Stories from the Class of 2023

**Education experiences of high potential
students from different backgrounds**

Kantar Public

August 2023

COSMO
COVID Social Mobility
& Opportunities Study

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Key Findings

Following on from our recent piece, _Social Mobility: The Next Generation –_
Lost potential at age 16, this report looks to deepen our understanding of the
experiences of young people who were in the top third for attainment at the end
of primary school ('high attainers'). Using in-depth interviews with 17-18 year
olds, the report looks at how the socio-economic background of high attainers
shapes their educational journeys, as well as their future plans and aspirations.
This group of young people were studying for their GCSEs at the start of the
COVID-19 pandemic.

The research reveals that the educational experience of the young people
interviewed and – to a lesser extent – their aspirations for the future was shaped
by five main intertwining factors: socio-economic inequalities, relationships,
personal characteristics, life events and other forms of inequality.

Socio-economic inequalities & educational experiences

- Socio-economic inequalities drove perceived differences in the quality of
  education received by the young people interviewed. Disadvantaged high
  attainers felt they were negatively affected by issues such as high staff
  turnover, a lack of teachers as well as a generally lower quality of teaching.

- Socio-economic inequalities were also felt to have affected access to digital
  technology, which impacted on young people's ability to attend online
  classes during the pandemic.

Relationships with parents, teachers and peers

- Relationships with parents, teachers and peers influenced young people's
  motivation, career choices and levels of comfort at school.

- Teachers were critical in either stimulating or discouraging interest in
  subjects among the young people interviewed, which could then go on to
  influence their future career plans.

- Disadvantaged high attainers experienced a broad range of parental
  involvement, from disengaged to motivating parents. This group were the
  only ones to report having parents with no involvement or engagement in
  their child's education. However, having disengaged parents was associated
  with (or required) higher levels of personal motivation and determination, as
  these young people appeared more likely to feel solely responsible for their
  future as a result.

- Disadvantaged high attainers also appeared more motivated by the idea of making their parents proud, supporting them financially or caring for them in the future. In particular, a sense of responsibility towards their parents was a source of motivation which was absent in the decision-making of more advantaged high attainers.

- In contrast, parents of more advantaged high attainers tended to occupy the middle ground in terms of their involvement. The exception to this was parents of the privately educated, who were often pressuring, with very high levels of engagement.

- Regardless of socio-economic background, bullying was a powerful factor shaping attitudes and experiences, with extremely adverse effects on the motivation, mental health and wellbeing of those affected by it.

Personal characteristics

- Being intrinsically motivated was the main source of motivation for both the disadvantaged and more advantaged young people interviewed.

- However, the disadvantaged young people interviewed reported more consistently high levels of motivation throughout the entirety of their secondary education. In contrast, more advantaged high attainers tended to describe fluctuating motivation, often influenced by teachers or other factors beyond their education.

- Individual motivation was affected by individual attitudes to learning. Classroom teaching was not seen as the most effective learning approach for all high attainers, with some learners feeling under-stimulated in class.

  - In addition, values were important in shaping motivation. Values such as believing in the importance of hard work in life were associated with higher levels of motivation throughout their education. Disadvantaged high attainers tended to emphasise the importance of hard work in life more strongly than others. While more advantaged high attainers also recognised the relevance of hard work in life, they placed a stronger emphasis on luck and other life circumstances outside of their personal control.

Future plans

- Personal interests in subjects and fields of work or study were the guiding force for high attainers' career aspirations and future plans.

- Among those interviewed, only disadvantaged young people mentioned achieving a stable income or not having to worry about money in the future as additional considerations when choosing a career path. While personal interests were still the main factor shaping future career aspirations, considerations about salary or financial responsibility could potentially make careers with higher income more relevant for disadvantaged high attainers.

- In combination with personal interests, changes in plans and aspirations were usually linked to a higher exposure towards the degree or profession, learning more about what it involved in practice or identifying a career they hadn't known about before.

Major life events

- Across high attainers from different socio-economic backgrounds, life events that were felt to be disruptive had a noticeable effect on experiences and learning outcomes. The disruption of young peoples' sense of stability usually affected motivation levels and performance, either positively or negatively.

- Moving home, as one form of disruptive life event, was more commonly experienced by disadvantaged than more advantaged high attainers. The combined effect of moving home, changing school, and having to make new friends could completely alter high attainers' enjoyment, attitude towards education, and performance at school.

Experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic

- Across both disadvantaged and more advantaged high attainers, stark differences in the quality of online learning were felt to impact learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

  - Overall, the quality of learning was negatively impacted by (a) teachers not being able to effectively check up on their students' attendance and attention; (b) young people experiencing difficulties in retaining information due to the absence of personal interaction and (c) young people not being able to directly and frequently ask questions to teachers.

  - Young people at private schools reported that they were able to more quickly set up online learning, and used it more effectively than state schools over time. State school students also remarked that a reduced workload meant that much less content was covered during the year, resulting in them knowing less and being less prepared in comparison to their private school peers.

- While some young people enjoyed the reduced workload and stress associated with online learning during lockdowns, they also pointed out the negative impact it had on their learning, including a reduced ability to focus for longer periods of time due to shorter tasks being set by teachers, as well as knowledge-gaps due to difficulties absorbing information online as opposed to through in-person teaching.

- High attainers felt less prepared for their A-level exams due to the cancellation of GCSE exams. Those who regarded the teacher assessed or replacement GCSEs as unfair discussed how it could limit their future choice of A-levels and therefore potentially their higher education opportunities.

  - The COVID-19 pandemic was also felt to have provided a more suitable learning environment for some students who struggled to learn within a traditional educational environment. Here, these included neurodivergent young people and those with less conventional attitudes to learning.

Other inequalities

- Other inequalities based on health, sexuality and gender as well as race had the potential to have a strongly negative impact on motivation, wellbeing and school performance.

- Inequalities that resulted in bullying could lead to the school environment being viewed as an unsafe space, and education itself being perceived negatively.

- Mental health issues often had the capacity to dominate high attainers' feelings of wellbeing and affect educational performance and perceptions of school, with a perceived lack of adequate mental health support in schools seen to have exacerbated and prolonged these issues.

Key differences and similarities depending on the socio-economic background of high attainers

Differences	Similarities
• Overall, the major areas in which socio-economic background drove differences in young people's experiences were the quality of education and access to education. Quality was defined by staff turnover, lack of teachers and generally poor quality of (online) teaching, whereas access to education was limited or enabled on the basis of technological access.	• Regardless of socio-economic background, young high attainers also shared similarities such as the importance of relationships with parents, teachers and friends as well as an intrinsic motivation to perform well at school.
• Socio-economic background also informed differences in the role and level of engagement of parents.	• They also shared the importance of disruptive life events such as COVID-19 or experiences of bullying and its detrimental effect on motivation, mental health & wellbeing.
• Differences in socio-economic backgrounds were also associated with a varying consistency of motivation and the varying degree in the perceived importance of hard work.	• Inequalities stemming from (mental) health, sexuality, gender or race could be intertwined or go across socio-economic backgrounds.
• Experience of the COVID pandemic were mainly shaped by the quality of and access to education, as well as differences between state and private education.	• Across socio-economic backgrounds, high attainers were guided by their personal interests in their future plans.

Recommendations on high attainers

This research reflects and builds upon a number of key findings identified through the Sutton Trust's recent *Social Mobility: The Next Generation - Lost Potential at age 16* report.

Recommendations from that project address topics of direct relevance to this piece of research, including:

1

The influence of the pandemic on educational experiences:

There should be a national strategy to close the attainment gaps that have opened since the pandemic. Addressing these gaps should be a national priority, with a long-term plan in place, based on evidence. This should include closing the gap at all levels of attainment, and not just the lowest attainers.

