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## **“EMBERS FROM THE ASHES”?**

### **THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING AN ASSISTED PLACE HOLDER**

A report for the Sutton Trust

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## Foreword by Sir Peter Lampl

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The Assisted Places Scheme (APS) – and the experiences of those on it – has an important contemporary relevance, even though the programme was ended by the incoming Labour government over a decade ago. We continue to live in a society where the 7% of young people in fee-paying schools are much more likely to achieve highly, to enter our most prestigious universities and to take places in our leading professions, than the 93% in the state sector. Efforts to open up the private sector so that its resources and expertise are shared more widely have also come into sharper focus in the last couple of years, with fee-paying schools coming under pressure from the Charity Commission to prove their public benefit credentials.

So this report is a timely reminder of the lessons that can be learnt from past efforts to open up private education. We know from previous research that assisted place holders were more likely to do much better – in terms of exam results and earnings in adulthood – than state school pupils with similar backgrounds and academic abilities. But we also know from this new study that the scheme was far from an unqualified success. Many assisted place holders felt estranged or alienated in the elite atmosphere of their private school, and those from working class backgrounds continued to underperform relative to their better off peers. And the scheme often failed to reach those families it was intended to help most.

The question for today’s policy makers, then, is whether it is possible to take the best of the APS – and the Direct Grant scheme before it, through which the majority of places at 165 top independent day schools were fully funded – whilst overcoming the shortfalls. In other words, to give young people from non-privileged backgrounds access to the advantages of independent education in an economically efficient and socially inclusive manner. I believe it is and we have a model that works.

For a number of years the Sutton Trust piloted an Open Access approach at the Belvedere School, Liverpool, in partnership with the Girls’ Day School Trust. Places were allocated on merit alone, with parents paying a sliding scale of fees according to their means, resulting in 70 percent receiving some form of assistance, including 30 percent who paid nothing. Importantly, no families who could well afford to pay full fees were subsidised and the whole school – rather than a few token places – was opened up to all. An independent evaluation proved the scheme’s effectiveness: the first Open Access cohort achieved Belvedere’s best ever GCSE results and the school created an inclusive environment in which girls of diverse backgrounds, fully reflecting the Merseyside area, thrived together.

The divide between the independent and the state sector is blurring. The Labour government have introduced academies as ‘independent state schools’ and the Conservative opposition talks about allowing new providers to enter the maintained system. In this new landscape there must surely be room for an expansion of the Open Access scheme to other independent day schools with a history of educating bright students from non-privileged homes. The chance to democratise entry to 100 or more of our highest-performing

academic schools should not be missed and would be a tremendous boost for social mobility.

This study also holds important lessons for the private sector and government as they look to define what ‘public benefit’ means in the context of fee-paying schools. One of the most telling findings from this study is that virtually all the assisted place holders interviewed spoke of the fact that they could not participate in out of school activities, such as field-trips, cultural visits or foreign exchange trips, because their parents could not afford to finance them. So schools need to look beyond the simple question of fees when opening their doors. Poorer students need other financial and pastoral support if they are to make the most of the opportunities the private sector can offer.

I would like to thank the authors of this report for another illuminating and in depth study. The role of the independent sector in state education is always contentious and provokes strong reactions on either side of the divide. But if we are truly interested in providing life-changing opportunities to young people – opportunities that will take them to top universities and prestigious careers – it is simply not a role we can afford to ignore.

**Sir Peter Lampl**  
Chairman, The Sutton Trust

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We would like to thank the Sutton Trust for the grant that has made this project possible. We would also like to acknowledge the support of the Economic and Social Research Council which enabled us to undertake the previous surveys which are cited in this report. We also appreciate the assistance of Nova Matthias, Sarah Tough and Jonathon Walker, who commented on early drafts of this report.

As always, we are grateful to our respondents and would like to thank them warmly for giving up their time in increasingly busy lives to speak to us.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is now nearly thirty years since Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative government introduced the Assisted Places Scheme (APS) - their first education policy announcement. Eighteen years later, as their first education policy announcement, New Labour abolished it.

The scheme, designed to provide a ladder of opportunity to enable academically able pupils from poor backgrounds to attend independent schools, is also of contemporary relevance as there are those who argue that something similar is still needed. A critique of the APS is useful in illuminating the strengths and weaknesses of recent and proposed education policies which seek to meet some of the objectives of the scheme while overcoming its limitations.

For the current research project, twenty-five former Assisted Place (AP) holders were interviewed, all of whom had participated in previous research stretching back to the 1980s. The report attempts to unravel some of the processes that contributed to the variable performance of our AP holders. The sample, deliberately selected to include the more disadvantaged AP holders, provide diverse accounts of their experiences of sponsorship, of stigma and of success. To make sense of this diversity, we have categorised our respondents' careers at school (following the work of Basil Bernstein) in terms of whether they were predominantly 'committed', 'detached', 'estranged' or 'alienated'.

### Principal findings

#### *Feelings of difference*

- All our respondents experienced the difficulties of economic hardship. Virtually all spoke of the fact that they could not participate in the 'semi-formal' activities in the school curriculum, such as field-trips, cultural visits or foreign exchange trips, because their parents could not afford to finance them. Also commonly mentioned was a lack of participation in weekend and after-school activities, compounded by very long journeys to and from school.
- While none of our respondents were 'well off', their relative financial hardship was not universally *experienced* by them as a source of stigma. For some, it was simply a 'fact of life' which prevented them undertaking certain activities, but it was not a major issue. For others, feeling like the 'poor relation' was *the* defining characteristic of their time at school. It appears, from this small sample, that financial hardship combined with cultural discontinuity between the home and the school, contributes to a sense of stigmatisation for AP holders. For most of our pupils, this discontinuity arose out of social class differences. For a few, it stemmed from differences in race, religion and sexuality.

- It is also worth noting that, while almost half of our respondents (12/25) came from single parent families, this was experienced as a source of stigma by only two pupils. Neither of these two pupils came from middle or intermediate class homes, even though these accounted for the majority of single parent households in the sample (8/11). Again, this might suggest that a non-manual class background protects children from the potential stigmatisation of coming from a single parent family.
- It was rare for respondents to remember AP holders standing out as a group at school or even their identity being common knowledge. It should also be noted that there was considerable variation between the independent schools in this study in terms of the percentage of students within the cohort who had assisted places. This ranged from a token percentage of students to over 40% of the intake when the scheme was fully grown.

### *Impact on family*

- Many of those sampled came either from middle class or intermediate backgrounds and/or had high or medium educational inheritance. This meant that respondents were not necessarily encountering a totally alien culture when attending independent schools. Overall, only three respondents, all from working class families with low educational inheritance, mentioned their secondary schooling as having impacted on their relationship with their parents.

### *Friendships and social capital*

- Independent school pupils tend to be drawn from a relatively large geographical area compared to those attending comprehensive schools. This naturally inhibits visiting friends if they live some distance away. In addition, the workload at independent schools and the often extensive range of extra-curricular activities mean that there can be less time for socialising in general. Some respondents found that this had also impacted on their friendships with local children, because they did not get home from school until late, had more homework and were, in some cases, required to attend school on a Saturday. There is also evidence that the schools attempted to protect pupils from supposedly undesirable or potentially distracting neighbourhood, and even family, influences by providing a near-‘total’ environment.
- It is sometimes suggested that independent schooling provides ex-pupils with strong networks and valuable ‘social capital’ later on. Yet, while most of the respondents still had some form of contact with at least one person from their secondary school (18/25), very few, regardless of background or mode of engagement with the school, still had strong friendships with them (4/25).

### *Modes of engagement*

- Bernstein's categorisation of school involvement centres around pupils' understanding, realisation and acceptance of the school's academic and social dimensions. The academic dimension is concerned with the acquisition of specific skills, i.e. attainment. The social dimension is related to behaviour and activities, such as sport and extra-curricular visits. Pupils tend to have one of the following relationships with the school: commitment; detachment; deferment; estrangement; alienation. Given the retrospective nature of our respondents' accounts, deferment is not a category that is used here.
- Within the sample, the distribution of the dominant modes of involvement of our respondents is uneven. Commitment and detachment are the most frequent modes of involvement. As with all samples requiring voluntary participation, there is likely to be some systematic bias in the response rate. It is probable that the pupils who recall their time at school in terms of 'estrangement' and 'alienation' are those least likely to have participated in the interviews. Also two respondents were not categorised because they left their secondary school half-way through.
- Eight of our respondents displayed 'commitment' to their school when they reflected on their experiences. 'Commitment' is the strongest form of involvement where the pupil understands and can realise the ends of the academic and social dimensions of the school. These respondents came from homes with diverse occupational backgrounds and levels of educational inheritance. There is a marked gender difference, with the large majority (6/8) being female. This is even more marked when one considers the under-representation of women within categorised sample (8/23).
- Ten of our respondents exhibit a 'detached' involvement with their schools. 'Detachment' involves high levels of involvement with the academic dimension, but a more uncertain relationship with the social dimension. Our 'detached' respondents ascribed to the academic dimension of the school. However, they did not fully embrace the school – and in particular, appear to have distanced themselves from the social dimension of the school. As with our 'committed' respondents, our 'detached' respondents came from diverse backgrounds. They are though all, bar one, male.
- Two of our respondents were 'estranged' from their schools. 'Estrangement' occurs when the pupil accepts the academic and social dimensions of the school, but does not understand how to realise them. The commitment to the idea of the school, combined with the experience of academic failure makes this position particularly painful for the pupil. Our 'estranged' respondents look back at their schooling with some confusion and regret.
- Three of our respondents were 'alienated' from their schools. These are the pupils whose involvement with the school is one of disenchantment. 'Alienation' is the most negative form of involvement with the school and involves a lack of understanding and a rejection of both the academic and social dimensions of the school. Even if they start



off being committed to the school, they cannot or will not engage academically at the school, and ultimately reject the social dimension as well. All of the 'alienated' respondents in our sample came from working class backgrounds and all are male.

## INTRODUCTION

It is now nearly thirty years since Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative government introduced the Assisted Places Scheme (APS) - their first education policy announcement. Eighteen years later, and as their first education policy announcement, New Labour abolished it. The scheme was designed to provide a ladder of opportunity for academically able pupils from poor backgrounds to attend independent schools. Or, as one head teacher put it, the scheme entailed 'plucking embers from the ashes'. The scheme was partly intended to fill the perceived vacuum left by the abolition of direct grant grammar schools in the 1970s. These schools, which educated about three per cent of the secondary school population, were required to give at least 25 per cent of their places free to pupils who had spent at least two years in a maintained primary school. These places, together with some 'reserved places' to which the two year rule did not apply, were usually paid for by the local education authority. By the end of the 1960s, local education authorities funded more than 50 per cent of the places in 93 of the 178 direct grant schools. In addition, some other pupils in these schools had their fees remitted in full or part on a means-tested basis (PSC 1970).

However, despite the ending of the scheme, it is of more than historical interest as there are those who argue that something like it is still needed. An evaluation of the original scheme can be used to illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of recent policies and experiments in education, such as the Open Access experiment at the Belvedere School, Liverpool, funded by the Sutton Trust, which sought to overcome some of the failings of the APS.<sup>1</sup> The experience of the scheme can also be used to inform future policies and proposals with similar objectives.

This report draws on a small research project, funded by the Sutton Trust, which sought to investigate how the scheme was experienced by its beneficiaries. These respondents are part of a larger cohort which we have been following as part of our continuing exploration of the educational pathways into the middle class.

Our previous quantitative analysis (again, funded by the Sutton Trust) of the achievements and destinations of Assisted Place (AP) holders (Power *et al* 2006) showed that the scheme *did* provide a pathway to high level qualifications, elite university places and occupational advantage. However, it was not an unqualified success. Aside from consideration of the implications for the system as a whole of this kind of scheme, which have been written about elsewhere (see Walford 1987; Edwards *et al* 1989), our research suggests that it carried risks even for those pupils it was designed to 'assist', particularly for AP holders from *working class* backgrounds.

This variable picture of success and failure provided the main impetus for undertaking further interviews with the AP holders within our cohort.

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<sup>1</sup> Belvedere School became an Academy in September 2007.

### ***Background to the Assisted Places Scheme***

The APS can be seen as a part of a long tradition, curtailed by comprehensivisation and the end of direct grant status, of attempting to provide a scholarship ladder for the ‘deserving’ poor, (Edwards *et al* 1989; Whitty *et al* 1998). Although there is insufficient space, here, to give an account of all the scheme’s antecedents, it is important to look briefly at the scheme’s inception and development.<sup>2</sup>

In 1965 the Public Schools Commission (PSC) was set up by the then Labour government. One of its recommendations was to establish state funded assisted places (for boarders). It argued that the influx of new, less affluent pupils, would give rise to a social mix in independent schools. The PSC felt that the onus should not be on these pupils to ‘fit in’ and simply be absorbed into the schools. Rather the schools would need to adapt with a view, eventually, to having at least half of their pupils on assisted places, rather than ‘scattered in penny packets round all the schools’ (1968: paras 14-5).

Significantly, the PSC had stated that it would be ‘deplorable if a large proportion of the grant-aided places were filled by the kind of boys and girls who already go to public schools’ (1968: para 7). Yet, while the PSC presciently asserted that, in the early years, such a scheme would be dominated disproportionately by those with backgrounds similar to the schools’ current pupils, they rather optimistically hoped that the schools, and attitudes towards them, would change: ‘the passage of time will lay the ghosts who have haunted us in our discussion’ (1968: para 25).

The second report of the PSC (1970), which dealt with the direct grant schools, rejected the need for state support of pupils in the private sector except in exceptional cases, though the minority view was that there should be support for a small number of schools catering specifically for the highly gifted and talented. Its overall position was that it did not make sense for the state to support academically selective education at a time when maintained grammar schools were being encouraged to go comprehensive. This, of course, heralded the end of the direct grant grammar schools in the mid-1970s.

The Commission’s recommendations on subsidising pupils were not implemented by the various Labour and Conservative governments of the late 1960s and 1970s. However, the phasing out of direct grant schools in the mid-1970s meant that such a scheme became appealing to the Conservatives while they were in opposition. Most of the former direct grant schools had opted for ‘full’ independence and therefore needed new revenue streams.

