weekends. Jodie held a strong commitment to work, as well as study, as a required passport to securing a decent future:

> If you stay in education and you never have a part time job, then you can be qualified *up to your ears, but no one will pick you because you haven't got the work under your* belt (Jodie, associate professional)

This commitment to work alongside study corresponded closely with her own biography and strategy for doing well, and reflected her unease about the lack of vocational direction at the heart of her son's decision to pursue 'what he loves', and her concern about the outcomes of her son's choice to embark on a vocational course but without a clear goal.

These families all exemplify circumstances which might be characterised more in terms of constraint than disadvantage and their children may well carve successful vocational pathways into rewarding labour market careers. Nevertheless, even in such contexts of relative promise we see how parental accounts reflect the immediacy of uncertainties and contingencies faced by their young adult children, in marked contrast to those pursuing extended academic pathways.

Across the sample we see parents' values and practices in guiding and supporting their children as they embark on diverse pathways. Professional middle class parents were wholly clear that university was the best route for their children, despite their fury at the fees increases. In contrast, parents in intermediate circumstances more explicitly weighed up the costs and benefits of a higher education route for their children. I argue this reflects a perception of more

marginal benefits, the absence of a family norm around higher education participation, and a more positive evaluation of vocational routes to employment. Those with more immediate (personal or family) experience of skilled and semi-skilled manual work also ceded greater autonomy to their children, and positively valued training and vocational routes to employment, again strongly embedded in familiarity and normative ideas about a good job. In these contexts such ideas were often qualified with immediate worries about their children's prospects.

Conclusion

How do parents perceive and seek to influence their children's educational pathways as they approach young adulthood, and how do class related differences play out in the current context of change in education and labour market arrangements? Using qualitative longitudinal evidence I have explored values and practices amongst parents whose children were growing up through their teenage years, between 2008 and 2014. This was a period of recession and austerity, and saw the marked increase of fees in higher education in England and ongoing challenges in post-16 opportunities for younger school leavers. Exploring perceptions and values relating to educational decisions has highlighted some important differences across the sample. Amongst the professional middle classes, the ages of 16 and 17 were not seen as a transition point, but another rung on the educational ladder. These parents were confident that their children would pursue academic routes and if this was ever called into question by children then the parents became strongly directional, intervening to ensure their child stayed on track (cf. Ball et al 2002). Increased HE fees caused consternation but did not deflect professional middle class families from seeing university as the only appropriate route for their children. Whilst middle class participants certainly held concerns about their children's futures,

there was little doubt about 'the right pathway' to be on, necessary to a decent professional future occupation, and consistent with positive evaluations of the intrinsic worth of academic pursuit. Intermediate and working class parents ceded greater autonomy as their children moved beyond compulsory full time school leaving age. Amongst some parents in intermediate positions there was a more explicitly stated cost benefit calculus regarding the value of university than for middle class graduate parents, reflecting its more marginal, less normative, standing. Allowing children greater autonomy, tailoring advice and positively valuing vocational routes was also typical of working class parents, especially amongst those fathers who had themselves followed trades. Here the ages of 16 and 17 were widely perceived as a decision point since options opened up, and children were choosing alternatives to full time schooling.

I have developed the analysis with reference to class groupings, but these should not be taken to stand for social classes as a whole, indeed part of my intent is to develop a more situated analysis of diversity. The positive evaluation of practical and vocational pursuit may reflect the fact that several working-class families were recruited through their sons' commitment to physical activity (through football in particular). The analysis contributes partly to addressing the experience of the 'missing middle' (Roberts 2011), bringing them within a comparative, cross-class, analytic framing. The evidence contributes to understanding classed continuities across familial generations. Through the analysis I have highlighted some important differences in parental values and practices across class groupings. These values and practices are embedded in diverse contexts and reflect parents' own backgrounds, ethics, familiarity with different kinds of educational and training pathways and situated judgements about the best route for their 16 to 19 year old children to follow.

How do changes in the wider educational and labour market context recast the social value of differing norms and practices, and differing pathways? Most parents believed that the economic risks faced by their children had significantly increased since their own day although they diverged in their ability to help their children manage, postpone or defray such risks. It has been argued that labour market restructuring further undermines once secure middle class expectations (Brown 2013), yet risks were still some way off as seen by the middle-class parents, who also often described options to support their children in future, for example anticipating providing financial support with housing. However, parents and youngsters in families which have traditionally valued vocational routes are undermined by the incoherence of non-academic 16-19 pathways and the precarity of the youth labour market (Keep 2015). We see in the sample that even those achieving well academically at 16, but pursuing more vocational routes, were commonly perceived by their parents as being on quite uncertain pathways. Growing political concern surrounding the value of non-academic routes to work has led to a new push for higher quality coherent vocational and technical education and training (e.g Sainsbury 2016; DfE 2016). Success is contingent on many factors, and concerns have already been expressed regarding the efficacy of the proposed new training infrastructure (Wolf 2015). Perhaps an even more fundamental difficulty is effectively challenging the current political and cultural emphasis on academic virtue as the only route to economic and social success.

Notes

1. In English law young adults must pursue education or training of some kind up to 18, but 16 remains an important transition point as young people's options open out and they follow school, college, apprenticeships or part time education or training alongside work.
2. This is a complex and evolving policy field (see e.g Sainsbury 2016).

3. Dr. Sharon Elley helped administer the survey, and ran half of the semi-structured interviews at round 1 and a third of the interviews at round 2. The author undertook the rest, and ran all the interviews at round 3.
4. Longitudinal data reveals more details and context surrounding individuals' lives. In the analysis sections I have taken some precautionary measures to further protect participants' anonymity, making minor alterations to circumstantial details and re-anonymising names.

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