2

The challenges arising from disadvantaged high attainers being unlikely to attend high performing schools:

School admissions should be reformed so there is a better socio-economic mix of pupils across schools, particularly in the most over-subscribed. Those who attend more socially mixed schools progress more at GCSE. Oversubscribed schools should consider a variety of ways of diversifying their intakes, including ballots, banding and priority for Pupil Premium applicants.

3

The level of educational disruption experienced by this generation due to the pandemic, and the likely impact of this on their higher education.

Universities should recognise the disruption faced by students joining them in the autumn by supporting their transition and success in higher education. When students arrive this autumn, universities should identify key gaps in learning at an early stage in the first term, and provide continuing support if necessary, as well as support for student mental health and wellbeing.

A full set of recommendations are available in the report, including recommendations for teachers on how best to support high attainers.

Introduction

Prior attainment is a major factor in both educational and career progression.[1] But the Sutton Trust's recent report, *Social Mobility: The Next Generation – Lost potential at age 16*,[2] has shown that even the young people who do show strong initial academic potential from less advantaged backgrounds often fall behind their better-off peers during their time in education. Indeed, by GCSE level, disadvantaged young people (defined here as those eligible for free school meals in secondary school and in the top third for attainment at the end of primary school), are achieving grades that are, on average, more than three quarters of a grade lower per subject than other high attainers. And while 62% of more advantaged high attainers gained five or more grade 7-9s at GCSE in 2021, this figure was just 40% for disadvantaged high attainers. While it is vital to promote social mobility at every part of the attainment spectrum, ensuring the initial potential of this group is not lost is a key part of equalising opportunities across socio-economic groups.

This report uses qualitative interviews with young people to look in greater depth at the experiences of high attainers, to better understand the ways in which their experiences, including any issues and barriers, differ by socio-economic background, as well as gaining a broader understanding of this group of young people more generally.

The COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities Study (COSMO)

This project is based on qualitative interviews with young people from the COSMO cohort. COSMO is a major national longitudinal cohort study of 13,000 young people, set up to examine the short, medium and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational inequality and social mobility. It is the largest study of its kind. This cohort in particular has experienced substantial disruption to their education due to the COVID-19 pandemic at a significant point in their schooling (the run up to taking their GCSE qualifications in 2021); the impacts of which on inequity in life chances is also explored here.

- COSMO is a collaboration between the UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities (CEPEO), the Sutton Trust, and the UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies, with fieldwork led by Kantar Public. Previous research conducted with young members of the COSMO study and the Opportunity Cohort has been predominantly quantitative, identifying key characteristics, experiences and choices at a population or subgroup level. This is the first work using qualitative methods to explore the experiences of a small group of COSMO study participants.

Research aims

The aim of the research was to explore the experiences of high attainers and understand how these differed by socio-economic background. This will be used to enrich quantitative findings from the COSMO study and through quantitative research and workshops conducted as part of *Social Mobility: The Next Generation.*

This project had four key research objectives:

- To map educational journeys to date, including pre- and post-GCSE.

- To explore aspirations and plans for the future, and understand the factors in decision-making.

- To identify barriers and enablers for education, career plans and aspirations.

- To explore engagement with and experience of programmes and interventions, including those offered by the Sutton Trust, and any outcomes as a result.

Methods

Kantar Public have served as the fieldwork partner for both waves of the COSMO study, with data collection for Wave 1 starting in October 2021 and for Wave 2 in October 2022. The findings from Wave 1 have been published in a series of focused briefings, which can be found here.

The research for this project is based on qualitative interviews with COSMO cohort members between the age of 17 and 18 across England. Kantar Public conducted 34 online in-depth interviews, each 60-minutes in length. The interviews took place between 30th March and 25th June 2023, with a two week recruitment break from 15th to 26th May to accommodate the start of A-level exams. A timeline interviewing technique was used, whereby participants 'plotted' past events and future plans on a timeline shared onscreen while being probed on their emotions.

To understand the relevance of socio-economic background in shaping experiences and future plans, Kantar Public interviewed 15 high attainers from Sutton Trust's COSMO Opportunity Cohort sample of 2,249 young people, all of whom are classed as disadvantaged. These individuals are state school students with high academic potential (within the top third of English and Maths attainers at key stage 2) and are from socio-economically

disadvantaged backgrounds (eligible for free school meals at any point during their secondary education). They are referred to as 'disadvantaged'. Kantar Public and the Sutton Trust also agreed to interview 15 participants from the COSMO study's core sample of high attainers, who were not eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), they are referred to as 'more advantaged'.

Across both groups of high attainers, a mix of respondents *(see Appendix)* were recruited to capture a broad range of potential experiences and plans for the future. This included, for example, a mix of genders, ethnicities and regions across England as well as school types (e.g. sixth form college, school or specialist college). Based on the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC), the core sample included respondents from households with higher managerial, intermediate or manual occupations. This sample also included a mix of respondents *(see Appendix)* who attended state or private education.

As private school students do not sit key stage 2 assessments, for this group, high attainers were identified as those in the top third at GCSE rather than at key stage 2.

Participants were between the ages of 14 – 16 at the time of the COVID-19 lockdowns between March 2020 and December 2021. The cohort were due to take their GCSEs in 2021, which were replaced with Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGs) during the pandemic.

During this study, participants were provided with a list of resources in case they revealed any sensitive information indicating a need for support. Safeguarding provisions were in place in case participants revealed any information which indicated a (imminent) threat of harm to themselves or others.

Participants received a £40 voucher for their participation. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. A thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcripts.

It is important to bear in mind that a qualitative approach explores a range of experiences, plans and attitudes in depth. It provides an insight into the many facets and factors underlying participant's experiences and decision-making. Findings are descriptive and illustrative, not statistically representative.

Findings

The aim of this research was to understand high attainers' educational journeys and their plans for the future, as well as how these differed by socio-economic background. The research indicated that educational journeys and – to a lesser extent - aspirations for the future, were shaped by five main intertwining factors: socio-economic inequalities, key relationships, personal characteristics, disruptive life events and other inequalities.

Chapter 1 demonstrates the importance of socio-economic inequalities in affecting quality of and access to education. It also discusses the inequalities between state and private schools and the impact on learning during the pandemic.

Chapter 2 examines relationships with parents, teachers and peers and their effects on high attainers' motivation, career choices and levels of comfort in school environments.

Chapter 3 demonstrates how personal characteristics were important in positively or negatively affecting high attainers' motivation levels throughout their education. This chapter also shows that personal interests were the most important factor in shaping high attainers' future education and career choices.

Chapter 4 looks at the impact of disruptive life events such as bereavement, divorce and moving house on high attainers' educational experience and learning outcomes.

Chapter 5 discusses other relevant forms of inequality beyond socio-economic circumstances and education which stem from health, sexuality, gender and race.

1. Socio-economic inequalities

Socio-economic inequalities affected two main areas: the quality of education as well as high attainers' access to technology. Inequalities were both found between disadvantaged and more advantaged young people but were also relevant beyond receiving FSM within the group of more advantaged high attainers, based on inequalities between those receiving state and private education.

1.1. Quality of education

Disadvantaged high attainers were particularly affected by a lower quality of education. While this could also affect more advantaged young people, limitations on learning as a result of lower education quality were predominately reported by those receiving FSM.

From the perspective of young people interviewed, educational quality was defined on the basis of level of staff turnover, availability of adequate numbers of teachers, overall quality of teaching, and specifically, the quality of online teaching during the pandemic. It was the combination of these factors as well as official Ofsted rating which made young people assess a school as 'good' or 'bad'

"My own head teacher said 'this school is so s*** I wouldn't expect anyone to come here', [it] really, really messed up my motivation."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

"[My views were based on] a mixture of the school being rated as inadequate and the teachers constantly leaving, and constantly having changes of classes. This made it hard to get myself motivated for school and both that and COVID-19 heavily affected how I viewed school and just education in general."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A levels at a state school

Staff turnover: High staff turnover was seen to have a strongly negative effect on learning outcomes as high attainers pointed out the importance of personal and stable teacher relationships for their learning. This affected both groups of high attainers but particularly those who attended schools rated as inadequate by Ofsted.