Stuart Sexton, a political advisor in the Conservative Party, was one of the main instigators – the ‘intellectual broker’ – of what would become the APS. While in opposition, he was involved in lobbying and initiating discussions with independent schools. He envisaged the scheme operating on a larger scale than just involving the old direct grant schools, and hoped to achieve the participation of 500 independent schools in the scheme (rather than merely ‘reviving’ the old direct grant list).

In the aftermath of the 1979 election more intensive negotiations took place between independent schools and the Department of Education and Science, led by Secretary of State

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<sup>2</sup> Full a more detailed history see Edwards *et al* 1989: 11-34.

Mark Carlisle. There were various considerations to take into account, such as the cost, numbers of pupils involved and criteria for participation for schools and pupils. Stringent opposition from the Labour Party created some uncertainty for any school wishing to join the scheme as the school would not be assured of keeping the funding in the event of a Conservative defeat in the next election. This would then leave the school with a number of non-fee-paying pupils.

The scheme's funding, the number of available places and criteria for schools joining the scheme were debated at length. Participating schools were expected to demonstrate good academic records, to have a sixth-form and to offer a large number of academic subjects. Potential schools were categorised on this basis, and initial lists were dominated by former direct grant schools.

While the PSC (1968) had focused on the need to give assisted places to some boarders, this was not part of the basic APS's provision, mainly due to the increased expense. However, extra assistance was offered to those on the lowest incomes towards incidental costs, such as school meals, school uniforms and travel. In order to target disadvantaged pupils, and as part of a desire to bring new 'clients' into the private sector, schools were required to ensure that 60% of their AP holders had been educated in the state primary sector.

The scheme's establishment was part of the 1980 Education Act. In total, 219 schools participated in the scheme in the initial phase in 1981, considerably fewer than Sexton's original target of 500 schools. Of these participating schools, over half (124) were former LEA and direct grant grammar schools. The total number of assisted places for entry at 11-13 was 4453, and a further 984 came in at the sixth-form stage. For a range of contemporary opinions for and against the scheme (see Edwards *et al* 1989: 66-7).

Subsequent electoral successes for the Conservatives helped to consolidate the scheme, which ran for the best part of two decades, although it had a slow growth rate in terms of the number of pupils assisted. In November 1995, Prime Minister Major announced that the scheme would be expanded, eventually doubling in size, and would include assistance to primary-aged pupils. However, with electoral defeat in 1997, this expansion was abandoned and the scheme was phased out by the New Labour government from 1998.

### ***Previous research on the Assisted Places Scheme***

This research has its origins in previous work that examined the APS. In 1982, an evaluation of the scheme was funded by the then Social Science Research Council.<sup>3</sup> This entailed 611 interviews with pupils, all of whom were identified as academically able but divided in their schooling between fee payers at independent schools, AP holders at the same schools, and academically able children in nearby state schools, both grammar and comprehensive. Parents of around half the sample were interviewed in their homes.

The independent schools featured in the study were not homogenous and their characteristics are outlined in Appendix B. Particularly contrasting were the more elite

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<sup>3</sup> 'The state and private education; an evaluation of the Assisted Places Scheme', funded by the Social Science Research Council (Award No C00230036).

independent schools and the former direct grant grammar schools. For example, the latter were, in many ways, retaining or regaining their ‘traditional market’ through the scheme.

One of the major findings of the original research was that less than 10% of AP holders had fathers who were manual workers, with 50% of the sample having fathers in service class employment. Almost all the employed mothers of the AP holders were in white collar employment (Edwards *et al* 1989: 161). In the original sample, the majority of AP holders came from families with relatively high educational inheritance, leading to the conclusion that ‘on this evidence they are not clearly from socially or culturally disadvantaged backgrounds, despite the relatively low incomes of their parents’ (Edwards *et al* 1989: 161).

Therefore, they were often the types of pupils already found in independent schools, the ‘deplorable’ scenario that had been outlined by the PSC. This situation could be the consequence of parents being employed in middle class occupations with relatively poor remuneration, of the influence of highly educated but ‘downwardly mobile’ mothers on their children’s educational aspirations, or of family breakdown and re-formation. In a few cases, participants were not apparently suffering from material disadvantage, as their household income was substantial even though that of the eligible parent was not.

The other major conclusion of the research was that the scheme only marginally increased ‘choice’, not least because it was based on academic ability. It was also felt that while there was a direct ‘creaming’ effect on the state sector, the symbolic consequences of the scheme had even greater significance. That is to say that comprehensive schools were, by implication, seen as unfit to educate the most ‘able’ pupils.

There have been two major follow-up studies. The first (*Destined for Success?*<sup>4</sup>) consisted of questionnaire data from 1995 from over half the original sample, complemented by qualitative interviews with around 150 of them. The respondents were now in their mid twenties and becoming established in employment. Another questionnaire, with a slightly smaller sample, was conducted in 2004 as the respondents entered their thirties and consolidated their careers (*Success Sustained?*<sup>5</sup>).

In a major book based on this work (Power *et al* 2003), the independent school sample as a whole was compared with the state school sample. In 2006, further analysis was conducted for the Sutton Trust to disaggregate the independent school sample in order to analyse differences between Assisted Place holders and full fee payers, and to compare them separately with pupils at state schools (Power *et al* 2006).

In the 2006 analysis, it emerged that, on the whole, AP holders performed better in their GCSEs and A levels than the respondents at state schools, and also better than might be expected on the basis of socio-economic and educational inheritance variables. However, those AP holders in the sample from *working class backgrounds* did less well than might be expected. One reason for this may be that AP holders from homes where the father was in

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Destined for Success? Educational biographies of academically able pupils’, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Award No R000235570).

<sup>5</sup> ‘Success Sustained? A follow-up study of the “Destined for Success” cohort’, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Award No Res-000-22-0627).

an intermediate or working class occupation were more likely to have left school before they were 18 than peers who remained in state schools. In terms of higher education, while AP holders were more likely to go to more prestigious universities, they also appear to have had a greater chance of not completing their degree, and nearly one in ten dropped out or failed their course. Yet, there also appeared to be an independent school premium for non-graduate AP holders, the majority of whom were in professional and managerial occupations.

### ***Aims of the current research***

The main purpose of the present study was to explore the processes that lay behind the variable progress of our AP holders. For example, why is it that one pupil thrived at an elite independent school and went on to a prestigious university while his classmate, of similar ability and economic circumstance, became alienated and left full-time education as soon as he could? Clearly, we can provide no definitive answers to questions such as these. Nevertheless, through asking our respondents (now in their late thirties) to reminisce about their time at school, about their subsequent careers, about their relations with family and friends, and to reflect on what they see as the legacy of the scheme, we hope to throw some light on the relationship between sponsorship, stigma and success.

## THE RESEARCH

The diversity among AP holders in general has already been noted, and this holds true for the sample in this study, despite the fact that we selected those who were clearly disadvantaged in various ways. Therefore this section will examine the characteristics of the study sample before outlining the analytical framework used in the report.

### The characteristics of the sample

Our sample of AP holders is not by any means a homogenous group in terms of background characteristics. Although the scheme undoubtedly reached many families who might not otherwise have been able to send their children to independent schools, there is overwhelming evidence, from our research and others (e.g. Douse 1985), that many of its beneficiaries were not culturally and/or economically disadvantaged. Whether this was, as several of the scheme's implementers commented at the time, simply a feature of the early years of any such policy (as the PSC predicted might happen) is difficult to ascertain.

Certainly, and given the focus of this project, it was important for us to concentrate our resources on those who could be classified as the *most* socio-economically disadvantaged. Our original sample contained 157 AP holders (see Edwards *et al* 1989) from which we were looking to select around 25 for re-interview. We identified a small number who came from unambiguously working class backgrounds. In order to bolster the numbers, we broadened out our definition of 'disadvantage' to include children who came from 'intermediate' backgrounds, i.e. whose parents were not in professional and managerial positions nor in manual work. 'Intermediate' parental occupations included secretarial work and supervisory positions. Although some might argue that this is too loose a definition of disadvantage, this group of parents is often overlooked within sociological analyses which usually employ a crude middle/working class division. Certainly, within the socially and financially privileged milieu of our elite schools, 'intermediate' status would be experienced as at the lower end of the occupational hierarchy. Additionally, and in order to bring a different dimension to 'disadvantage', we included in our sample those pupils who came from circumstances which were impoverished through parental death, divorce or unemployment.

We began by contacting the 64 potential interviewees identified. Eight letters were returned with 'not known at this address', two respondents refused to participate and a further two agreed to be interviewed, but the arrangements fell through. We do not know why 27 AP holders did not respond, or even whether our request reached them. Details on the background, achievements and destination of our sample of 25 interviewees can be found in Appendix A. An overview of their main background characteristics is outlined in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1: Occupational category of parents** (*either mother or father*)

	Frequency	%
Middle (professional or managerial)	4	16.0
Intermediate	8	32.0
Working class	10	40.0
NIPE	3	12.0
Total	25	100.0

**Table 2: Level of educational inheritance**

	Frequency	%
High <i>(one or both parents with a degree)</i>	7	29.2
Middle <i>(one or both parents went to grammar school)</i>	7	29.2
Low <i>(neither at grammar school or went beyond secondary level)</i>	10	41.7
Total	24*	100.0

\* One case of missing data

As the following cross-tabulation shows, there is, not surprisingly, a very close relationship between occupational category and level of education.

**Table 3: Relationship between occupational group and educational inheritance**

		Educational inheritance		
		High	Middle	Low
Occupational group	Middle class	4	0	0
	Intermediate	1	4	2
	Working class	1	1	8
	NIPE	1	2	0
Total		7	7	10

Half of our respondents came from single-parent households at the start of their secondary education, and there is a clear relationship between occupational category, level of educational inheritance and family make-up, as the following two cross-tabulations show:

**Table 4: Relationship between occupational group and single parent status**

		Single parent?	
		Yes	No
Occupational group	Middle class	4	0
	Intermediate	4	4
	Working class	3	7
	NIPE	1	2
Total		12	13

**Table 5: Relationship between educational inheritance and single parent status**

		Single parent?	
		yes	No
Educational inheritance	High	6	1
	Middle	1	6
	Low	4	6
Total		11	13

Those with higher level occupations and higher level qualifications tended to come from single parent families – which of course is one of the factors behind their having been eligible for financial assistance. Those with working class and intermediate occupations and low levels of education tended to be two-parent households.



### **The interviews**

Interviews with the respondents were usually conducted face to face in homes or workplaces. A minority were conducted over the telephone – in two cases because the respondent was living overseas. Respondents were given previously completed interview and survey schedules in order to remind them of their earlier thoughts.

Clearly, the data derived from asking the respondents to reflect back to a period of over twenty years ago will have particular limitations. We are dealing very much with their reminiscences, which will inevitably be partial and selective. On the other hand, the passage of time may have provided respondents with a clearer sense of the legacy of their schooling. Moreover, experiences that are remembered with hindsight as significant carry an importance for future orientations and dispositions – even if they appeared to carry less weight at the time they occurred.

### **The analytical framework**

With such small numbers, diverse background characteristics and different schools attended (eight of the nine independent schools in the original study are represented here, see Appendix B), it is pointless to try to establish any statistical patterns. However, this does not mean that we should not attempt to explore contributory factors. These factors, though, are likely to be complex and interconnected. After looking at common themes from the respondents' experiences, we subdivide them into four groups, outlined below.

In attempting to unravel the complexity, we have drawn on much earlier studies within the sociology of education, which seem to us to address issues of continuing relevance to this current research. Three texts in particular – two empirical and one theoretical - are important referents. Firstly, Jackson and Marsden's (1966) *Education and the Working Class* continues to provide the model for combining an awareness of the social structure with sensitivity to cultural allegiances. Secondly, King's (1969) *Values and Involvement in a Grammar School* provides an important parallel in that it explores the complex connection between the culture of the family and the culture of the school. There is also a strong resemblance between the culture of the grammar school of the 1960s and the selective independent schools that we researched in the 1980s. Finally, and like King, we draw on Bernstein's (1966) *Sources of Consensus and Disaffection in Education* for an analytical framework for categorising and explaining different modes of engagement between pupil and school.

### **Modes of engagement**

Bernstein (1977) argues that the sources of consensus and disaffection in education may be understood through exploring the relationship between the culture of the school and the orientation of the family to that culture. The pupil's involvement in the school is influenced by four important factors: the pupil's family, the social structure of the school, the pupil's peer-group relations and the pupil's perception of his or her occupational destiny. King (1969), drawing on Bernstein, draws out the relationship between the factors as follows:

**The family:** Involvement will be greater where there is continuity between the values of the home and the values of the school. King draws particular attention to the importance of 'second generation' pupils – those with one or more parents who had been to grammar school. In our analysis, we have categorised the pupils from these homes as having 'middle' levels of education inheritance – unless they progressed on to do a degree and gained 'high' levels.

**The social structure of the school:** King writes of the importance of recognising three aspects of the school structure: formal activities that are obligatory and officially recognised; semi-formal activities where attendance is voluntary but are also officially endorsed, e.g. field trips, extra-curricular activities; informal activities, where membership is voluntary and not officially recognised, e.g. friendship groups. To some extent, these differences relate to Bernstein's distinction between the expressive and instrumental orders. Bernstein identifies two distinct but interrelated complexes of behaviour embodied within the school. The expressive order is the complex of behaviour and activities to do with 'conduct, character and manner' (1977: 38). The instrumental order is concerned with the acquisition of specific skills. Although schools vary in terms of the relative strengths of each of these orders,<sup>6</sup> the schools we are considering here can all be classified as having a very strong instrumental focus on academic attainment and a weaker, although not unimportant, expressive order comprised of sporting activities and extra-curricular visits etc. Participation within the official and semi-official activities of both the instrumental and expressive orders is likely to foster high levels of involvement and cement relationships within the informal organisation of the school in terms of relationships with teachers and fellow pupils. For the purposes of this report the instrumental order of the school will be referred to as the 'academic dimension' and the expressive order as the 'social dimension'.

**Peer group relations:** It is possible for the pupil's significant peers to be internal or external to the school. Culturally-continuous peer group relations are likely to foster high levels of involvement in the school. Culturally-*dis*continuous peer group relations may threaten involvement in the school. The extent to which the pupil maintains friendships external to the school may depend on the time demands of travelling to school, homework and extra-curricular activities. Interviews undertaken as part of the early research on the scheme (Edwards *et al* 1989) indicate that in some schools, heavy homework commitments and pressure to participate in after-school activities were explicitly used to keep pupils 'safe' from the distractions of youth culture, local non-school peer group influences and even family influences.

**Perceptions of destiny:** It is argued that involvement will be higher when a pupil sees the school as providing the route to a desired occupation. Given the delayed entry into the labour market nowadays, it is perhaps more appropriate to talk about higher educational destiny rather than occupational destiny.

As Bernstein argues, though, involvement is multifaceted. There is not a simple continuum between high and low levels. Moreover, levels and mode of involvement may change over time. The level and kind of involvement depends on whether the pupil understands, accepts and can realise the means and ends of the social and academic dimensions. Drawing on Merton's framework for analysing suicide, Bernstein identifies a range of possible relations (Table 6) that the family may have with the school.

Commitment is the strongest form of involvement, where the pupil understands the means and accepts and can realise the ends of the academic and the social dimensions of the school. Detachment involves high levels of involvement with the academic dimension, but a more uncertain relationship with the social aspect. The pupil understands the means, but may not

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<sup>6</sup> In Power *et al* (1998a) we use this framework to compare and contrast the 18 state and independent schools in the study.

accept the ends of the social dimension, or he or she may accept the ends but does not have the means to realise them. King (1969) makes a similar separation within his research alluding to Goffman's (1961) distinction between an actor's performance of a role and the actor's disposition towards that role. This relationship can be more or less close or distant. A close relationship is called 'embracement', where the player embraces a role and is in turn embraced by it. 'Attachment', on the other hand, involves playing a role but not fully embracing it. It is, argues King (1969: 30), 'a mechanism in allowing role-involvement without commitment to organisational goals.'

**Table 6: Types of involvement in the role of the pupil** (*adapted from Bernstein 1996*)

<i>(Social)</i>	<i>Instrumental (Academic)</i>		<i>Expressive</i>	
	means	ends	means <sup>7</sup>	ends
1. Commitment	+	+	+	+
2. Detachment	+	+	+	–
3. Deferment	-----			
4. Estrangement	–	+	+ / –	+
5. Alienation	–	–	–	–

*Notes:* means: *understands* the means (+–: yes/no)  
ends: *accepts and can realise* the ends (+–: high/low involvement)

In addition, Bernstein offers us three further variants. Deferment is when the pupil's involvement is suspended - 'watching the state of play' (Bernstein 1977a: 45). This position is of only passing interest to us here - given the longitudinal and retrospective nature of our respondents' biographies and the temporary nature of deferment. Estrangement occurs when the pupil accepts the social and academic ends of the school, but does not understand how to realise these ends. Alienation is the most negative form of involvement with the school and involves a lack of understanding of the means and a rejection of the ends of both the academic and social dimensions.

<sup>7</sup> We have slightly modified this. In Bernstein's original he refers only to 'understanding the means' and 'accepting the ends'. We have changed this to address the particular kinds of disadvantages which AP holders experienced at school. They may understand the means and accept the ends, both academic and social, but do not have the wherewithal to realise them. It is also useful to acknowledge Bernstein's later work on recognition and realisation rules here. Recognition rules are the clues that pupils need to recognise as to what constitutes a specialised discourse or subject. Realisation rules are the rules pupils need to understand if they are to reproduce this as appropriate practice. In this case, they may have recognised the relevant recognition rules but not the necessary realisation rules (Bernstein, 1981, 1990).

## **THE FINDINGS**

The diversity among AP holders is true of experiences at school as well as background. The differences in their experiences of school are explored in subsequent sections. However, despite this variation, there were some common experiences which are briefly explored in the next section. Pseudonyms for people, schools and places are used throughout.

## Common experiences of school

These are some of the common experiences of the respondents that often cut across background and mode of engagement.

### *Differences from the rest of the pupil body*

For some respondents, differences from the rest of the pupil body were noticeable. The most frequently cited differences were housing/area where they lived, holidays and/or school trips and types of car (all 7/25). All of these factors are indicative of wealth to some extent. These are briefly explored below.

Housing and/or location was mentioned by a number of respondents from various backgrounds. It was cited by respondents from middle class (2/4), intermediate (2/8) and working class (3/10) families. While the contrast was not necessarily felt to be too important, it was certainly noticeable for these respondents. For some, housing and the area where they lived, exemplified the scale of economic difference. Yet, others found different housing types to be a source of interest rather the subject of turmoil.

Lack of holidays and school trips were noticeable and, again, this was not limited to any particular social background. This difference was cited by respondents from families that were middle class (1/4), intermediate (2/8), working class (2/10) and those not in paid employment (2/3). Another difference cited involved family car type. Again, this difference was split across backgrounds, and was cited by respondents from middle class (2/4), intermediate (1/8), and working class (4/10) families. Two other differences involved uniform/clothes and occupation of parents (both 5/25).

### *Visibility of AP holders within the schools*

It was rare for respondents to remember AP holders standing out as a group at school or even their identity being common knowledge. In other words, it ‘wasn’t broadcast’. The head teachers at participant schools in the original research asserted that they took great pains to anonymise AP holders in the school, and that additional benefits such as free meals were treated discretely (Edwards *et al* 1989: 117). It is also important to note that there were considerable variations between the independent schools in the study in terms of the percentage within the cohort on APs. This ranged from a token percentage of students to over 40% of the intake when the scheme was fully grown.

### *Relationship with family*

As already noted, many of the sample came either from middle class or intermediate backgrounds and/or had high or medium educational inheritance. This meant that respondents were not necessarily encountering a totally alien culture (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 1999) by attending independent schools. Overall, only three respondents, all from working class families with low education inheritance, mentioned that their secondary schooling had impacted on their relationship with their parents. But, even in these cases, the consequences did not always appear to be too far reaching. For some, such separation can be relatively minor:

...occasionally my mum would go, 'Oh, you've changed since you went to that school.' But it was...no, I don't think it did have an effect; it was just one of those things that you say in an argument. And it was only like once or twice. Did it make me...? No, I don't think it really altered my relationship with my, you know, with my mum. It's just, you know, all right, you go to a clever school but that's not what your relationship with your mum's about, is it, really? [18]

Yet, for another respondent, it was perhaps more difficult. At this distance from the past, she can laugh about the issue with her mother, who worked as a warehouse assistant when she was at school. Yet, it is evident that there was some degree of separation at the time:

...we'd had an English lesson and we'd been told about the word pedantic. So my mum hadn't heard this word and wanted to know what it meant, so I explained to her the best way I thought. And a few days after I was being cheeky, I can't remember what I was saying but I was being cheeky, and my mum tried to use this word and got it completely wrong. So when I was supposed to be, you know, standing there chastised, I was actually rolling about laughing. And we were talking about it just a few weeks ago. So I think my mum felt a little bit, I think, from what she was saying a few weeks ago, that the longer I spent at the school and I suppose it was more that my vocabulary was broadened and she felt that I was coming out with these big words that she wasn't familiar with. And I think she probably felt a bit of a gap more than I did, really. [16]

The schooling sector for respondents' siblings varied. A number of the sample were one of two or three siblings all schooled in the private sector, while others had siblings all of whom attended comprehensive schools. Over a third of the sample had at least one sibling (10/25) in the state sector, and a further two had siblings at state grammar schools. In a couple of cases this has resulted in tensions amongst siblings:

I remember my brother made an issue of it at certain points, I guess because I was doing- I was getting involved in a lot more things. It's probably- there's probably an element of separation, I think, I think if I'm honest, I think they probably did feel that I was kind of lucky to get that, later on in life. [3]

[My brother]'s struggled all of his life. And I think he has a chip on his shoulder, really, that he didn't do well at school, he wasn't interested, he didn't try and then he blames mum and dad that he didn't get an education. And he just- He actually has his own business, repairing forklift trucks, up in- back up in Hometown. And he's not, you know, he's not bitter or anything but I think he does have that regret. But he knows it's his own fault rather than, you know, mum and dad chose me to go off to [private] grammar school and not him. [21]

### *Travelling to the school*

Aside from possibly indicating difference in status, home location could have practical issues. There were instances of respondents having to walk or get the bus home whilst wearing a distinctive uniform and being teased by children from state schools. Distance can

have additional ramifications, such as being located at a greater distance from the majority of other pupils in the school – a possible disadvantage for socialising. For some, this meant that friendships from primary school were maintained in part because the greater distance to school prohibited a great deal of socialising with secondary friends.

#### *Friendships and social capital*

Socialising at secondary school was often limited for the respondents, yet this needs to be contextualised. Independent school pupils tend to be drawn from a relatively large geographical area compared to those attending comprehensive schools. This naturally inhibits visiting friends if they are some distance away. In addition, the workload at independent schools and the often extensive range of extra-curricular activities means that there can be less time for socialising in general. Some respondents found this also impacted on their friendships with local children because they did not get home from school until late, had more homework and were, in some cases, required to attend school on a Saturday.

It is sometimes suggested that independent schooling provides ex-pupils with strong networks and valuable social capital later in life (Devlin *et al* 1992; Bourdieu 1996; Pahl 2000). Yet, while most of the respondents still had some form of contact with at least one person from their secondary school (18/25), very few, regardless of background or mode of engagement with the school, still had strong friendships with them (4/25).

## Categorising the respondents' modes of engagement

In the following sections, we explore the biographies and orientations of our sample in relation to the four modes of involvement. We begin by examining the overall profile of the sample and then look in depth at the journeys to commitment, detachment, estrangement and alienation. Allocating individuals to analytical categories is never an exact science and some narratives displayed both detachment and estrangement, and estrangement and alienation. Additionally, it is clear that the level of involvement changed through the school career. Some, indeed the overwhelming majority, of our respondents started from a position of commitment which then shifted over the years. For the purposes of this study, the allocation of any particular individual is done on the basis of the *dominant* mode of involvement within their accounts.

The distribution of the dominant modes of involvement of our respondents is uneven. Commitment and detachment are the most frequent modes of involvement. As with all samples requiring voluntary participation, there is likely to be some systematic bias in the response rate. It is probable that the pupils who recall their time at school in terms of estrangement and alienation are those least likely to have participated in the interviews.<sup>8</sup>

**Table 7: Frequency of mode of involvement**

Mode of involvement	Number of respondents <sup>9</sup>
Committed	8
Detached	10
Estranged	2
Alienated	3

As indicated earlier, the numbers within the sample are far too small to ascertain any statistical relationships. Table 8 shows that there is certainly no straightforward relationship between the occupational background of a respondent's parents and their subsequent mode of involvement. For example, the majority of pupils from working class backgrounds displayed commitment to their old school. However, it is worth noting that no pupils from middle or intermediate class backgrounds became alienated or estranged from their schools – even if their involvement was more ambiguous and distant.

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<sup>8</sup> Evidence of alienation among AP holders is provided by respondents recalling stories of classmates who 'didn't last very long', e.g.:

I always remember a chap who started with me and he was on the assisted place. But then he only lasted, I think he lasted about two or three weeks. ...I don't think he could cope with that...coming from a completely different background and, you know, mixing with kids that came from the likes of [wealthy areas] and went to preparatory school. [8]

<sup>9</sup> We have excluded from this part of the analysis two respondents who left their schools and their assisted places before the age of 16.



**Table 8: Relationship between occupational background and mode of involvement**

		Occupational background			
		Middle class	Intermediate	Working class	NIPE
Mode of involvement	Committed	2	1	4	1
	Detached	2	5	2	1
	Estranged	0	0	1	1
	Alienated	0	0	3	0
Total		4	6	10	3

A similar pattern can be found in relation to educational inheritance (Table 9). Although the mother of one of the ‘alienated’ respondents had been to grammar school, she had apparently been as alienated by the experience as her son had in later years. These tables may suggest that higher class membership and educational inheritance enable pupils not only to *accept* the means and ends of their schools but also to equip them with the means to *understand* and *realise* these ends.

**Table 9: Relationship between educational inheritance and mode of involvement**

		Educational inheritance		
		High	Middle	Low
Mode of involvement	Committed	3	3	3
	Detached	2	4	4
	Estranged	1	0	1
	Alienated	0	1	2
Total		5	6	10

It appears that there is a gender dimension to the mode of involvement (Table 10). While we have fewer female respondents overall (8 female compared to 15 male), three quarters of them fall within the ‘committed’ category. This may reflect some of the tensions between gender and academic ability that we have discussed elsewhere (Power *et al* 1998b)

**Table 10: Relationship between gender and mode of involvement**

		Sex	
		Male	Female
Mode of involvement	Committed	2	6
	Detached	9	1
	Estranged	1	1
	Alienated	3	0
Total		15	8

It should be noted that while there is no necessary relationship between involvement and academic attainment with the more positive modes of involvement, there is inevitably a relationship between attainment and lack of involvement. Only one from the five respondents estranged or alienated at school gained any post-school qualifications, and, in fact, this achievement was the result of returning to education to complete a vocational qualification and then transferring to a degree programme many years later.

**Table 11: Relationship between mode of involvement and educational qualification**

		Highest Educational qualification		
		O levels/GCSEs	A levels	Degree or above
Mode of involvement	Committed	0	1	7
	Detached	0	1	9
	Estranged	1	0	1
	Alienated	1	2	0
Total		2	4	17

In the following sections, we explore some of the qualitative factors behind these variable modes of involvement.

## Commitment

Eight of our respondents displayed commitment to their school when they reflected on their experiences. They came from homes with diverse occupational backgrounds and levels of educational inheritance. As already noted, there is a marked gender dimension, with the large majority (6/8) being female. This is even more marked when one considers the under-representation of women within our sample (8/23).