"I remember in year 8 and year 9, I didn't have a science teacher for an entire term. There was so much lack of teachers at my school for some reason. I think it was because of it, the turnover is high, isn't it? I'd say it was probably more negative than it was positive by quite a mile."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school

Young people reported that instability in school faculty could also lead to increased chaos, and even violence, in the classroom due to students reacting to new staff and the loss of established relationships between teachers and pupils. Overall, this instability had the potential to lead students to view school, and even education more generally, negatively.

Lack of teachers: For both disadvantaged and more advantaged young people, a lack of teachers in certain subjects such as science or maths was found to have a detrimental effect on their learning outcomes for the specific subject. This was felt to decrease the motivation of high attainers and make it harder for them to build stable and personal relationships with teachers.

> **"I think from year 9 to year 11, I had a lot of substitute teachers in my science subjects so we didn't actually have a proper teacher."**
> **- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels**

Quality of teaching: From the perspective of the young people interviewed, the most important factor in defining the quality of their education was the quality of teaching. This particularly affected disadvantaged high attainers, and perceptions of good and poor-quality teaching could be based on personal judgement as well as official Ofsted ratings. High attainers' personal judgment were usually based on how much knowledge they felt they had learned in a subject with a specific teacher. Good teaching was often described as resulting in long-lasting retention of the specific content and an ability to build on it in the future, poor quality teaching typically the opposite. For example, one disadvantaged high attainer described how attending a school with poor quality teaching resulted in them missing out on crucial course content, and that they were then required to compensate for this loss of learning through independent home study.

> **"My maths Teacher was awful, so bad [that] after school I'd have to go home and teach myself."**
> **- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels**

Disadvantaged high attainers identified a range of different reasons for the poor quality of teaching. One high attainer stated that while some teachers did not care about their jobs, other teachers did care but were simply too overwhelmed to be effective.

"I think it was more that they [teachers] were overwhelmed. Some of them actually they didn't care, some of them I'd say were overwhelmed."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

Teachers who were perceived as not caring were seen as having a particularly detrimental effect on the school experience for disadvantaged high attainers. One high attainer shared the story of an argument with a teacher which reflected their teacher's motivation, the wider quality of the school and the impact it had on them.

"He [teacher] had the audacity to tell me 'How did you end up in this school with these grades?' I said 'I don't know what to say to you man, I just ended up here, you don't have to worry' I just told him that and he was like 'Well good luck with that' slams my (…) certificate on the table and then I say to him 'I'm leaving, I'm done' he was like 'Do you think I wake up in the morning and enjoy entering the school' and then I said to him "No I don't expect you to but no one [enjoys it] because [this school is not a motivating place]."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

Quality of online learning: Differences in the quality of teaching were particularly relevant when looking at the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers and their effective use of online learning played a critical role during this time and ineffective online teaching impacted both disadvantaged and more advantaged high attainers. It should be noted that, overall, the pandemic had much less of an effect on private school students, and this is the focus of chapter 1.3. Teachers' ability to effectively make use of online learning depended on their individual teaching styles and familiarity with digital technology. In particular, the importance of teachers setting up online teaching and effectively using the technology were key factors young people discussed when reflecting on their pandemic experience. High attainers noticed differences between teachers who used online technology, with some making effective use of this while others were completely overwhelmed by the technology for the entirety of each lockdown. For example, at one end of the spectrum, one student mentioned how teachers would only count their attendance if they were participating in the online class. At the other end, teachers continued merely to send out worksheets for students to fill out. Another student commented that they did not even see the point of having a teacher, as there were not any lessons, even in online form, for the first few months of lockdown.

"It really depended on the subjects, some teachers were really lazy and they sent absolutely nothing and some teachers would do like weekly lessons on [Microsoft] Teams. (…) I think it was just the quality of the teaching was just really bad. Especially when you're just sat at home and told something over and over and over again, it doesn't really help in the same way. It wasn't as interactive lessons as they would be in person."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

"For the first three months it was just hellish because I wasn't learning anything. I had a massively increased workload, and I didn't interact with anyone other than my parents."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at a state school

1.2. Access to education

In addition to a lower quality of education, disadvantaged young people also faced challenges regarding their access to education as a result of limited access to technology. This was particularly relevant for online learning during the pandemic. Not having the necessary or up-to-date digital technology available at home to attend online classes was a key limitation on learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and more advantaged high attainers could also be affected by this. However, in the context of their home, only disadvantaged high attainers discussed the general financial pressures on their families limiting provision of digital technologies. This could result in having to share technology with siblings or joining online classes on their phone. Indeed, in Sutton Trust's previous quantitative analysis from the COSMO study, disadvantaged high attainers were over three times more likely to lack a suitable device to study at the beginning of the pandemic, and twice as likely to lack a suitable place to study.[3]

"Not everyone really has like a computer or laptop. I had a computer, but it wasn't the best. It didn't even Zoom properly, so I used [my] phone."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

"We all had to get iPads in year 7 and it cost like three hundred and sixty pounds, I know my parents had to spend it over three years because that's certainly not a one-off purchase that they'd really make"
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

"They obviously couldn't give us the worksheets, we had to print all of them off and my printer was broken the whole time so I literally just didn't know what to do for half of it or I would just do one page."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at a state school

As well as access to technology, housing conditions also affected high attainers' ability to learn, as explored in the case study below.

Figure 1: Case Study Example: A high attainer's housing conditions made learning from home 'unbearable' during the pandemic

Louis, a high attainer currently studying for A-levels at a state school, described how poor housing quality as well as his family deciding to keep the heating switched off to reduce costs negatively affected their **standard of living and his ability to learn at home** during the pandemic.

He attempted to work in the face of uncomfortable conditions including noise and cold. He was disrupted by wind coming through the windows, and the general coldness of their house once their boiler stopped working.

This young person was not eligible for FSM, and his experience shows that many **young people living in difficult conditions are not always covered by this measure**. It highlights that socio-economic inequalities also affect young people beyond FSM eligibility. Louis reflected that heating costs had become ever harder to manage for his family **as a consequence of the cost-of-living crisis**. This issue is likely to continue to impact other students in the future.

"I have two windows right here and if someone shuts their car door outside, they rattle in their frames. They're like awful. And winter was pretty bad because it feels like you're just getting wind blown on your face.

And obviously I'm sat here like having to type on the thing, like doing work on my desk. I just remember that being really bad, I think our boiler went as well so we didn't have heating and like, obviously, heating was nowhere near as expensive then as it is now. So, like we did have the heating on and stuff and then the boiler went, it was like oh my God, this is unbearable. And then this winter, we just didn't have a heating on full stop because it was so expensive."

While socio-economic inequalities predominantly shaped the quality of and access to education, young people also described how this impacted their own decision-making for the future. Previous research by the Sutton Trust showed that disadvantaged high attainers were 5 percentage points less likely than other high attainers and 16 percentage points less likely than private school students to apply for university, at 82%, 87% and 98% respectively. For instance, going to university was seen as an important stepping-stone to securing a career with high earning potential in this research. It revealed cases in which disadvantaged high attainers, due to the financial situation of their household, had future aspirations that prioritised income over other goals. For instance, going to university was seen as an important steppingstone to securing a career with high earning potential. Similarly, while personal interests were still the predominant factor shaping future career aspirations (see chapter 3.4), only those classified as disadvantaged mentioned achieving a stable income or not having to worry about money in the future as important additional considerations.

> **"I think as long as I'm happy in the career that I'm in and like it's providing a stable income that I can rely on, then I think that's the most important thing."**
> **- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels**

> **"I just don't want [to] live like this forever you know. I want to, I don't know how to put it in words, I just don't ever want to have to worry about money ever."**
> **- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels**

1.3. Private vs state education

While disadvantaged high attainers faced particular challenges around the quality of and access to education, socio-economic inequalities were also driven by whether young people interviewed attended private or state schools. The differences were particularly stark when comparing educational experiences during COVID-19. It should be noted, however, that only a small number of private school students took part in this research, and so the sample is less diverse than the sample of state school high attainers.