**Table 12: Characteristics of respondents exhibiting ‘commitment’ to their school**

<i>ID</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Educational inheritance</i>	<i>Parents’ occupational background</i>	<i>Single parent?</i>	<i>School</i>
1	F	High	Middle class	yes	St Hilda’s
5	F	High	Middle class	yes	Nortown High
8	M	Low	Working class	no	Nortown Grammar
13	F	Low	Working class	no	Milltown High
15	F	High	Working class	no	Dame Margaret’s
16	F	Low	Working class	yes	Milltown High
17	M	Middle	NIPE	no	Nortown Grammar
21	F	Middle	Intermediate	no	Milltown High

### Evidence of commitment

Evidence of commitment is shown by the respondents’ strong appreciation for all that the school has done for them. They reflect on their time at school as being one of happiness. Typical comments include:

And I loved school, actually, I enjoyed it, I really loved it. [21]

I loved it. I absolutely loved my time at the school. [16]

I think the quality of education there was absolutely superb. And the quality of the teachers as well and the fact that so many of them had done other things in their lives before they’d become teachers and what they learnt and what they brought to the school in terms of life experience. [5]

These respondents were clear that the school, and the scheme, had opened up new opportunities for them, e.g.:

I think it’s made a huge difference to me. [5]

I just see it that it was a fabulous opportunity and I was very lucky, you know, and I’m still very grateful for that. [16]

### The family

A common feature in all these accounts was the strong preference of their parents, and sometimes themselves, for the school during the time they were making the transition to secondary education:

I'd always wanted to go to the best school I could and that was a good school. [18]

From...the first primary school I was in, it was like, "Ooh, Nortown High, ooh, it would be a wonderful achievement to get into Nortown High." So it was always held up as being the goal, really, for secondary education. [5]

It was the school that my mum always wanted me to go to because it's the school that she went to. [15]

To some extent, and unlike the pupils in King's grammar school who were allocated on the basis of passing the 11+ alone, all the parents of AP holders had to be proactive in trying to gain a place for their child at the preferred school. There were occasions when parents had to go against primary school staff disapproval of the scheme [13] or predictions about passing the test, e.g.:

When my parents went to the primary school for parents' evening the teacher said "Listen," you know, "don't expect your son to get into Nortown Grammar because it is the most difficult school to get into." And my dad was very good at encouraging me in his own little way, you know what I mean? And he knows that if someone does sort of not believe in me it makes me work ten times harder. So it became, we had a little bet on it, and it became a little challenge. [8]

Some respondents [e.g. 8, 21], even from working class homes, recalled receiving tutoring before the entrance test. And many felt that their parents would have found a way to enable their attendance at the school even if the scheme had not been in operation.

Strong parental enthusiasm for a particular school, or for a particular kind of schooling, was often explained by our respondents in terms of their parents wanting their children to have the opportunities they had been denied when they were young:

My mother was brought up in London but when she was nine she moved to Canada and had what she would call an absolutely dreadful education...And she came back to England the minute she could. And I think the minute she had children she thought, "They are going to go to the best flipping school that I can [find]". [1]

The aspiration and preparation for a place at one of these schools was not only a product of a middle class background or high levels of educational inheritance. To some extent it indicates, as some of its advocates hoped, that the scheme opened up private education to a new range of 'customers', even if they had had relatively little experience or knowledge of it themselves.

Our committed respondents spoke of strong support for the school from their parents after they had entered the school. Parents with higher levels of educational inheritance often enjoyed close connections with the school:

Oh, she loved it...She just loved the fact that her daughter was there. ...[She] enjoyed nattering to the staff. [1]

So she was very much, sort of, I mean, as active as she could be in the school and she came to all the events [5]

They felt very involved...it's difficult to name now things that they did. ...they supported me doing all my sport and would come and support and watch almost everything that I did. [15]

But respondents whose parents had much lower levels of education also recalled strong, if not close, support for the school, and a sense of pride in their child being there, e.g.:

I think they were just really proud I was there and I was very happy to be there. ...I would go through my homework every night with my dad in particular. So they were very involved with the school work definitely. Definitely. [17]

### **The academic and social structures of the school:**

If we consider the academic and social structures of the school, and the pupil's place within it, we can see high levels of involvement in both the academic and social dimensions.

#### *The academic dimension*

All of the schools are academically selective at entry, but are also stratified according to ability for particular subjects. This combines to create a strong academic 'push'. The committed respondents all thrived under this pressure:

We all worked, you know, we all enjoyed it and wanted to achieve and were pushed to achieve. [21]

By the end I loved it... I was a very intense studier and there's a very good environment to do that, the teachers are great. It's a great school basically. [17]

It kept me intellectually occupied. And also gave me a challenge that I needed. Because more than likely, if I'd gone to a school where I wasn't surrounded by people as intelligent then it might not have given me the push that I needed to be successful, to be successful academically. [8]

King found that the pupil's place within the structure was an important factor in their involvement and it would appear that our committed pupils were to be found in the top sets, e.g.:

What saved me, I suppose, was that I was, even amongst that group, I was one of the brighter ones in some ways and therefore kind of did well academically. But I really had to pull my socks up in terms of just being organised. ...And at the end of the first year I got a special little prize. [1]

Being good at schoolwork could compensate for differences in social class background, e.g.:

I've gained more confidence and realised I was equal, if not more capable, than a lot of the people...background never became an issue after that. [8]

### *The social dimension*

Everyone from this group of respondents also spoke warmly of the opportunities that their school offered for non-academic development. Many spoke of the extent to which their school had given them confidence, e.g.:

It's just unbelievable, in some ways, academically, the music, the art, the theatre, the whole thing. ...When I was thirteen, you know, you're expected to speak out and to become a confident person and, you know, I give lectures to three hundred people now and stuff like that and it never even occurred to me why I don't feel nervous. [1]

For several [1, 13, 15] of these pupils, sport formed an important part of their school experience and helped to increase involvement:

It gave me all the opportunities I could possibly have wanted and it stretched me academically and sporting-wise. And I just could never have done...and, you know, I've played lacrosse for England and Wales, I could never have done that. [15]

We were all into hockey. And that was our thing, that was our sort of like little niche. I think you had groups within the form where some of the girls were very into boys and make-up and stuff like that. But there [was also what] you might have called the swots. But we were sort of like a middle group...I think we could just intermingle with all the groups because we were the most sporty. [13]

Another pupil spoke of the opportunity to become 'entrepreneurial' at school:

I was quite entrepreneurial at school...I actually set up a little shop inside the sixth-form college and negotiated with the suppliers and got it up and running. [8]

As we shall see later on, many of our AP holders spoke of the problems created by not having enough money to participate in semi-formal activities, such as school trips. Two of our 'committed' pupils also mentioned the problem of school trips, but for them it seems not to have caused as much anguish:

The only thing that you could say, maybe the assisted place kids...were left out. Because, to be fair, some of the kids, who I know their parents paid the full fees, didn't send them on the school trip either. So it wasn't necessarily that. But you could always guarantee that the kids on assisted places didn't go. [16]

Once we were there we were all the same. I never had a problem with the fact that mum and dad couldn't afford the whole school fees apart from the trips...That was life. [21]

In general, it would appear that the ability to accept and realise the social, and not just the academic, ends of the school that distinguishes many of our female respondents from their male counterparts. The extent to which independent schools are successful in wholly inspiring girls is also evident in Roker's (1993) research. In her interviews with AP holders, she notes how when 'faced with two quite different sets of behaviours...many pupils effectively chose to incorporate the new aspirations and values of the school into their existing values' (1993: 134). Whether boys' peer group cultures are more effective at resisting

such incorporation or whether boys' schools are less effective at instilling the desired aspirations and values is difficult to determine.

### **Peer group relations**

In general, this group of pupils all developed strong friendships with their new schoolmates (some of which continue to this day) at the expense of friendships developed outside the school.

#### *Internal to the school*

Success in the academic dimension and involvement in many extracurricular activities seem to have helped foster good relations with other children at the school. These pupils did not report any particular difficulties 'fitting in'. For AP holders from middle class homes, the cultural gap between the school and the home was likely to be less marked than for others. While they may have suffered the disadvantage of low income, they fitted in in other ways. Respondent 5 does not recall feeling different from her classmates in any way. Respondent 1 commented that her accent helped her 'belong':

I sounded as posh as the rest of them so that didn't distinguish me. But I know it may have distinguished other [assisted place holders]. [1]

It would appear that some schools may be better at developing a culture in which pupils who are 'different' are less stigmatized. It is unclear, though, from our limited data what this involves. One respondent spoke of the benefit of her school having been small which had resulted in many pupils knowing each other:

I think as well one of the great things that I loved about the school was for a secondary school it's quite small, so everybody tended to know everybody and people looked out for each other. [16]

Another mentioned the broad mix of pupils from different backgrounds at his school:

I think Nortown Grammar, I don't say it's typical of all such schools, it isn't a snobby school. You have a lot of boys on assisted places and various bursaries. So there's a lot of really rough kids. It is really very meritocratic, I mean you pass the entrance exam and, you know, people came. So there were a lot of people who were a lot poorer and much rougher than me, you know. ...It's not a snobby school, not at all, not at all. Quite the contrary. [17]

A broader mix of pupils made it more likely that you could find someone 'like yourself', e.g.:

I managed to find a friend that was I would say...certainly more a working class background. Do you understand what I mean? In a school like that you're going to get some people that have had money for a long time or whatever. Doctors, solicitors, whatever. [13]

Responses to an earlier survey indicated that AP holders were more likely to feel 'ashamed' of their home. Our committed AP holders appear not to have been troubled by this. One, from a middle class background, felt that her house was the same as those of her friends:

But generally my closest friends, I would have said, were, you know, similar backgrounds, you know, sort of same kind of houses. [21]

Another commented that her school friends rarely came to her home:

When I started making friends and went to other people's houses, by and large, you know, their houses were all huge houses in Leafysuburb. It was pretty obvious that they were very wealthy, a lot of them. And I think initially, when I was a bit younger, I was a bit kind of worried about that. The thing was...people didn't tend to come back to my house very much because I was miles away ...So I suppose they didn't really get to see my house very much so there was nothing for them to know or comment on. [15]

#### *External to the school*

The high levels of involvement with school activities and the close relations with peers within the school meant that relations with peers outside school were either significantly weakened or abandoned altogether.

Some respondents spoke of the way in which their 'old' friends turned away from them when they started a different secondary school, e.g.:

'They just perceived that you wouldn't want to be their friends anymore if you went to that school. [5]

I was kind of ostracised, I suppose, locally because I was always seen as the kid that went to the posh school. ...I didn't have any friends locally at all. [16]

The uniform became a mark of difference:

I had one or two name-calling issues and stone-throwing issues on the bus...I had to travel quite a long way...on a normal public bus with people going to other comprehensives in the area and you stand out in a bright blue blazer and a tie. [21]

Even when respondents wished to maintain friends inside and outside school, the school demands – such as extra-curricular activities, homework and time spent travelling often made that impossible:

It was just long days and lots of homework and there wasn't a lot of time to be...to be keeping up with things, really...I did a lot of sports, I was at practices after school almost every day. ...As I got older we'd do the bus, but that was long. It was two buses and...that was probably an hour and a half. But I used to do [homework] on the way home or home from matches on a Saturday. [15]



**Perceptions of destiny:**

As one might expect from committed pupils, they achieved well at school and all but one went on to higher education.

**Table 13: Aspirations and destinations of ‘committed’ respondents**

<i>ID</i>	<i>Occupational aspiration</i>	<i>Higher Education aspiration</i>	<i>End ft ed</i>	<i>Higher Education of respondent</i>	<i>Current job</i>
1	Something to do with art	Yes	25	University of Bath, Architecture; Diploma in Architecture Glasgow	Architect
5	Vet	Yes	22	University of Nottingham, Manufacturing, Engineering and Management	Project Manager/consultant
8	Didn't know	Yes	23	University of York, Philosophy and Politics	Partner in property business (Spain)
13	Police officer	Didn't know	22	University of Newcastle, Agriculture and Environmental Studies	Full-time mother (ex-environment manager)
15	Teacher	Yes	19	Dropped out from the University of Kent after a year	Researcher for central government
16	Didn't know	Yes, Manchester	26	University of Leicester, Geography, dropped out; University of Manchester, Dentistry	Dentist
17	Didn't know	Yes	23	University of Oxford, Modern History	Company director
21	Architect	Yes	21	University of Leicester, Geography	Full-time mother

These respondents look back on their schools, and the APS, as a positive legacy and a crucial element in their achievements, e.g.:

I felt very lucky and very privileged, then and now, even more so now as a parent, that I was given this fabulous opportunity. [16]

**Preferences for their children's education**

Not surprisingly, given their strong levels of commitment to their school, all of these respondents were positively disposed towards selective and private education. Six of the eight now have children of their own, and two have already placed their children in the private sector. The rest were currently considering their options, but felt that, depending on the local alternatives, they would consider independent schooling.

## Detachment

Ten of our respondents exhibit a ‘detached’ involvement with their schools. They ascribed to the academic means of the school and realised, with varying degrees of success, the academic ends. However, they did not fully embrace the school – and in particular, appear to have distanced themselves from the social dimension of the school. As with our ‘committed’ respondents, our ‘detached’ respondents come from diverse backgrounds. It should be noted, though, that they are all, bar one, male.