When comparing private with state education, privately educated high attainers tended to share positive experiences about the education, technology and general support their schools provided. Privately educated high attainers described how well-prepared their schools were for the online learning needed during the pandemic, and how quickly they adapted to it by setting up online communication channels and sharing resources.

Examples of private schools showed that some were able to set up online learning within a week, while state school students shared stories of their school taking up to three months to achieve the same outcome.

"[L]iterally, within a couple of days, they set up [Microsoft] Teams. And we had lots of videos on how to use Teams sent out, and then we'd have six meetings a day, like one in each lesson with the teacher teaching us. So, [they] literally didn't even drop a beat."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at a private school

"For the first three months of lockdown, we didn't have a single online lesson. So it was just teachers would send out emails or activities or whatever, which would have like an entire PowerPoint of stuff to read through, which realistically, if you could learn an entire GCSE by reading, what's the point of employing a teacher? So, for me anyway, that did nothing like it really didn't help, so it made it a lot harder to learn stuff."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school

"When I was in year 7 to year 11, I hated the environment that I was in, I hated the school, like I just didn't like anything about it, I feel the school wasn't actually doing anything that was beneficial for not only my education but also [for] my mental health (…) Because of COVID there was a lot of content that we missed out on (…) A lot of the content also got cut out of the GCSEs."
 - Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

Similarly, over the course of the pandemic, private schools tended to maintain the quality of education and content provided. In contrast, many state school students discussed the reduced amount of work and inefficient use of online teaching, such as teachers only sending out worksheets once a week. While private school students still criticised certain aspects of their school experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, they recognised the disparity between private and state schools over this period. Those who had moved from one type of school to another for sixth form were the most aware of this disparity.

"At my college there's quite a lot of people who went to private school. And just compared to them I feel like they were more prepared, they had a lot more resources I think."

"There's a couple of people in my school now who did do that [go to a state school], so I know from them a massive difference because what I experienced even though it was really bad, it was a lot better than what I know other people experienced because I at least got this [Microsoft] Teams thing. I know for a fact, like one of my friends who went to a state school for GCSEs their teachers would send them maybe two pieces of work a week and that was all they would do because there would be nothing else and it would be hard to talk to the teachers and stuff, so they got nothing. That's as far as I'm aware, I didn't experience that."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at private school

"I know from what I talk to my cousins about that we were really lucky in the sense that we – from, literally, minute one, my school was really good with it. The teachers were really proactive and just, it made it seem as close to normal life as possible whereas I think, my cousins struggled a bit, and the teachers weren't very good with getting everyone online and sorting out work."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at private school

For one student who had been at a state school over the pandemic, the differences became evident once they attended a college with students who had been in private education over the period. By hearing stories from private students, they observed differences in preparation and in available resources.

"At my college there's quite a lot of people who went to private school. And just compared to them I feel like they were more prepared, they had a lot more resources I think."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

2. Relationships

While socio-economic background was an important driver for differences in educational experiences, relationships with parents, teachers and peers were important in influencing educational journeys. Relationships influenced young people by affecting their motivation, career choices and levels of comfort in school environments. While parents generally affected motivation levels positively, they did so in different ways depending on what 'type' of parents they were. Some high attainers' school performance also benefitted from the parental guidance, advice and resources they received.

Of the three types of relationships, parents could have the greatest direct influence on future plans and aspirations, while teachers' influence on interests shaped plans and aspirations more indirectly. Although important to the school experience, friendships were felt by high attainers to have a minimal effect on future plans and aspirations.

2.1. Parents

Types of parental relationships and how these impacted experiences of and attitudes to education, appeared to differ in a few key ways between disadvantaged and more advantaged high attainers. Disadvantaged high attainers reported a wide spectrum of parental involvement, ranging from no involvement or interest to high involvement and pressure to succeed. Indeed, parents with no involvement or engagement in their child's education (explored in more detail below) were only discussed by disadvantaged high attainers. In contrast, parents of more advantaged high attainers - with the exception of the privately educated - occupied the middle ground in terms of their involvement. Differences in parental involvement were also reflected in previous research by the Sutton Trust, which showed that 75% of parents of disadvantaged high attainers reported that they always talk to their child about their school report or progress review, compared to 91% of parents of other high attainers and private school students.[4]

Regardless of their parents' level of involvement, disadvantaged high attainers also appeared more motivated by the idea of making their parents proud, supporting them financially or caring for them in the future. In particular, a sense of responsibility towards their parents was a source of motivation that was absent in the decision-making of more advantaged high attainers.

For disadvantaged young people, tensions in relationships – especially with parents – were felt to arise from having limited space in the home. These were seen to have knock-on effects on aspects of their education. Those who lived in smaller properties and felt constantly surrounded by other household members mentioned the risk of negative experiences arising. More generally, if a high attainer found aspects of living with parents uncomfortable during the COVID-19 lockdown, this was felt to make completing schoolwork ultimately more challenging.

Overall, both disadvantaged and more advantaged high attainers tended to emphasise a positive and close relationship with their parents, despite parents differing in their level of involvement and type of role (see below). Regardless of socio-economic background, they regarded their families as close knit and did not see major differences between themselves and their parents or siblings. Despite this closeness, findings here did not suggest there was a clear connection between parents' educational background and high attainers' future aspirations.

Across both groups of young people interviewed, four types of parents were identified based on in their level of involvement and role. These categories are based on the observation of key differences through qualitative interviews and are therefore not rigid, generalisable, classifications.

1 **Disengaged parents:** This type of parent had limited experience in education themselves or simply were not interested in their child's education. This meant that they could not, or did not, support their children throughout their education. High attainers with this type of parent often developed a high level of independence and autonomy in navigating their education. They also acted very independently when deciding their future plans and aspirations. Overall, having disengaged parents resulted in particularly high levels of motivation and ambition due to the absence of adequate support at home and a sense of being solely responsible for their future. This type of parent was only reported by disadvantaged high attainers.

"I don't think she [mum] knows much about the education system [in this country], so I made literally all of my choices myself and I'm quite ambitious. (…) Like no-one's going to give me any handouts in life, I need to work as hard as I can to do the best for myself in the future."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

"[Talking about influences on future plans] Especially with my parents, because neither of them went to uni, both of them were just sort of like 'okay', they don't really understand how it works." - Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

2 **Reactive parents:** This type of parent tended to only get involved when the high attainer reached out for support. Unlike parents with no involvement, they were able and willing to support when needed. Overall, they were therefore less involved in their child's education which was often the result of the high attainer proving their independence by performing well in past exams. Like high attainers with disengaged parents, being independent was associated with higher levels of motivation due to a sense of being solely responsible for their own future. Reactive parents were generally open and receptive to whatever career their child wanted to pursue while not having specific career expectations for their children. This type of parent was tended to be encountered amongst the more advantaged high attainers interviewed here.

"Since I've started sixth form, I've been quite independent (…) I think after my GCSE results, they [parents] could trust me (…) We [high attainer and sibling] can always ask if I want help."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school

"I don't think [it could be described as] pressure. I think they weren't involved as in telling me when I needed to study, they were just 'Oh how are you feeling about your subjects?'. They would just ask how I am coping with my studying. It wasn't too much pressure from them."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

3 **Motivating parents:** This type of parent was described by young people who felt positively influenced and motivated by their parents. Unlike reactive parents, who only became involved when young people reached out, this type of parent was more proactive in providing guidance and support while having a generally positive and motivating impact on the individual. In addition to feeling motivated, high attainers with this type of parent also benefited from advice, guidance and resources. Similarly to reactive parents, they were open about high attainers' future plans and aspirations while not having specific career expectations of their child. They were found across disadvantaged and advantaged high attainers.