**Table 14: Characteristics of respondents exhibiting ‘detachment’ from their school**

<i>ID</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Educational inheritance</i>	<i>Parents’ occupational background</i>	<i>Single parent?</i>	<i>School</i>
2	M	High	Middle class	yes	Cathedral
4	F	Middle	NIPE	no	Milltown High
6	M	Low	Working class	no	Nortown Grammar
11	M	Low	Intermediate	no	Bankside
12	M	Unknown	Intermediate	yes	Nortown Grammar
18	M	Low	Working class	yes	Nortown Grammar
19	M	High	Middle class	yes	Nortown Grammar
20	M	Middle	Intermediate	yes	Milltown Grammar
22	M	Middle	Intermediate	no	Nortown Grammar
25	M	Low	Intermediate	yes	Nortown Grammar

### Evidence of detachment

These respondents appreciated their schools along the academic dimension, e.g.:

It was a good education...I got lots of opportunities there that I wouldn’t have got, probably, at a local state school. Most of the kids were nice kids most of the time...it was a good teaching standard. [4]

I don’t look back at that with regret. I think that it probably just gave me more opportunity in terms of getting better qualifications and going to a better university and raising my expectations of how far I could go in my academic studies, and then careers that would sit beyond that. I think Nortown Grammar had sort of a quite high expectation of good grades and a good white collar career. [19]

However, alongside this appreciation, there was ambivalence about other aspects of their experience, e.g.:

The whole emphasis of the school is around academic interest and, you know, conducting your life as an intellectual rather than as a more active person. [19]

Cathedral College trains one to be confident, the sort of the cultural capital that it provides you with ...I think that there’s a lot of people like me who are in that world and performing well in it but deep down they’re not fulfilled...So did the assisted place help me? Yes, I suppose that it did in that it gave me that knowledge and experience which special education provides. [2]

There was often some regret about the extent to which academic success had been achieved at the expense of more social objectives, e.g.:

I believe that had I not gone to that particular school, if I'd have gone to one of the local schools, I wouldn't have achieved the same level of academic qualification. ...From a purely academic output, yeah, I think that is far better than I would have done in the other schools. But the social thing, from mixing with people, possibly slightly detrimental. [20]

### **The family**

The families of our 'detached' group of respondents were apparently happy for their children to attend these schools, but there seems to have been a less intense desire amongst these parents than amongst those of our 'committed' respondents for a place at the school. For example, one recalled:

I don't think there was any undue pressure from my parents. I think they were keen for me to do well but I think it was much more important for mum that I was happy. [2]

There is a sense in which the parents, like their children, appear to be slightly detached from the school. They watched the progress of their children without having a close involvement with the child's school, e.g.:

I think as long as I was doing okay academically then they weren't really that fussed about other stuff. [4]

They worked. At the time my dad used to work nights quite a lot. So my mum...the parents' evenings she went to by herself, things like that. So I think having two younger children than me and, my dad was working nights, she couldn't really get involved that much. [6]

### **The academic and social structures of the school:**

#### *The academic dimension*

Like our 'committed' respondents, this group both understood the means and accepted the ends of the academic dimension of the school. They generally fell in line with the priorities of the school:

The pressure to do O-levels then A-levels then go on to do a degree, and in many instances follow a very narrow career progression was intense. ...the pressure was absolutely intense. [20]

However, they do not always recall their academic achievements with pride. Full commitment to the school was jeopardised if the pupil's position within ability groups declined:

Since I was four, my primary school I seem to remember these halcyon days with girls and kiss chase and, I don't know, totally relaxed classes. And being academically

one of the higher in the class as well. Then suddenly I was plunged into an all boy environment and very high academic pressure...It ended up putting a lot of stress onto me and I didn't handle too well...I got dropped in the third year down to a sort of more medium level...it's a kind of grey period in my life. And not being terribly happy, not terribly motivated about anything. ...I wasn't so happy in my school, my secondary school years. [2]

Even though I was good at primary school, I wasn't anywhere near as good as some of the other guys at the school ... it came as a bit of a shock ... So I suppose in terms of that I felt that I didn't fit in. [25]

In general, these respondents' descriptions of their time at school are tinged with a sense of something lost.

#### *The social dimension*

The strong emphasis within these schools on the academic dimension of academic success sometimes led to a marginalisation or rejection of the social dimension, as the following comment reveals:

And actually, as I found, up until the A-levels it got worse and worse. Very unpleasant at times. When you experience that at the time it's quite horrific, when you look back on it I think you tend to dress it up as character building. ...And I think that's probably one of the downsides of the school: they're too narrow, too narrow with where they want to push people [20]

Rejection of the social dimension could also involve rejection of the disciplinary procedures of the school, although not to the point that the academic ends were seriously jeopardised. The following account of a disciplinary incident reveals a strong rejection of the disciplinary style of the teachers in authority, in this case the head teacher:

He was a very sort of bombastic, single-minded, quite strange sort of chap. ...and he was just a strange man. I mean, he was just a bit odd. ...There was only him, me and my form tutor/teacher in this interview. ...I went in and it was after school had closed and there was major refurbishments going on so his desk, his office, was entirely empty, no pictures, no furniture, nothing except for a desk had been put in there and three chairs. And there was nothing on the desk except a Luger. I presume it was a replica but it was just, like, "What? What are you thinking, you total madman? Why have you got a gun on the desk, you half-wit?" [18]

Alongside those respondents who rejected the social dimension of their school were those who appeared unable to become fully involved in the life of the school. A number of barriers to involvement can be identified. One example, discussed later, arises from respondents' continuing allegiances to friendship networks outside the school. Another, not unrelated, example occurs when pupils are excluded or made to feel different. The following respondent remembers what it was like to be the only Jewish pupil in her class:

It was the first time I'd been in such a, kind of, a non-Jewish environment. And I remember really clearly on, I think it was the first or second day, the RE teacher made

me stand up and said – and at the time I was the only Jew in the school – and she said, “I just want to explain the difference between Jews and Gentiles.” ...They also used to do different assemblies at different points of the year so I was always made to go up and do an assembly about Hanukkah or Passover or something, which was always just, like for me, like stood in front of six hundred people, it was a hideous experience. [4]

Financial difficulties, particularly when combined with long journey times, also prevented pupils from participating fully in non-academic aspects of school life:

Being in a fee paying school it was fairly evident that my background, in terms of funding, was different to a lot of people, you know, I mean it was clear that plenty of people came from homes with, you know, significantly more than I had. Trips, I suppose. I was conscious that I didn’t often put myself forward to things like that because I was conscious the money wasn’t there. [22]

I had this very long journey, so the after-school stuff didn’t really happen for me either because I couldn’t get to go round to hang out at someone’s house that easily because it was just too far to get home. ...And I think most of the time I was at school we didn’t really have a car so, you know... You know, we were in a different bracket as well, so I think that the finance thing and the free place – not the free place necessarily but the money aspect – meant that, you know, I just knew things like the ski trips and the French exchange and all those things. I didn’t even give the letter to my mum and dad. [4]

Lack of full involvement in the social side of the school was also evident for two respondents from this group who had been day boys in schools with boarding accommodation:

I was offered the option of boarding if I wanted to, because I felt rather lonely, excluded from school life at one point. [2]

### **Peer group relations:**

#### *Internal to the school*

Rejection of or inability to realise the social ends of the school is also evident in this group where respondents had much weaker friendship bonds within the school. Where significant friendships within the school were formed, they often developed in opposition to the perceived dominant culture of the school, e.g.:

There were probably two types of people at Bankside. There were people who wanted to get on and study hard. And I think generally those were people from less privileged backgrounds. And then there were people that didn’t seem to care very much at all because daddy had so much money he would look after them anyway. And so I was, fortunately or unfortunately, in the first set of people. [11]

One of our respondents felt that the predominantly Christian ethos of Nortown Grammar made him feel he did not belong, even though the school actually had a significant number of Jewish pupils:

I'd been brought up as a Jew ... I mean there were other Jews there but .... I used to attend assemblies in the morning and they'd be singing hymns and that. So I didn't really feel I fitted in. [25]

Just as one of our 'committed' respondents remembers fitting in because her accent was as 'posh' as that of her classmates, working class respondents recall their accent being a barrier, e.g.:

I remember being, I don't know what the word is for it – teased, bullied – which one, for my accent, which to all intents and purposes is about your background as well. [11]

Amongst these 'detached' accounts, there is a strong sense of isolation:

It made me feel that I had more in common with my family and less in common with my school to be honest...I felt a bit of an outsider at school from the group of people that I was with...the sort of brainwashing that goes on in all schools but particularly high pressured schools...I always felt a separation from the mainstream. [2]

Several pupils recall feeling stigmatised because they were poor:

"Not fitting in" is probably too strong a word. But I would say that there was a degree of "You're a poor kid", which some of the wealthier pupils would sort of choose to exploit by way of establishing themselves as more important members of school society. [19]

I always felt a little bit like the poor relation there if you know what I mean. Cos I think it's things like the school uniforms. ...You can buy the school uniform from Tesco or whatever or buy the proper school uniform from the school, which is like four times as expensive. So obviously, as we were, you know, fairly hard up, then I used get to get the Tesco bought one with the badge sewn on. It was just little things like that...and the fact that my dad used to quite often drop me off in his taxi, and I think that I was little bit, I don't know if I was embarrassed about it or whether I just felt a bit self-conscious about it. [6]

Sport could provide an alternative route to gaining prestige:

I was always sort of quite good at sport and things like that. Which just meant that you were less likely to get that sort of abuse. So I probably witnessed it more on other people than it necessarily being directed at myself [19]

However, even when pupils were keen to join in after-school activities, the journey home could prevent socialising:

Because with Nortown Grammar school people came from so far away I actually found it hard, I didn't really see the other classmates regularly because they were south Nortown. [12]

In general, very few of these 'detached' respondents have maintained contact with any of their old classmates.

### *External to the school*

A common feature of our ‘detached’ respondents is that they continued to maintain close friendships *outside* the school either with neighbourhood friends or with old primary school classmates. Sometimes, distance from school meant that neighbourhood ties were much stronger:

I kept in touch with friends from primary school, outside of school, more than I did with my friends from Nortown Grammar, because they lived so far away and the school itself was so far away. So I just had friends outside, like friends I played football with, sort of local football teams things like that. So I didn’t really socialise with people from school. [6]

Sometimes, the respondents managed to lead parallel lives:

I had quite a lot of separate friends at home and separate activities at home, like I was very involved in this Jewish Youth Movement and had lots of friends in the street at home that I used to play with after school and at weekends. So I kind of felt, in a way, school was a bit of a parallel universe and home was home and school was school. [4]

Because most of my friends from locally went to the local comprehensives and I never had an issue with them, which was peculiar because there was a lot of friction between some of the local schools. I seemed to be outside of that because I managed to keep a leg in both camps, [20]

However, for others, the competing demands and cultures of school and neighbourhood put pupils in an impossible situation, e.g.:

I became a little bit of a misfit I think...at school I was one of the [local] pupils and therefore my accent etcetera put me a little bit out of place there. Whereas at home with my old school friends I was the guy who’d gone off to posh school and who also started speaking posher. Therefore I didn’t really fit in as well at home either. ...You’d go to school and you’d get teased for having a [local] accent and you’d go over to the local park and you’d get teased for being posh. You can’t win [11]

There was always this ‘Oh, he thinks he’s better than us’ kind of thing because I went to Nortown Grammar. And there’d always be jibes as well, like ‘You go to Nortown Gay School.’ It did impact. [25]

### **Perceptions of destiny:**

The profile of our ‘detached’ group is similar in many ways to that of our ‘committed’ group, reflecting the shared understanding of the means and acceptance of the ends of the academic dimension. All but one left school to take degrees and are in professional occupations.

**Table 15: Aspirations and destinations of ‘detached’ respondents**

<i>ID</i>	<i>Occupational aspiration</i>	<i>Higher Education aspiration</i>	<i>End ft ed</i>	<i>Higher Education of the respondent</i>	<i>Current job</i>
2	Mechanical engineering	Yes	23	University of Edinburgh, Social Anthropology	International development worker (Guatemala)
4	Solicitor	Didn't know	25	Leeds Polytechnic, Social Policy & Administration, Diploma Social Work	Social work manager
6	Doctor or Solicitor	Yes	21	University of Essex, History and politics	General manager of financial services firm
11	Didn't know	Yes	21	London School of Economics, Economics	Partner in accountancy firm
12	Forensic scientist	Manchester	22	University of Sheffield, Medical School, medicine	Consultant Surgeon
18	Solicitor or barrister	Birmingham	23	University of Bradford, Modern Languages	Academic publishing
19	Didn't know	Didn't know	21	Durham University, Maths	Senior manager in financial services company
20	Dentist	Yes	22	University of Huddersfield, Transport and Distribution	Logistician/transport planner.
22	RAF	Oxbridge	21	University of Bristol, Aeronautical Engineering	Scientist in government agency
25	Linguist	Cambridge	18	None, currently studying with the Open University	Not employed, student

The extent to which being ‘detached’ rather than ‘committed’ impacts on subsequent career destinations is difficult to determine. The earnings of our detached respondents were highly variable. Of the seven who told us their income, three were earning less than £50,000, but no-one in employment had an income lower than £25,000 and two earned in excess of £100,000.

While detachment may not have any impact on level of occupational destination, it may affect orientations. One of our detached respondents [2], for example, believes in radical education and now works on an alternative education project in Guatemala. Another comments that his lack of involvement with the social side of his school may mean that his career and networks are not as advanced as they might have been:

To go to a school like that does give you a better opportunity to get [good] grades. It probably gives you better opportunities if you take them up. Like some of the friends I was at school with, I had at school, have gone on to become barristers...So I think if I



had kept in touch with those people then I'd think you'd have a different group of friends rather than the people I've got who are just very, you know, average. ...I don't think I made as much of the opportunities as I could have done. [6]

If these networks had been maintained they could potentially have provided a valuable form of 'social capital' (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1990; Putnam 1993, 2000). As noted earlier, maintaining strong friendships with secondary school friends was rare among the sample, regardless of background or mode of engagement.

On the other hand, detachment might protect one from the pain of estrangement experienced by our next (estranged) group of respondents.

### **Preferences for their children's education**

Seven of our ten detached respondents have children, although none is currently being privately educated. These respondents' ambivalence about their own education is reflected in their ambivalence towards their current or children's schooling. In general, and like our committed respondents, they recognise the potential benefits of private and selective education. One [25] already has two girls in private schools in South Africa. Most of the others (7/10) would consider the private sector, but with some caveats, e.g.:

I'd definitely consider it and I probably would be prepared to pay the extra. One thing I would do, I'd be very careful choosing which independent school...I do think that there are in some places, and certainly in Cathedral when I was there, there are people, as I've said, whose parents are very rich. They don't necessarily care as much about their studies as they should do. And I wouldn't want my children getting mixed up with those people and develop that same sort of attitude. [11]

## Estrangement

In many ways, estrangement is the opposite of detachment. Detachment arises when a pupil accepts and can realise the academic dimension, but distances themselves from the social aspects of the school – either because they feel they do not belong or because they reject the ‘character-building’ aspects of the school. Estrangement, on the other hand, arises when one fully embraces the social and academic ends of the school but, for a variety of reasons, cannot realise these ends. Bernstein presumes that accepting the social ends of the school will automatically enable the pupils to realise them. However, our estranged pupils were not able to realise the academic *or* social ends of the school. It may be, as Bernstein argues, that they do not understand the means. Or, it may be that they are denied involvement.

**Table 16: Characteristics of respondents exhibiting ‘estrangement’ from their school**

<i>ID</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Educational inheritance</i>	<i>Parents’ occupational background</i>	<i>Single parent?</i>	<i>School</i>
9	M	High	NIPE	yes	Nortown Grammar
10	F	Low	Working class	yes	Nortown High

### Evidence of estrangement

While these respondents are committed to the idea of the school, their experience of academic failure makes this a particularly painful position. These respondents look back at their schooling with some confusion and regret, e.g.:

I have to say, the reason I came out so badly, well, I consider badly, because other people say “Well five O-Levels is quite an achievement”. But it’s not, not when you go to Nortown Grammar School and everyone else was coming out with ten or eleven. ...I was unhappy really from the day I went there. I didn’t feel that I fitted in. So that is why I didn’t do so well when I was there. I then went into the first year of A-Levels. I did one or two but because I was unhappy there I didn’t want to, but for various reasons I did. But I was kicked out after about two months. [9]

There can be strong affection and loyalty to the school, even when it had not brought great academic success:

When you’ve had a good education, whether you choose to waste it, and people might say I wasted it because I didn’t finish school properly or I came out with bad A-levels and I should have gone to university and not have a child, I always knew that I’d had that start in life. ... And, actually, especially even now when I look in the paper...and see where Nortown High is placed in terms of schools on the league table. Every year. And I think, “Our school is one of the top four in the country and I attended that school.” [10]

Because they *believe* in the school, these respondents account for their failure in terms of their own choices and behaviour rather than any failure on the part of the school.

### **The family**

The relationship between the family and the school of our estranged group is mixed. For one of our respondents, there was huge investment on the part of her mother for her to get a place:

So she focused and focused on just education, education and private tuition and everything to get us to that school. I remember the day that the letter came through and my mum was so...she was so excited that we'd got a place, she was crying...She was crying because she'd bloody struggled so hard to get us into the school because it was like a major achievement. [10]

For another, it was part of 'grooming' on the part of the primary school rather than any parental push:

In junior school I'd been groomed for this. Obviously I was bright. There was a small group of boys and girls who were all in the examinations for Nortown Grammar, Milltown Grammar, and the girls for Nortown High School. ...there was some prestige. I had my best friend by me who'd done the same thing but when I got there I didn't want to be there but persevered because I was given this honour really. [9]

This respondent's mother had little involvement with the school while he was there.

### **The academic and social structures of the school:**

#### *The academic dimension*

Despite the initial commitment to the school, both of our respondents struggled with the academic side of their education. For one, achievements and confidence gained at primary school faded in the more competitive and academically-oriented push of their secondary schools:

I was going to do something wonderful, that everyone was going to be proud of. But it didn't turn out like that. Very quickly I knew I wasn't really capable of the doing the work that they demanded. The school day was very long anyway, nine to four. Three hours travelling on top of that. Plus I was supposed to be doing three hours homework every night...I was supposed to be a bright kid and yet consistently it's Ds and Es. I was told I would fail all my O-Levels, I was told that I would not get one qualification. [9]

The other respondent did well in the early years, but then made (or was pressured by her mother to make) what she considered to be 'bad' choices at A level:

Some of the girls were dumb but came out with really good A-level grades because they chose really good easy subjects, which were just memorising things, like geography and history. If you were dumb they'd say choose geography and history because you'd just memorise facts and come out with good grades. I did languages! You can't blag a Latin exam or an ancient Greek exam, you know. You just can't. You've either got to know that stuff, you've got to sit down and learn that stuff, you've got to learn the core texts. [10]

### *The social dimension*

However, despite the desire to belong and their commitment to the school, neither of our 'estranged' respondents were able to participate fully in the social domain, and a significant part of this, as we shall see in the next section, was that they did not feel, or perhaps were not encouraged to feel, that they 'fitted in' at the school.

### **Peer group relations:**

#### *Internal*

Neither of these respondents enjoyed close relationships with their peers at school. They were marked out as 'different' on a number of grounds. Respondent 10 is the only black person in our sample and recalls feeling very much in a minority in her school:

It was difficult...no one was deliberately trying to make me feel like an outsider...but it particularly made me feel an outsider because I thought, you know, that's just where everyone's at and it's not where I'm at or where I'm going to be. [10]

This respondent was not only black but from a single parent family:

You know, I remember getting teased because they were saying, "Well, if you're half-Asian why haven't you got an Asian surname?" And, you know, and I think at one point I made the mistake of telling someone my mum and dad weren't married and it was like a look of horror on someone's face because in those sorts of societies or those sorts of schools, you know, you went to university, you got married probably to someone you knew from university or someone from work, and you settled down and you bought your lovely house, you had your children, sent them to independent school and that was the circle and the cycle that existed. So when I made the mistake of telling someone that I hadn't got an Asian surname because my mum - I've got my mum's surname - "Why have you got your mum's surname? I'm confused." "Because my mum and dad weren't married." They were like, "Oh". [10]

Not having two parents at home, as well as being gay, is something respondent 9 recalls making him feel like an outsider:

I was different somehow, I don't know how, you know. These guys had the money, had clothes, had a normal life and two parents, do these things that I'd never done and could see that I'd never be able to do. [9]

While these differences were important, the issue of financial disadvantage recurs through these respondents' narratives, e.g.:

I knew all these people around me were paying to go to this school. And I could see them in their perfect smart blazers, everything was very crisp and everything was perfect. And I felt very much that I wasn't. I did make a few friends, but I still felt very alone, very isolated. [9]

Friendships were not made with their school friends:

My mum didn't really want me to invite any friends home...when you're from such a completely different background as I was...We were on a council estate...So it was really difficult at that stage being at school because, as I say, you just felt like you had friends but you didn't have- you had friends and close friends but you couldn't really become really, sort of, close to them because of that issue about inviting people home. [10]

#### *External to the school*

The estrangement experienced by these respondents was exacerbated by isolation from 'local' friends. Attendance at their 'posh' school created distance from their neighbourhood friends, particularly when combined with an aspirational parent:

Well, we didn't have much in common with them anyway because it was a council estate and we sort of felt we were better than a council estate. And we'd sort of grown up to think, you were raised to think, you were better than those on a council estate. [10]

I felt a bit distanced from local kids because obviously I went to the posh school...it wasn't a huge issue, but I did feel distanced from people who'd gone to, from my year at school. [9]

#### **Perceptions of destiny**

Both of our respondents in the 'estranged' group had very high occupational aspirations at the start of their secondary schooling. Moreover, they both had clear intentions to go to university and had even identified the university. In the event, one left school at 16 and twice dropped out of A level courses. The other completed her A levels (achieving two E grades) but then left full-time education. She also became a mother at this time. While our aspirant barrister now earned between £45,000 and £50,000 as a local government manager in a London borough, our aspirant doctor was earning less than £10,000 as a shop-worker.

**Table 17: Aspirations and destinations of 'estranged' respondents**

<i>ID</i>	<i>Occupational aspiration</i>	<i>Higher education aspiration</i>	<i>End ft ed</i>	<i>Higher Education of the respondent</i>	<i>Current job</i>
9	Doctor	Manchester	16	Dropped out of A-Levels twice	Shop-worker
10	Barrister	Oxbridge	18	Later, HND converted to degree at Manchester Metropolitan University	Manager in local government but ex-musician

Given that high and clear aspirations are usually associated with high levels of involvement and attainment, our respondents' troubled academic careers are worth exploring further. It is worth observing, for example, that their aspirations were shaped by their parents:

I was supposed to be barrister, a lawyer, my sister was supposed to be a doctor. But she'd always had these plans for us and we had to stick to these plans and there was no way we were going to be distracted. [10]

The mother of respondent 9 was studying when he was at school and went on to obtain a PhD and he felt he should also enter higher education:

For years I was hankering after this success that I should have had. Because I was obviously bright as a child. I was hankering after it for years, but there was no point. It was making me unhappy, trying to achieve, trying to be that successful person, trying to emulate my mother. [9]

It is also worth noting that while they were strongly committed to their schools, neither felt they 'belonged'. Issues to do with race, sexuality and material disadvantage rendered them unable to benefit from any compensating involvement in the social life of the school.

A contributory factor to this sense of failure may well be the investment (by parents and/or the government) in their education. This appears to be something which drove one respondent to return to her studies as a mature pupil:

Although people might look at me and think, "Oh, she wasted an opportunity"...There's more than one way to skin a cat. I got there in the end. It might have been a different route or an alternative route...it had been a personal sacrifice for my mum...she spent all the money on private tuition and piano lessons. So I knew that I always had to get there because otherwise I would have thought I hadn't repaid that debt...I couldn't just have a baby at nineteen and that's it, sit on the dole or just go and work in Tesco's...and I think having gone to Nortown High and having an assisted place...you do feel that you do owe them something for it, you know, you should end up achieving something. ...There was a part of me that used to think, "Gosh, I wish I just went to a normal, normal school." But looking back now, I think your viewpoints do change as you get older and older and older, I'm sort of glad I did go. [10]

### **Preferences for their children's education**

Both of these respondents have teenage children (respondent 9 has a 17 year old step-daughter, respondent 10 an 18 year old son). Although they do not dismiss the idea of selective or independent schooling out of hand (indeed, estrangement is so painful *because* of their commitment to the values of this kind of education), the emphasis they place on the importance of 'fitting in' reflects their own sense of isolation while at school:

I wouldn't want them to feel different. Being different myself and knowing how it affects life I wouldn't want to put a kid through anything that would make them feel not one of the crowd. [9]

So I didn't think that I wanted him to go to any school where he's going to be a real minority, especially as a boy...and at a time when he should be getting some confidence and looking at people who are similar to him. I don't want him to be the only black boy in that school. [10]

## Alienation

Alienated pupils are those whose involvement with the school is one of disenchantment. Even if they start off being committed to the school, they cannot or will not realise the academic ends of the school, and ultimately reject the social dimension as well. All of the alienated respondents in our sample came from working class backgrounds. All are male.

**Table 18: Characteristics of respondents exhibiting ‘alienation’ from their school**

<i>ID</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Educational inheritance</i>	<i>Parents’ occupational background</i>	<i>Single parent?</i>	<i>School</i>
7	M	Middle	Working class	No	Milltown Grammar
14	M	Low	Working class	No	Bankside
23	M	Low	Working class	No	Bankside

### Evidence of alienation

The memories of this group of pupils are generally negative:

The more and more I look back on it now I only remember a lot of the bad stuff. The not wanting to go to school, the trudging, getting dad to pick me up in his builder’s van from the bottom of the road rather than come to the school. [14]

However, unlike the estranged respondents, they do not see this ‘bad stuff’ in terms of their own failure, but in terms of failings within the school.

### The family

These respondents recall ambivalence about going to the school in the first place – and the pressure seems to have come initially from their primary school rather than their parents:

I felt pressurised to go. I was given this opportunity; my teachers at my primary school said “You’ve got to do it. You’ve got to take this opportunity”. My mum and dad said “You’ve got to do it”. I went and sat the exam and I remember the relief the morning my dad walked into my bedroom, opened my curtains and said, “You’re all right, you’re going to Kingsway [the local comprehensive].” I thought, “Thank God for that.” And then the headmaster of the preparatory school organised the first type of sports scholarship so I could go there. ...and I felt as if I had to go because everyone had said, “Don’t miss this opportunity”. [14]

One respondent recalls that his mother actually did not want him to go to the school as her own experience of grammar school had been negative:

My mother didn’t want me to go there. She’d gone to a grammar school. It was me who, basically, said I wanted to go there. I just came to regret that, I think. My mother had gone to a grammar school and...I think I ended up having the same- similar experiences. But that’s life and at that age you don’t really learn from that. You know it all and that’s the problem [7]

None of these respondents recall close involvement between their parents and their schools.

### **The academic and social structures of the school:**

#### *The academic dimension*

None of our three ‘alienated’ pupils ended up accepting the academic dimension of the school. Even if they began their secondary school careers with commitment, they went on to reject its demands. Again, the contrast between their confidence at primary school and secondary school is mentioned:

When I was young I was extremely clever and I came very high in the entrance exam. Things went downhill from there. [7]

They took me into English lessons where I was used to doing reading and writing and we were doing poetry analysis and the teachers made you feel that small. [14]

Relations with teachers were not positive and there was resistance to what was seen as the narrowness of the curriculum and the teaching style:

There were some nice teachers but there were some evil. There were three in particular that even to this day it makes me cringe to think what they must have been like, you know, they were just vile. And there were some brilliant teachers...but they kind of followed a syllabus and I think a syllabus is probably the same wherever. ...You know, you sat in a classroom, a typical Victorian classroom, you know, twelve to fifteen of you, and they preached the party manifesto from the front of the room, and they dished out the books, charged you a fortune for them and off you went. [14]

I didn’t think the teaching was very good. I thought there were some good teachers and there were some absolutely awful teachers. ...I’d have said probably three in ten teachers did it by means of bullying. I didn’t react well to that, I rebelled against that. [7]

These three respondents did not particularly respect their teachers, and social class seems to have been an issue in this:

I can probably count on one hand the ones that I had any respect for...but they were both working class. [14]

#### *The social dimension*

Although two of our respondents (7, 14) were good at sport, this still failed to increase the pupil’s attachment to the school:

Rugby, rugby, rugby. Everyone wanted to be associated with me. But I had this barrier up. I didn’t like doing things with them because they weren’t my type of people. That had a major impact on me. And even the kids who were in my house or wanted to socialise with me. So it was it was on my terms and probably actually gave me a complex. Or I bore a grudge against what it stood for because of some of the teachers and because of some of the kids and because of some of their attitudes. I thought “you’re not very nice people, basically”. And for that reason I was always a Smalltown boy who kind of went in and then got back to Smalltown. [14]



Sometimes a single incident could appear to shift a pupil from a more positive mode of involvement to alienation. Respondent 7 was heavily involved in playing sports for the school. However, he fell out with his teacher because he missed a tournament when his mother's car broke down and was subsequently suspended from sport. He marks that as the beginning of his disillusionment:

It does all go back to completely being unfairly treated because a car breaks down. I'm sorry, we didn't drive round in Rolls Royces, we had a Datsun or a Nissan or whatever it was at the time. [7]

Although respondent 23, who was constantly in trouble for breaking the school rules, values what he learnt at Bankside socially, he most remembers learning how to *resist* the discipline of the school:

But you learnt a lot more than just academic skill with Bankside. It was bucking the system taught you a lot about communication and management as much as going with the system taught you, you know, the maths and the English and everything else ...I was as frequently in front of the headmaster as I wasn't. Not from being naughty but from doing things that they decided I wasn't allowed to do and I disagreed with them. So the ability to communicate and put a case forward and quite happily stand up and take it and justify it and whatever else...those types of things. And that's why I refer to it as a rounded education. [23]