"My parents have always been really supportive in my education. Because it's quite important to them as well. If I needed a textbook that I thought would help me do better, they'd always get it for me. For example, my iPad, I told my parents that I got my iPad for school, which is why they were so ready to get it for me. They're always really supportive with my education."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

"My mum definitely encouraged me to look more towards the sciences, at least economics, and preferably medicine, I remember during the year eleven summer holidays there was a virtual medical online conference, me and my mum attended, before then I hadn't really thought about medicine, but after [that] I certainly started to like the idea."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

4 **Pressuring parents:** This type of parent showed high levels of involvement in their child's education by checking up on their schoolwork, organising tutors or helping to prepare for exams. In some cases, particularly amongst disadvantaged high attainers, the individual also felt pressured by their parents to perform well, pursue a certain path such as doing A-levels or felt pressured to prioritise their school and education over other areas of their life. However, high attainers usually perceived this pressure as positive and motivating and in some cases as necessary to make sure they were focussing enough on their education. Looking at future plans and aspirations, this type of parent also showed high levels of involvement by providing guidance, influencing decisions to the extent of setting expectations regarding specific universities or careers. In addition to disadvantaged high attainers, this group of parents was found particularly amongst the privately educated (not receiving a bursary).

"Both of them [parents] are quite involved, because my mum wants me to go to (location deleted) University because there's lots of opportunities, and then my dad wants me to go to (location deleted) because it's closer and I'm around family. (…) My dad always wants to know what I'm going to do so that he can give me the best advice."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

"[My parents' role was] probably quite influential because I needed a bit of a kick up the backside to be honest. (…) It was positive pressure I'd say."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at a private school

"I'd say my dad put pressure on me for my education (…) I'd say my mum to an extent she has as well, to do well. My current school that I'm in now, they've put pressure on me to do well, but I'd say it's benefited me."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

The role of parents could also differ per parent with, for example, one parent not being involved while the other one was highly involved and put pressure on their child.

"My mum's more on top of everything. She's the one pushing me a bit more or if you need help, I'll get you a tutor, don't worry about it. My dad though, he's very laid back. He's like whatever."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

As explored, close proximity with parents during the COVID-19 pandemic could create discomfort and make schoolwork more challenging. However, relationships with parents – regardless of their role and involvement in their children's education – could also act as a positive driver for experience in this period. The opportunity to spend time with each other was regarded as a unique opportunity to bond and improve relationships. Parents also acted as important social supports and counterbalanced the social isolation during lockdowns.

2.2. Teachers

Alongside parents, teachers performed another important role by steering or discouraging interest in subjects as well as affecting motivation levels. While relationships with parents were largely discussed in a positive way, relationships with teachers could be more divisive, and dependent on how long high attainers were engaging with the respective teacher.

In general, teacher relationships could be very fluctuating and were often based on having 'good' and 'bad' teachers together in the same year.

1 **Positive**: A positive teacher relationship was generally grounded in a personal relationship between teacher and student with teachers positively influencing motivation and enjoyment of subjects. In a positive student-teacher relationship, the student felt supported, listened to and motivated to perform well. High attainers particularly valued support which went beyond teaching in the classroom such as teachers supporting them with applying for university, writing a personal statement or providing supporting with their mental health. A positive teacher relationship was therefore a highly memorable factor which stood out for high attainers when discussing their educational journey and it was often associated with a positive perception of the teacher's subject.

"When you have a teacher you like, you're more willing to work for them anyway because they're going to put in the work for you so you're putting in the work for them."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at private school

"I can't criticise any of my sixth form teachers, I think they were all great, and the(n) GCSE the vast majority of them were amazing."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

Thinking about the future, good relationships with teachers were often associated with an enjoyment of the respective subject and could therefore be interpreted as an important underlying factor in shaping broader career plans regarding industries or sectors.

"I think my biology teacher, I've had him for my GCSEs and my sixth form, well partly for my sixth form, he's been exceptional, I think definitely he made me like biology more than I already had."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

2 **Negative**: In contrast, negative relationships with teachers discouraged student interest in the teacher's subject and negatively affected learning outcomes. Negative relationships were just as deeply memorable experiences for young high attainers as positive relationships. A bad teacher was often seen as not being motivated and not enjoying their profession. A negative relationship could also be the result of students feeling teachers put too much pressure on them, because they didn't get along with the teacher on a personal level or due to teachers showing favouritism towards certain individuals. Similarly, teachers being overwhelmed and stressed often translated into a negative student-teacher relationship and negative associations towards the respective subject they were teaching.

"I feel like they had favouritism and they would favour (…) the bad, stupid kids in the school that would act up and then the teachers would then praise them for acting good, but the majority of the class would act good so it was like 'why are they getting praised for something that they should be doing?'. So a lot of my teachers definitely showed favouritism as well."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

"It was very obvious when they [teachers] wanted to be there and when they didn't want to be there, if you've got someone in front of you that doesn't want to be there, it doesn't make you very confident in them, whereas if you've got a teacher who clearly, like, [is] interested in what they're telling you and they want you to know it, it makes learning the content a lot easier."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school

Looking at future plans and aspirations, a negative teacher relationship had the opposite effect to a positive one by discouraging interest in specific subjects. In doing so, it also functioned as an important underlying factor shaping broader career plans regarding industries and sectors.

2.3. Friends and peers

In addition to parents and teachers, friends and peers formed another integral element shaping high attainers' educational journeys. This was particularly the case for socio-economically disadvantaged high attainers, where friends and peers could either boost motivation or promote bad behaviour. As chapter 4 shows, changing friendship groups was often discussed as a highly influential and disruptive life event. Positive relationships with friends often resulted in increasing high attainers' motivation based on sharing similar interests and feeling supported at school.

"I'm motivated to do well in school, and I feel like my friends around me help me feel motivated. Because we all do quite like similar subjects. So, when I see them doing something it makes me motivated to also do something."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

In contrast, negative relationships could result in promoting bad behaviour such as disrupting class or skipping lessons. This form of negative influence of friends was only reported by state school students with private students pointing out the positive influences of their friendships. While a change in friends was discussed regardless of economic background, disadvantaged high attainers stressed the overall importance of friendships in influencing their educational journey.

"I was just constantly misbehaving. I had a couple of friends who were very bad for me. I skipped lessons a lot. I was, I was just a s****y kid to teachers as well, so I don't remember much of school itself."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for BTEC

Looking at relationships with peers, bullying was a particularly powerful factor with very adverse effects on the motivation, mental health and wellbeing of those affected. Affected individuals also criticised their schools for lacking adequate systems to combat and prevent it. For young people who experienced bullying, it was an immensely formative life event. The reasons for bullying were manifold with high attainers sharing stories of how they were bullied specifically for their high attainment and the jealousy of their peers.

Bullying was also often linked to other forms of inequalities which is covered in more detail in chapter 5. It had a very negative effects on high attainers' mental health, motivation and overall perspective on education with some individuals having had to go as far as changing school in order to escape from it.

While bullying was usually carried out by peers, high attainers also discussed cases (as in Figure 2 below) in which they received abuse and bullying from staff.

Figure 2: Case Study Example: A high attainer who reported being bullied by their teacher found this affected their relationships with family members and encouraged them to leave the school

Zoe, a more advantaged high attainer who is currently studying for her A-levels at a private school, described an experience of emotional, verbal and sometimes physical abuse from a member of staff at their previous school. This staff member was also responsible for safeguarding, and the experience was connected to a complaint about bullying from peers.

The experience led to her feeling desperate as staff members contacted her family, saying the issues were her fault. She felt she had nowhere to turn for support. Her parents did not trust her side of the story at the time and this was a factor in her **eventual decision to leave the school** in year 10 despite having strong friendship groups.

"I got into [school name deleted] which is one of the best state schools in the UK. It's also a grammar school. I got there on merit. (…) I felt pretty chuffed by that but it just ended up just not being great because of just a multitude of factors. It just got progressively worse and worse due to mainly abuse from staff. The bullying from students, I kind of forgive them for that because they are ultimately 12-year-olds, 13-year-olds, they haven't developed the maturity to behave properly."

"One of my teachers was actually the perpetrator of this, which is not fun. I couldn't do anything about it as well because realistically if you're a 12-year-old (…) your school fires back and says something different you're not going to believe the 12-year-old. That's just an unfortunate fact. And there's nothing I could have done, really, any more than what I did to try and stop it from happening."

In any case, high attainers suffering from bullying criticised the school support structures they felt did not effectively prevent and combat bullying.

"I feel like bullying was a big issue and then the teachers would never do anything about it, and there were lots of groups, and people kicking people out of groups, and it was just too much. I feel like people, like a lot of people didn't like me during high school, and then that obviously made it a lot harder because people just didn't like want to be around me."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school

"None of the people that bullied me ever got any kind of repercussions from the school... I did have like quite a lot of homophobic abuse from people that the school just didn't do enough about."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school

Victims of bullying often had more positive experiences of COVID-19 lockdowns as they felt safer at home than in school. The need to stay at home with schools being closed allowed victims to escape in-person bullying which ultimately improved their general wellbeing, motivation and performance in education.

In contrast, high attainers who enjoyed socialising at school suffered from not seeing and hanging out with their friends which had negative impacts on their general wellbeing.

"You couldn't really see any of your friends, it was all online, even the school experience was online, I mean it wasn't good because especially at the beginning none of the teachers even knew what to really do, you weren't really learning anything it was, everyone was falling behind but then there was also the social aspect of like you couldn't see anyone besides your family, and if you're not close with your family it's just like super lonely, you know, because there's no one to really talk to."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at private school

Despite the need to stay at home, online communication was an important way of maintaining their social network over the course of the pandemic. However, even when returning to school, high attainers could be put in classes with random peers who they were not friends with. Therefore, a return to school did not always translate into reduced social isolation.

3. Personal characteristics

While socio-economic differences and relationships were particularly important in shaping educational experiences over time, plans for the future appeared to be most strongly shaped by high attainers' individual characteristics. These personal factors included their intrinsic motivation, their attitudes to learning, their values and their interests.

3.1. Consistency and sources of motivation

The research revealed important differences between socio-economically disadvantaged and more advantaged high attainers regarding the consistency of their motivation. When discussing their motivation to do well in school, disadvantaged young people reported more consistent levels of motivation throughout the entirety of their secondary education. They often explained that their motivation and positive attitude toward education was based on enjoying socialising and learning, while recognising the importance of their education for the future. This contrasted with more advantaged high attainers who tended to report more fluctuating levels of motivation throughout their education. They often discussed alternating periods of low or high motivation levels which were influenced by relationships with teachers, important exams such as GCSEs or factors outside of education.

> **"I think I was most motivated in year seven but then I stopped. (…) Then I just sort of just did the bare minimum but then got, like, average grades and stuff. (..) It doesn't really mean anything until GCSEs so then I just stopped trying."**
> **- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school**

Though it was clear that socio-economic differences contributed to differences in motivation, the self-reported nature of the study was limited in being able to explicitly link motivation to high attainers' socio-economic situation. While the consistency of motivation differed across disadvantaged and more advantaged high attainers, being intrinsically motivated was the most important source of motivation across both groups.

> **"I want the best for me, and I want to do the best that I know I can do rather than knowing that I could have done better if I'd done more."**
> **- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels**

In addition, high attainers were also motivated by being categorised as a high attainer either from their family or from school, which could add another layer of motivation or even pressure to keep up the reputation of 'being the smart one'. Considering oneself as a high achiever was associated with high levels of motivation but could also be explained on the basis of 'being naturally smart' without requiring much effort to perform well in school.

> **"In school and in most things I'm kind of just naturally good at quite a lot of stuff and I don't really put much effort into doing a lot of things."**
> **- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school**

An especially important source of motivation was found in the targeting of future university and career goals. Disadvantaged young people in particular were aware of the importance of their GCSEs and A-level results for their future.

> **"The thing that has motivated me all along, it's the grades, the grades that I will need to get into a university, or at university, to get into a good career that I will find enjoyable."**
> **- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels**

Across both groups of young people interviewed, motivation was often linked to interest in specific subjects. This explained why participants reported that their motivation increased directly following GCSEs. A-levels were a way to pursue subjects which interested them while leaving others behind.

> **"GCSEs, a lot of subjects you don't really have interest in them. The motivation isn't really there. When it comes to A levels, you shrink it to 3 subjects, so you are more motivated to actually, it's actually something of interest."**
> **- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school**

Those who did not see themselves as 'high attainers' explained it based on a lack of overall motivation and interest in education. More advantaged young people in particular did not identify themselves as high attainers. Not seeing oneself as a high attainer could also be the result of only performing well in certain subjects or recognising peers were performing even better than them.

"I think when was younger I didn't really care about grades as much whereas now I would say I'm a high achiever."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school

"I'm around people that are doing a lot better than me, but I'm not around people that are doing a lot worse, so me personally I feel like I'm a low achiever compared to them."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school

3.2. Attitudes to learning

Some young people interviewed had a more negative perception of school which was usually based on not finding education and the way subjects were taught stimulating, helpful or relevant to them. Their personal interests as well as attitudes to learning prevented them from positively engaging with school. This was often also interlinked with mental health issues such as anxiety or ADHD. Disinterest in conjunction with low motivation was seen to lead to negative attitudes towards school, disruptive behaviour and ultimately punishment and bad relationships with teachers.

"[I] never did it [homework] and that's because I didn't think it was important and I still think that. I literally tell my little brother now who is in Year 8 'Homework does not matter'. Because you're doing stuff you've already done in the lesson. Especially if you didn't pay attention in the lesson, you're not going to be able to do it right? But it's like what's stopping you going home and just searching the answers up on Google? I just think it's completely pointless and all it is giving you more of what you've already done. (…) I think I did two pieces of homework in my whole life and that's including sixth form."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school

"In history I feel the homework was a lot, I feel I'm the type of person that I know how I learn, so I don't know if the homework that we're getting is beneficial."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

"Just a lot of the school stuff and the curriculums just never really clicked with my brain. The way I learn isn't the same as most people. I struggled with maintaining attention and not messing around and not just chatting and doing nothing in the lesson like 'oh you got a supply teacher?', safe, free lesson where I don't have to do anything!"
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school

During the COVID-19 pandemic, an independent attitude to learning and routine combined with being disciplined and ambitious could motivate high attainers to keep up with their education despite the difficulties around online learning discussed previously.

"I think, I'd say a lot of people did [miss out on content during COVID-19 pandemic]. I for one, [and] in hindsight I don't quite know why, still did the full six hours of work every day. Up until like the very last day of school ending in July. I would get up at six so that I could be done for like mid-day, which was annoying. Then when we went back in the Autumn and just did everything again because they knew that most people didn't do anything." - Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school

Similarly, young people who disliked the way teaching was conducted pre-COVID-19 saw online learning as a unique opportunity to pursue their own style of learning without having to rely on their teachers.

"I feel like it [learning during the COVID-19 pandemic] worked quite well just because I could teach myself the work in a way that I knew that I would learn it rather than like having to rely on teachers' methods to learn things, like I always feel like I've been like someone that like I can teach myself things."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school

3.3. Values

Previous findings from the Sutton Trust found differences in how young people from different socio-economic groups view fairness around opportunities, with 21% of this group, as opposed to 10% of other high attainers - agreeing with the statement 'people like me don't have much of a chance in life'.[5]

Here, another potential explanation for differences in motivation between disadvantaged and more advantaged high attainers was found in the importance the disadvantaged young people interviewed assigned to hard work as opposed to luck in life.