### **Peer group relations:**

#### *Internal to the school*

Class background was an important issue not just in terms of these respondents' orientation to the school, but also with regard to their relations with their classmates. These AP holders felt very much like 'poor relations':

There was a hierarchy at Bankside College. Boarders were top of the hierarchy, full paying boarders...then you came down to day-boys, they were pretty low as far as they were concerned, they were all [locals] and were scum. [14]

Some of these respondents were disdainful of their more affluent peers at school. There was often a sense that their teachers did not live in the 'real' world:

I was going back to school and being told what to do by a group of young men who I wouldn't have given the time of day in real life. And they had gone through public school, university, straight back there. They'd never paid a bill in their life. ...I just had no respect for ninety-five percent of the people who were there. And the older I got the more I looked at the people who were around me at school and just thought, "No, you're not my type of people." [14]

Despite this disdain for their wealthy classmates, they tended not to invite school friends to visit their houses in order to avoid negative comments about their homes:

My mentality of it was feeling probably inferior to people who lived in mansions or whatever compared to a two-up two-down [7]

Why didn't I want to bring any friends home? You know, it just...I was building my towers on a rugby front and an individual with strong morals and everything else, I am higher than they. And I didn't want to give anyone any excuse to start tearing away at that tower. [14]

#### *External to the school*

Like our detached respondents, our alienated respondents all recall being much closer to their non-school friends whom they saw socially outside school hours. These friendships may well have had a detrimental effect on their academic progress:

It was a very, very close network of individuals...from the local schools...we all collectively got to know each other in the Albion in Bankside...where I was consistently found on a Friday and a Saturday night and having to meet with the headmaster on a Saturday morning for being caught on a Friday night and a Monday morning for having been caught on a Saturday night. It was just every week. They'd go, "Oh, not you again?" I'm like, "Yup. When do you want me to meet the headmaster now?" It was just part of the part of the weekly routine really. [23]

The issue of class differences appears strongly in their explanations:

Perhaps unless you're Dr. This or Dr. That, who live next door to each other and both happen to send their children there, you're coming from a different walk of life. You know, you don't generally have a joiner being best of friends with Dr. Whatever. [7]

Far from pulling these boys away from their neighbourhoods and families, their experience of secondary school seems to have drawn them closer to their home, e.g.:

I was very much a Smalltown boy, much happier with the working class, struggling to be middle class, people in Smalltown rather than the types of people who went to Bankside College...I keep talking about Smalltown all the time. ...Smalltown personifies to me everything that I consider to be normal, rounded. [14]

These three still remain close to these non-school childhood friends to this day.

#### **Perceptions of destiny:**

None of our 'alienated' respondents fulfilled the academic promise that one might have expected from them at the start of their secondary education.

**Table 19: Aspirations and destinations of ‘alienated’ respondents**

<i>ID</i>	<i>Occupational aspiration</i>	<i>Higher Education aspiration</i>	<i>End ft ed</i>	<i>Higher Education of respondent</i>	<i>Current job</i>
7	Architect	Yes	16	Left education after O-Levels	Director of division in a ceiling business
14	Didn't know	Oxbridge	18	Didn't go. Briefly attached to Bath on a sports course.	Managing Director of Engineering Firm
23	Dentist or doctor	Bristol	20	Dropped out after one year at Kingston Poly	Consultant in recruitment company

Two of our respondents started secondary school with clear occupational aspirations. However, like our ‘estranged’ respondents, these may not have been their own aspirations but those of their parents:

I think that was my more my mum’s than anything else. Yeah, that’s what she always wanted me to do. I don’t think that was ever going to happen. [23]

The aspiration to attend Oxbridge was similarly a parental ambition. When he was interviewed at the start of his secondary education, respondent 14 qualified his response with ‘Mum and Dad want me to go on. I don’t want to leave home, I could be enjoying myself’. Twenty-five years later he still recalls:

I knew they wanted me to go to university but I probably didn’t have a clue. It was never on my timeline. Oxbridge was probably the one that was on the tips of everyone else’s tongues. [14]

Although the respondents claim to have derived benefits from their time at secondary school, these often seem to have developed out of adversity. Certainly, their academic progress has not been impressive. Of course, it may be that this does not matter. However, as respondent 14 notes, he had the opportunity to achieve upward social mobility through higher education, but failed to take that route:

I’m kind of the first one who’s been able to break the mould from the Fry family. We’ve been all builders or in the army but, you know, always been working class. I had one chance to break the mould and I think I’ve broken the mould, you know, I’ve come up and hopefully my girls will take what I’ve done and they probably will want to go to uni. If they don’t I haven’t got a problem with that, but I’m hoping that they’ll see that a standard of life and their dad does this, they’ll want to go off and do something lower middle class/middle class. As I say, the only thing, I could have been the first one in the family to go on to university...and I’ve done a complete U-turn there... I’ve always run back to what the Fry family represented. [14]

Nevertheless, in terms of income, these three alienated respondents are relatively affluent. Of the two which responded to this questions one [7] earns in excess of £60,000, the other [14] £200,000. Their high earnings are a source of pride to them, e.g.:

I still maintain I am the son of a builder...I'd like to go back to Bankside to sit down with a lot of them and say, "What are you doing now? How much do you earn?" I guarantee you - I don't know anyone else my age who earns what I earn. [14]

These comments, though, suggest that they see their financial success arising *in spite* of their privileged education and not *because* of it.

### **Preferences for their children's education**

Our three 'alienated' respondents all have young children, two of whom are coming up to the age when decisions about secondary schools need to be made. Given their own lack of involvement in their schools, it is not surprising that they are not enthusiastic supporters of either the kind of scheme from which they 'benefited' or selective and private education in general:

In principle I'm totally against doing it. [7]

Respondent 7 acknowledged, though, that he might be faced with considering private education (especially for a daughter), if the local schools were too poor. It would, though, be a reluctant decision:

I can afford to. I just don't know whether given my experience I would want to. [7]

Respondent 14 fully supports the local comprehensive:

I haven't known one bad egg come out of there. [14]

Yet he too might consider sending one of his children to private school because he feels that she is especially vulnerable. However, the final respondent in the 'alienated' group is only considering the local comprehensive:

I'd prefer them to go to a local comprehensive and be able to afford to take them to Canada for two or three weeks a year and for them to be able to learn from that experience...I would always opt for the rounded education. [23]

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This report has attempted to unravel some of the processes that contributed to the variable performance of our AP holders. The sample, deliberately selected to include the more disadvantaged AP holders, has provided diverse accounts of their experiences of sponsorship, of stigma and of success. In order to make sense of this diversity, we have categorised our respondents' careers at school in terms of whether they were predominantly 'committed', 'detached', 'estranged' or 'alienated'.

### Principal findings

#### *Social class and mode of involvement*

In this discussion, we will examine whether there is any relationship between these contrasting modes of involvement and the different dimensions of disadvantage. Firstly, and as noted earlier, it is important to point out that the relationship is not straightforward. Working class pupils with low levels of educational inheritance can be found in each category of involvement. Children from single parent families experienced different levels of involvement too. However, it is possible to identify some tendencies from within our (albeit small) sample.

All of the pupils who came from homes where at least one parent was in a middle or intermediate class occupation accepted and realised the strong academic objectives of the school. They may have been more ambivalent about the social dimensions of their schools, but managed to distance themselves from these without jeopardising their academic progress to any serious degree. Over half our working class pupils (6/10) were also able to accept and realise the academic objectives of the school, but a significant minority (4/10) did not. This suggests that a non-manual class background protects children from estrangement and alienation, even where money is tight.

#### *The experience of financial hardship*

The difficulties of economic hardship were experienced by our respondents. Virtually all spoke of the fact that they could not participate in the 'semi-formal' activities of the school curriculum, such as field-trips, cultural visits or foreign exchanges, because their parents could not afford them. The lack of participation in weekend and after-school activities was compounded by the very long journeys to and from school which were commonly mentioned. Although many of their wealthier classmates would also have experienced long travelling times, the relative poverty of our AP holders meant they had a greater reliance on public transport. It is likely that this lack of participation in activities more associated with the social dimension of the school contributed to the relatively high levels of detachment within our sample.

However, while none of the respondents was 'well off', their relative financial hardship was not universally *experienced* by them as a source of stigma. For some it was simply a 'fact of life' which prevented them undertaking some activities but, for them, it was not a major issue. For others, feeling like the 'poor relation' was *the* defining characteristic of their time at school. It appears, from this small sample, that financial hardship combined with cultural discontinuity between the home and the school contributes to a sense of stigmatisation. For

most of our students, this discontinuity took the form of social class differences. For a few, it stemmed from differences in race, religion and sexuality.

#### *Stigma and the single parent family*

It is also worth noting that, while almost half of our respondents (11/23) came from single parent families, this was experienced as a source of stigma by only two students. Neither of these students came from middle or intermediate class homes, even though these accounted for the majority of single parent households in the sample (7/11). Again, this might suggest that a non-manual class background protects children from the potential stigmatisation of coming from a single parent family.

#### *Gender and involvement*

In addition, and relatedly, we need to comment on the gender aspect. Why is it that our committed respondents are largely female and our alienated respondents entirely male? Our sample is small and imbalanced in terms of the number of men and women interviewed. Nevertheless, the difference is striking. It may be that our girls' schools embodied the forms of 'academic feminism' identified by Arnot (2002), which underscored the importance of high academic attainment for competing with males.

However, the greater levels of involvement of our female respondents arise not so much from their acceptance of the academic dimension of their school, but from the acceptance and realisation of the social objectives of the school. After all, our 'detached' category is comprised largely of male respondents. As mentioned earlier, it is unclear whether the more effective incorporation into the social dimension of the school arises from schoolgirl cultures, girls' school practices or a combination of both. Certainly the contrasting modes of involvement require further investigation in order to unravel the relative importance of contrasting peer-group cultures, school composition and the particular attributes of a school's social and academic dimensions.

#### *The culture of the school*

What we have not been able to explore in any depth in this research is the extent to which school attributes and practices can reduce or increase this sense of stigmatisation and consequent lack of involvement. Although the schools were all prestigious and academically selective, they had different histories and traditionally served different social groups. Bankside College, for example, would rank among the top tier of the ancient public schools with a tradition of educating the children of the upper class. Nortown High represents the typical redbrick Victorian grammar school designed to foster the academic attainment of the academically able across the city - irrespective of social class background. The two Milltown schools had effectively operated as the local grammar schools for the town. In the days of the direct grant, these schools had often had more pupils on free places than they subsequently had on assisted places. By the time our cohort attended these schools, the social class profile of each type of school was relatively privileged, but there was still less contrast between AP holders and full-fee payers at the former direct grant grammar schools. Although there should be caution about drawing firm conclusions, there was certainly evidence in our interviews that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds experienced far more difficulties in becoming involved at traditional public schools like Bankside than at day grammar schools like Nortown and Milltown.

Additionally, although all of the schools prioritised academic performance, the traditional public schools placed more emphasis on the social ‘character-building’ dimensions of schooling (see, for instance, Walford (1986) on the importance of these activities in such schools). It is possible that within these schools it was more difficult for pupils to hold on to a position of detachment throughout the school career.

We also have only sketchy data on how the internal organisation of the school might have affected our respondents’ engagement with their schooling. Their accounts would give some support, though, to King’s (1969) conclusion that, in highly stratified schools such as these, the place of the pupil within the school hierarchy is a very important factor in involvement. Indeed, he argues that, in the grammar school he studied, it was more important than home background. Certainly, within our small sample, being ‘top’ of the class promoted involvement even for working class pupils with low educational inheritance. On the other hand, losing position within the academic hierarchy, either on transfer from primary school or on progression through secondary school, jeopardised involvement.

### **The benefits and risks of the Assisted Places Scheme**

This and earlier research have drawn attention to the benefits and risks of the APS. These can be loosely categorised into individual benefits and risks and system-wide impacts.

#### *Individual benefits and risks*

There is little doubt that many individuals benefited from the APS. The receipt of an assisted place enabled them to attend prestigious and well-resourced private schools which led to high academic attainments and places at elite universities. Previous analysis (Power et al 2006) indicated that AP holders were more likely to do better than state school pupils in this respect, although less well than full fee payers at private schools.

This is borne out in the present research. Only 5/23 respondents in our sample were estranged or alienated from their schools. However, these students failed to thrive in the scheme and dropped out of full-time education as soon as they could or failed to complete their higher education. Four of these respondents were from working class families, the other from a single parent family where the mother was not in paid employment at the time. This is consistent with the earlier analysis (Power et al 2006), which indicated that working class AP holders were more likely to exit education. The present research has attempted to unravel some of the complex processes which lie behind these variable levels of engagement.

It suggests that the risks of a damaged (and damaging) educational career within these highly academically and socially selective institutions are greatest for those from lower occupational backgrounds with low levels of educational inheritance. These risks appeared to be particularly pronounced for boys and for those attending the most socially selective schools. This research also suggests that, while the APS may have covered the fees, many students felt unable to participate fully in the life of the school because they could not afford the many extra-curricular and social activities on offer. These difficulties created tensions between different peer networks and this further detached students from full involvement in their school.

### *System-wide impacts*

In addition to the individually-experienced risks and benefits are the system-wide impacts of the APS (see for example Edwards *et al* 1989). While these impacts have not been central to the present report, they are relevant to discussions about future similar policies.

One of the early criticisms of the APS was that it was not money well-spent because it did not attract its original target group (Edwards *et al* 1989). There did appear to be a lack of genuine need in some cases in our original study, and there is evidence that some of the beneficiaries were not disadvantaged in any conventional sense. Certainly, several of our respondents felt that it was likely they would have attended the same school without government assistance. This however is largely an issue of implementation rather than principle, although in a scheme such as this, the specifics of implementation are very important.

Beyond the question of matching resource to need, there remain serious concerns about the ways in which the APS enabled private schools to ‘cream’ the most talented students who would have otherwise gone to state schools. This creaming, it is argued, not only disadvantages the remaining academically able students in those schools but may also undermine the role of comprehensive schools in maintaining social cohesion, although some might argue that private school pupils should be exposed to children from a greater variety of backgrounds.

Even where the actual number of pupils removed from state schools was small, the very existence of the APS implied that these schools cannot adequately cater for the most academically able. To some, it therefore contained a very strong message about the superiority of private education.