Disadvantaged high attainers tended to emphasise the importance of hard work in life more strongly than others. While advantaged high attainers also recognised the relevance of hard work in life, they emphasised luck and other life circumstances outside of their personal control more strongly. Luck could be seen by them as a factor in life which always outweighed hard work and therefore offered some an unfair advantage.

"I think that sometimes luck does come into play, but you can overcome that with hard work if you've worked hard at something and for long enough you can achieve it."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

"I think luck is probably in some sense more important than hard work, but I think hard work is important. I just think that I'm quite apathetic to be honest (…), obviously you can work really hard and I think you probably can do well in life. I don't know about monetarily-wise with the current economic situation of our country (…). I feel like you can also work really, really hard and still be unsuccessful."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels

Being more consistently motivated while showing a tendency towards self-discipline and ambition embedded in a belief in hard work was prevalent across high attainers but it was particularly well represented among those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

"Self-reliance like a hundred percent [being an important value in life]. (…) I need to work as hard as I can to do the best for myself in the future. (…) I think I'm just a really disciplined person."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

"I think I've always been quite hardworking; in anything I do. Even if it's not academic. If it's something that I was just doing. Say if I was gardening, for example. I've always strived for perfection."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

3.4. Personal interests

Among the young people interviewed, while relationships could impact future plans in a limited way, aspirations and plans were predominantly the result of personal interests. Personal interests were the guiding force behind high attainers' choice of subjects from GCSE to A-levels to university, as well as job aspirations. There was often a clear line in terms of interest such as a passion for STEM subjects and the desire to study in a field such as medicine in the future.

Considerations such as future income, reputation or parents' expectations were considerably less important than personal interest, particularly for more advantaged high attainers. However, a perception that doing A-levels was the 'natural path' was less prevalent amongst disadvantaged high attainers. It was only among disadvantaged high attainers that not doing A-levels was considered a valid alternative to taking them. This finding is similar to previous research conducted by the Sutton Trust which showed that, when asked what they will be doing in two years' times, disadvantaged high attainers were 10 percentage points less less likely than other high attainers to see themselves studying in the future, at 65% and 75% respectively.[6] With regards to GCSEs, some high attainers were interested in having a broad selection of subjects in order to not restrict themselves in the future while keeping their options open for the future. Others were motivated by good results and therefore pursued certain subjects based on knowing they could perform well in them.

In some cases, decisions were also influenced by religious beliefs or personal morals. For instance, a potential career in aerospace raised moral and ethical questions for one individual due to its close relationship with the defence industry.

In combination with personal interests, changes in plans and aspirations were usually linked to a higher exposure towards the degree or profession, learning more about what it involved in practice or identifying a career they hadn't known about before. For example, learning more about what a medical degree would actually involve and how long it would take to study encouraged one individual to reconsider, despite their initial interest in the field, as in the example below. High attainers discussed how university days, career events or placement experience could help them to build their understanding and make decisions about their future.

"I think it was always my dream to do something science related and then didn't know what science specifically and I did work experience and it was more based in chemistry and I thought I'd really enjoy that. (…) Well initially it [aspiration] was medicine and then I decided I didn't want to do that whole process so then I did – it was always science but like a year ago I did my work experience in a lab and then I was like okay I want to work in a lab and do chemistry."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

The research revealed some cases in which young people were less interested in working in healthcare or education after seeing how medical professionals and teachers were treated during the pandemic.

"I think year seven through year ten I wanted to be a music teacher, year ten I went off the idea of teaching and I wanted to be a session musician... I think there was a window into the fact that teachers weren't very well supported [during the pandemic], and also I've got relatives that are teachers, so it just sort of put me off education."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school

4. Life events

As part of the interview, high attainers were asked to reflect on memorable events in their lives between the ages of 11-17 and to use a timeline to record their reflections. Of these experiences, only disruptive life events were felt to have had a noticeable effect on their education experience and learning outcomes. Events of this nature included bereavements, changes to their household composition or school, and the COVID-19 pandemic – an experience shared by all participants.

Overall, disruptive life events affected young people regardless of their socio-economic background. However, the research showed that disadvantaged high attainers were particularly affected by frequent house moves which also often entailed entering a new school environment and forming new friendship groups.

Discussions revealed that high attainers felt the impact of disruptive events on their motivation levels, and on their enjoyment of and performance at school, could be positive as well as negative.

For example, while high attainers identified long-term negative impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic on their learning and future prospects, short-term positives were identified around workload and wellbeing. While the direct experience of the COVID-19 pandemic shaped life and school experiences, the cancellation of GCSE exams within this context was felt to have had the greatest impact on plans and aspirations for the future.

4.1. Bereavements

A family bereavement was the clearest example of a life event happening 'beyond the school gates' with a largely negative impact on young people's emotional wellbeing, and motivation and performance at school as a result. This was raised by both disadvantaged and advantaged high attainers. While bereavements, grief and loss affected many areas of high attainers' lives, one side effect included negative feelings towards school at the time of the death. Longer periods of grieving were felt to sap educational motivation and lead to poorer performance in class due to difficulties concentrating on schoolwork. In some cases, for example after the death of a close family member, high achievers felt bereavement risked having an adverse long-term impact on their mental health.

The death of close family members could also upset family dynamics and create feelings of instability, with wider implications for educational progress and decision-making. For example, one high attainer described how the death of their grandparent at the start of college disrupted their sense of security and led them to question dropping out of college due to discomfort and a lack of motivation.

> "I'd lost my grandad and he was a big (…) part of my family and a big part of my upbringing (…) I found it hard to manage, but I've stayed with it anyway. I'm still there now, but at one point I did consider whether college felt right for me at that time."
> - More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school

4.2. Changes to household composition

Across their years spent in secondary school, young people varied in the degree to which their households remained stable or underwent a lot of change in terms of family members moving in or out. This was an important event for both disadvantaged and advantaged high attainers. While change often created challenges, in contrast to bereavements, this disruption also had potential to positively increase wellbeing at home, as well as educational performance.

Positive changes included the addition of more 'caring' members into the household, which improved students' sense of wellbeing, or the student acquiring more space in the household once someone had left. Negative outcomes included feeling less comfortable at home and therefore potentially being less effective in being able to complete schoolwork at home.

How changes to household composition impacted wellbeing and educational performance depended on whether someone was moving in or out of the high attainers' house and their relationship to that individual. For example, a young person having someone they disliked moving in could experience discomfort and find it harder to effectively get schoolwork done at home. Table 1 highlights the different ways changes to household composition could affect high attainers' wellbeing at home and educational performance.

Table 1: Impact of changes to household composition depending on relationship

	Good relationship between high attainer and household member	**Bad relationship** between high attainer and household member
New household member **moving in**	*Case 1: Aunt moved to UK and brought positive 'caring' attitude to household.* - Positive short-term impact reported on young person's wellbeing and levels of comfort at home. - Potentially positive long-term impact on their ability to effectively learn from home.	*Case 2: Stepdad who young person disliked moved into home* - Potentially negative long-term impact on wellbeing and levels of comfort at home. - Potentially negative long-term effect on the ability to effectively learn from home.
Household member **moving out**	*Case 3: Sibling moved out to go to university, initially the high attainer felt sad about the change but adjusted over the long-run and benefited from more space.* - *Negative short-term impact on wellbeing at home.* - *Limited long-term effect.* - *Potentially benefitting from more space (regardless of relationship).*	*Case 4: Dad who argued a lot with mum and who the young person had a bad relationship with moved out when parents divorced.* - *Positive impact on young people's wellbeing and feeling of comfort at home.* - *Potentially positive long-term effects on the ability to effectively learn from home.* - *Potentially benefitting from more space (regardless of relationship).*

"We had one of my aunties because she moved to the UK, so she was staying with us a little bit. This was during lockdown (…) I would say that was good, like she was really nice and like loving and caring, so that was like a positive time."
- Case 1 example: Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

"I think I was fifteen when it [brother moving out] first happened so I was quite young and I'd lived with them literally all my life so it was a bit weird but over time I've probably got used to it and it's quite nice just having a bit more space."
- Case 3 example: More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at private school

4.3. Moving home, changing school and making new friends

The experience of moving home was often a highly disruptive event for high achievers which brought with it changes to school and friendship groups. The combined effect of these could completely alter young people's enjoyment, perception of, and performance at school. Having to form new friendship groups was associated with moving home as this often meant moving school, but these were also common for high attainers moving from secondary school to sixth form college.