### **Contemporary issues in private schooling**

Many of the issues driving the APS in the early 1980s, such as comprehensivisation and the end of the direct grant schools, are perhaps less relevant now. The Conservative government 1979-1997 did not expand state grammar schools (although they were looking to do so if they regained power in 1997). When New Labour came to power they avoided challenging either the private school sector or the remaining grammar schools and declared they would concentrate on ‘standards not structures’ (Whitty, 2008, 2009). In 2007, the Conservative party also distanced itself from selective education. David Willetts, then education spokesperson, said: ‘a return to the 11-plus is not the way of increasing social mobility today. We need to focus on raising standards in the 3,000 secondary schools across the country’ (quoted in BBC 2007). This caused a furore within the party at the time. Michael Gove recently reiterated the commitment to improving the state sector and spoke of the ‘opportunity gulf’ between private and state schools being a ‘scandal’: ‘this widening gap is an affront to our national conscience. And tackling it head on is a central mission for the Conservative Party’ (Gove 2009). However, this does not preclude the Conservatives attempting to create more ‘bridges’ between the two sectors.

It is worth briefly looking at the performance gap between the two sectors. High achievement in the private school sector is still very much evident and it remains dominant in public life, despite only accounting for 7% of the current secondary school population



(Independent Schools Council 2008). Various research studies conducted by Sutton Trust indicate that the majority of the judiciary, politicians and journalists were educated privately (Sutton Trust 2005a, 2005b, 2006). Moreover, prestigious universities have disproportionate numbers of privately educated students, for example Oxford with 47% and Cambridge with 42.3% (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2008). In addition, a third of students at Oxford and Cambridge come from just 100 schools (82 private, 16 grammar and two comprehensive) (Sutton Trust 2007). This suggests that investment in private education should pay high dividends for most individuals. In fact, Chris Patten, Chancellor of Oxford University, argues that universities should be able to follow the private school model and charge high fees for an elite higher education:

Can there be a middle-class objection to higher fees? It is surely a mad world in which parents or grandparents are prepared to shell out tens of thousands of pounds to put their children through private schools to get them in to universities, and then object to them paying a tuition fee of more than £3,000 when they are there (quoted in Curtis 2008).

Increases in social mobility appear to have stalled over recent decades (Narey et al 2009) and levels have not so far increased significantly under New Labour (Palmer et al 2008). Yet this should not necessarily be attributed to the decline of grammar schools and the abolition of the APS. Some, like Bernard Trafford of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC), certainly regret the abolition of the APS role on the grounds that it was a 'ladder of opportunity' and a 'powerful engine of social mobility' (Trafford 2009). However, its impact was limited because, as we have seen, so few of its recipients were unambiguously working class. Nevertheless, the premiums from a private education are high and, as long as this is the case, there remain important questions about whether access to these benefits should be effectively denied to those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **Beyond the Assisted Places Scheme**

Although the APS has now been abolished, there are therefore continuing debates about the risks and benefits of sponsoring disadvantaged pupils and students into advantaged milieux. In addition to current schemes designed to attract academically able students from disadvantaged backgrounds into prestigious universities (Curtis and Andalo 2008), there are also a number of policies currently in place and on the horizon which seek to change the relationship between the state and private education. In this final section, we consider the implications of these policies in the light of our own research on the APS.

#### *Opening access to private education*

There have since been various similar but smaller individual initiatives in independent schools. As already mentioned, one example is the Open Access Scheme at Belvedere school in Liverpool, which ran between 2000 and 2007. This scheme, supported by the Sutton Trust, opened up access to the independent girls' school based on ability, regardless of ability to pay and claimed to have overcome some of the weaknesses of the APS. In particular, the school attracted a relatively high proportion of socio-economically disadvantaged students. One third of the girls admitted during the first five years of Open Access were eligible for free school meals - more than twice the national average (Smithers and Robinson 2006).

Despite the relative success of schemes such as these, it is not clear that an incoming Conservative government would bring back the APS or a close equivalent. However, more radical voices in the party would like to develop a 'voucher' scheme to allow parents to take the amount that would be spent on the state education of their children and spend this on places in independent schools. The recession might affect some parents' ability to continue to pay for private education (Swinford 2008), although many in the sector, at the time of writing, remain bullish (Rogers 2009). Two recent censuses looking at the 2008/09 school year have indicated that pupil numbers in independent schools in England have marginally increased compared to the year before (ISC 2009, DCSF 2009b). However, as Fread (2009) notes, there is often a 12 to 18 month lag between an economic crisis and falls in private school numbers, and there have been reports of schools in the private sector closing or merging (Sugden 2009) and parents defaulting on fees (Sugden and Woolcock 2009). If parents in the sector become increasingly unable to pay fees, then scholarship or voucher schemes in private schools may become more attractive to certain elements of the electorate. A variation of this, which is somewhat reminiscent of the APS, is to adjust the value of the voucher in relation to parental means, thereby assisting disadvantaged families to gain access to independent schools (Brighouse 2002).

If these ideas are implemented, policy-makers would be well-advised to consider the lessons from our AP holders' experiences. Careful consideration would need to be given to ensure appropriate targeting, sufficient resources for all pupils to participate, not only in the formal curriculum but the range of opportunities on offer, and a diverse social composition.

The independent sector has also moved over the last few years to divert more of its fee assistance to means-tested bursaries, rather than straightforward scholarships which, it has been argued, often go to students whose parents can well afford to pay full costs. While this is welcome, our research suggests that in making these awards, private schools not only need to think about covering the cost of basic fees, but also take stronger steps to make sure the full range of extra-curricular activities are accessible to those from poorer homes.

In terms of social mix, it is instructive to bear in mind the Public Schools Commission's (PSC) (1968) suggestion that traditional public boarding schools would need to have at least half their intake on assisted places if they were to make the necessary adaptations for less well-off pupils. This raises issues for the pilot scheme that has run since 2006 where vulnerable children are placed in independent (as well as state) boarding schools (DCSF 2006). By 2008, only 17 young adults have been through the pilot, mostly at private schools. An evaluation of this initiative found a mixed picture of how they coped. While some placements were successful, six pupils dropped out and others encountered difficulties (as might be expected to some extent because of their disadvantaged backgrounds): 'individual young people's personality and social skills, as well as their own socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, influenced their ability to cope with a boarding school placement' (Maxwell et al 2009: 6). Plans have recently been confirmed to increase the numbers of children from care being educated in state boarding schools (DCSF 2008, 2009a). Increasing boarding facilities in state schools, including Academies, might be preferable to sending these children to independent schools, a view presumably reflected in recent Conservatives proposals for residential Academies (Gove 2009).

### *Blurring the boundaries*

Although the second report of the PSC (1970) contained a minority view that the state should support the private sector in providing for a small group of very highly gifted children, the Commission concluded that state support for academically selective education could not be justified at a time of the comprehensivisation of maintained grammar schools. As a result of the subsequent abolition of the direct grant system, academically selective education is now restricted to the private sector in many areas of the country and there is little political appetite for a return to selection in state schools. However, we have mentioned the danger that schemes like the APS create the impression that state schools cannot serve the needs of all children, especially those who are identified as academically able. In practice, most academically able children are successfully educated within the state sector but that is not always recognised. In this situation, it might be argued that an alternative to using public funding to open up access to private schools would be to pay more attention to ensuring that all non-selective state schools can effectively meet the needs of academically able students and to convincing aspirational parents that they can do so. Gifted and Talented programmes are intended to do this. Yet, although there is some evidence of their having a positive effect on achievement and engagement (Bailey *et al* 2008), such programmes remain highly controversial with some state school teachers (Curtis 2008).

More cross-sector co-operation may be one way forward. A recent example is the agreement that the cadet corps of six independent schools will be opened to pupils from local state schools. However, this proposal relates to the social dimension of the school and might therefore seem unlikely to secure the involvement of the sorts of pupil who we have characterised as estranged or alienated. Specialist teaching in subjects where state schools lack qualified staff, such as physics, would probably be less problematic in this respect and has some current appeal to independent schools with charitable status as helping them to meet the ‘public interest’ test. It would also be less subject to the state school objection to the APS and other scholarship or bursary schemes that they ‘strip talented, well-motivated children out of state schools [and] damage the public interest by harming the schools attended by the majority of children’ (Stevens 2008).

The growth of Academies is also likely to play a role in blurring the boundary between state and private education. For example, Andrew Adonis has favourably contrasted the numbers of students educated in Academy schools to the number formerly on assisted places (Adonis 2007), and more recently private schools have been encouraged to become involved in the programme as co-sponsors or partners (DCSF 2007). Indeed, as noted earlier, Belvedere itself has become an Academy after the Open Access scheme ended because of financial pressures. It is also interesting to note that private schools’ charitable status has been questioned. This may lead to an extension of existing bursary schemes or to further involvement in the Academies programme.

Current leaders of the Conservative Party have also become staunch supporters of the Academies programme, especially in its original form which emphasised the independence of the schools from local authorities. They now promise that their programme of new Academies will make an ‘independent state school accessible to every community’ (Gove 2008).

Cross-sector federations might be a way of securing academic collaboration across sectors without requiring pupils to move to an ‘alien’ cultural environment. They might also provide opportunities for collaboration in extra-curricular activities. The need to create a different institutional ethos, at the same time as exporting Adonis’s ‘educational DNA’ (Adonis 2007) into new schools, may be one motivation for some independent schools sponsoring separate Academies rather than expanding their own provision or converting to Academies themselves. Some Academy sponsors, such as the United Learning Trust and the Haberdashers’ Livery Company, also run schools in the private sector. In time, of course, such arrangements might themselves help to reduce the sorts of sectoral differences that impacted upon the experience of the pupils in our study.

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**Appendix A Table outlining attributes and involvement of AP holders**

ID	Sex	School	Educational inheritance	Occupational background	Single parent?	Occupational aspiration	HE aspiration	Age left ft ed	HE	Current job
1	F	St Hilda's	High	Middle class	yes	Something to do with art	Yes	25	Architecture, Bath; Dip Arch, Glasgow	Architect
2	M	Cathedral	High	Middle class	yes	Mechanical engineering	Yes	23	Edinburgh, Social Anthropology	International Development Worker
3	M	Bankside	High	Intermediate	yes	Didn't know	Yes	21	Southampton, Chemistry	Director of marketing and sales for a small company
4	F	Milltown High	Middle	NIPE	no	Solicitor	Didn't know	25	Leeds Poly, Soc Policy & Admin, Dip Social Work	Social work manager
5	F	Nortown High	High	Middle class	yes	Vet	Yes	22	Nottingham, Manufacturing Eng & Management	Project manager/consultant
6	M	Nortown Grammar	Low	Working class	no	Doctor or solicitor	Yes	21	Essex, History and politics	General manager of financial services firm
7	M	Milltown	Middle	Working class	no	Architect	Yes	16	Left education after O-Levels	Director of division of ceiling business
8	M	Nortown Grammar	Low	Working class	no	Didn't know	Yes	23	York, Philosophy/Politics	Partner in property business (Spain)
9	M	Nortown Grammar	High	NIPE	yes	Doctor	Manchester	16	Dropped out of A-Levels twice	Shopworker
10	F	Nortown High	Low	Working class	yes	Barrister	Oxbridge	18	Later, HND converted to degree at Manchester Met	Manager in local government
11	M	Bankside	Low	Intermediate	no	Didn't know	Yes	21	LSE, Economics	Partner in accountancy firm
12	M	Nortown Grammar	Unknown	Intermediate	yes	Forensic scientist	Manchester	22	Sheffield, Medical School.	Consultant Surgeon
13	F	Milltown High	Low	Working class	no	Police officer	Didn't know	22	Newcastle, Agriculture & Environmental Studies	NIPE (ex -environmental manager)
14	M	Bankside	Low	Working class	no	Didn't know	Oxbridge	18	Briefly attached to Bath for sports	Managing Director of engineering firm
15	F	Dame Margaret's	High	Working class	no	Teacher	Yes	19	Dropped out from Kent after a year.	Researcher for central government
16	F	Milltown Grammar	Low	Working class	yes	Didn't know	Manchester	26	Leicester, Geog; left to study dentistry, Manchester	Dentist
17	M	Nortown Grammar	Middle	NIPE	no	Didn't know	Yes	23	Oxford, Modern History	Company director
18	M	Nortown Grammar	Low	Working class	yes	Solicitor or barrister	Birmingham	23	Bradford, Modern Languages	Academic publishing
19	M	Nortown Grammar	High	Middle class	yes	Didn't know	Didn't know	21	Durham, Maths	Senior manager in financial services firm
20	M	Milltown	Middle	Intermediate	yes	Dentist	Didn't know	22	Huddersfield, Transport and Distribution	Logistician/transport planner
21	F	Milltown High	Middle	Intermediate	no	Architect	Yes	21	Leicester, Geography	Full-time mother
22	M	Nortown Grammar	Middle	Intermediate	no	RAF	Oxbridge	21	Bristol, Aeronautical Engineering	Scientist in government agency
23	M	Bankside	Low	Working class	no	Dentist or doctor	Bristol	20	Dropped out after one year at Kingston Poly	Consultant in recruitment firm
24	M	Bankside	Middle	Intermediate	No	Didn't know	Yes	18	Took A levels at various FE colleges	Unemployed
25	M	Nortown Grammar	Low	Intermediate	Yes	Linguist	Cambridge	18	Currently studying for a degree with the OU	Student

## Appendix B: List of schools

	<b>Key characteristics<sup>10</sup></b>
Bankside College	Traditional boys' public school with 600 pupils, mainly boarders. Only a small number of AP holders.
Cathedral College	Leading public school for 700 boys which takes boarders and day pupils. Only a very small number of AP holders
Dame Margaret's High School	Private girls' school with about 550 pupils. In addition to AP holders, it has its own bursary scheme.
Milltown Grammar	Former direct grant school (now fully private) with 650 boys serving local town.
Milltown High	Former direct grant school (now fully private) with 500 girls serving local town.
Nortown Grammar School	Former direct grant school (now fully private) serving large city and beyond. A very large school with up to half of its pupils being assisted, either through AP Scheme or school bursaries.
Nortown High	Former direct grant school (now fully private) with 500 girls.
St Hilda's Girls	Private girls' school for 600 pupils. Has own scholarship scheme as well as AP holders.
Weston School	Small school of 300 boys, mainly boarders.

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<sup>10</sup> At the time when our respondents attended. Several have subsequently become co-educational.