Whether moving had a perceived positive or negative effect depended on the frequency with which a high achiever moved, and their attitudes towards their previous or new school environment. Those who moved home more regularly and left behind schools and friends they liked reported struggling in school during the times of re-adjustment. In contrast, moving home once could be seen as an opportunity for a 'new start.' High attainers described leaving behind a school experience they disliked and their motivation and performance increasing over the long-term as they joined a school environment they felt they could thrive in. Data from the Health Foundation indicates that children growing up in the rented sector are more likely to move home than children who grow up in owner-occupier households, and they are more likely to move more than once.[7] This was reflected in this research, where moving home was more commonly discussed by disadvantaged than advantaged high attainers. This may have been the result of more temporary or less stable living situations, however this study was limited in its ability to understand this difference.

Other factors affecting how positive or negatively young people experienced moving home included proximity to school and available space to work. Living near their new school following a move could have a positive impact on high attainers' performance in school by reducing travel time. This reduced travel time was associated with higher enjoyment and attendance. In contrast, those who had to travel longer distances to school believed that their performance declined in the aftermath. Moving into larger homes with more space improved the wellbeing and comfort of high attainers at home which ultimately had positive effects on their educational performance.

> **"The house we used to live in only had one room, one bedroom so we were quite crammed in that bedroom, whereas now, we have a lot more bedrooms so it's definitely like we get our own spaces and especially if you argue there's definitely more of a relaxed atmosphere."**
> **- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels**

Enjoyment of a new school environment often depended on making new friends (similar to the importance of friends shown in chapter 2.3). Forming new friendships was felt to have a largely positive impact. Making new friends helped high attainers to develop their social skills, provided a support network, and allowed high attainers to surround themselves with people who shared their interests.

Changing school was only discussed in negative terms in cases in which young people found themselves in a worse social environment than before, by either not making new friends or not getting along with their new peers. This could very negatively affect motivation levels to the extent of young people considering dropping out of school.

> **"I actually considered dropping out of college and going into work or an apprenticeship. (…) I would have been sort of age 17 when I moved college. Because I basically knew no one from this new college and I wouldn't say I'm the best at making new friends. And I think that has made it harder for me to want to go to college since there's no social aspect anymore."**
> **- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school**

For those who had never moved home, plans and aspirations for the future could be shaped by a desire to experience something different. For some of them, going to university in another city away from home represented an opportunity to move away and explore new parts of the country.

4.4 COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic was recognised by high attainers as the major disruptive event that dominated their final years of education. Despite its severity, it was common for high achievers to identify short-term benefits from the pandemic, such as a reduced workload and stress and increased wellbeing in its initial months. However, over the longer term, young people often felt the pandemic had negatively affected their educational progress and enjoyment. These were seen to be the direct result of the requirements of online learning and the cancellation of GCSEs.

Key challenges were linked to online learning:

- Teachers not being able to effectively check up on their attendance and attention during online classes leading to their work declining in quality.

- Difficulties in retaining information during online teaching due to the absence of personal interaction with the teacher and the learning content.

- Not being able to directly and frequently ask questions to their teachers. Instead, students had to rely on emails and other forms of written communication which inhibited the personal exchange and learning.

**"Most people would never interact (…) There wasn't really like a sharing of ideas. (…) no-one turned their camera on ever."
- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels**
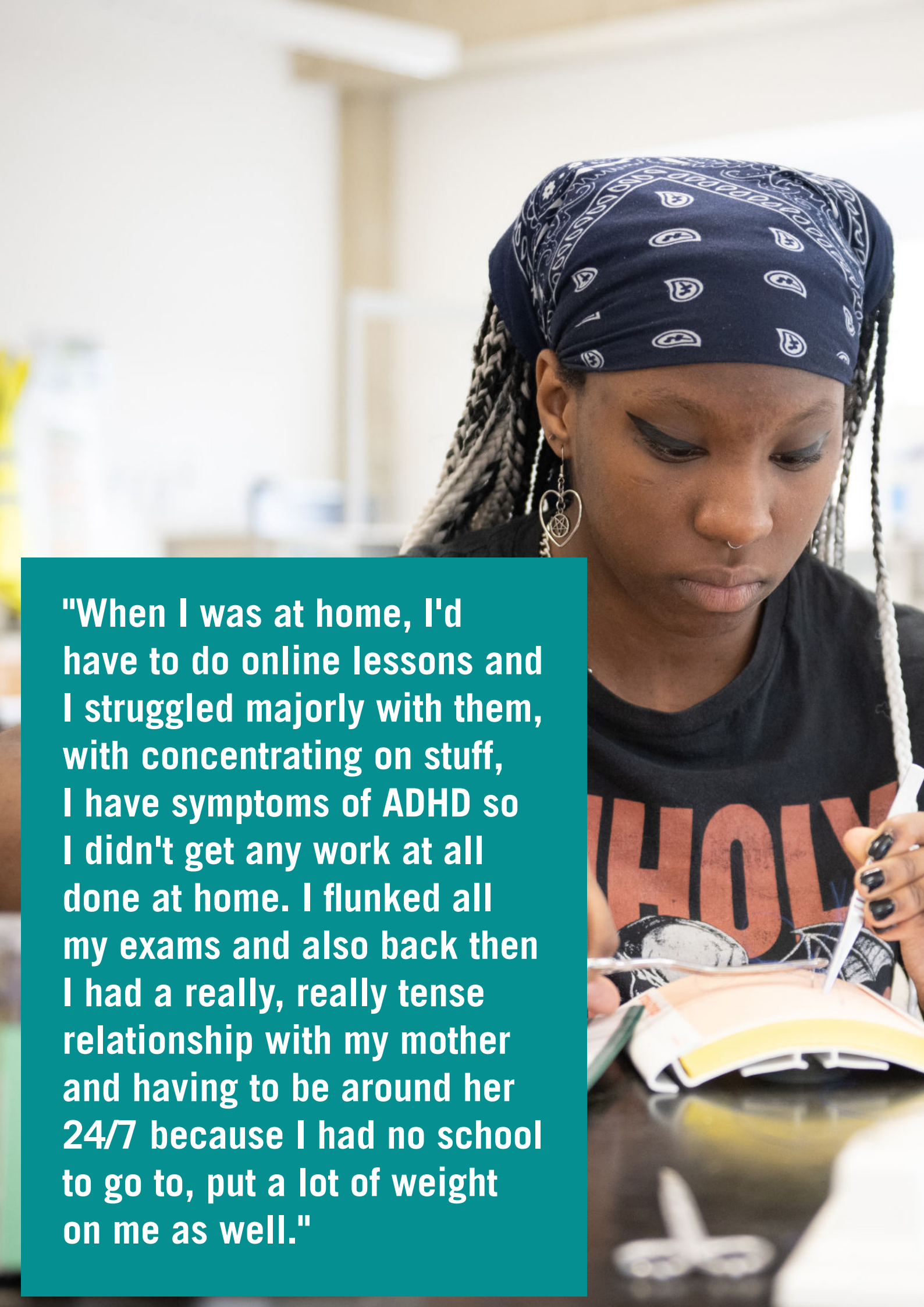
**"At the beginning of lockdown they weren't really teaching; they were just setting online tasks. And you had to watch a video and then do some questions. So it was really just teaching yourself. I think that was a bit difficult. But then they changed it to when they had calls. Then they would actually start teaching it again. And then that got a bit better."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels**

**"During the first lockdown they uploaded all the work just as like worksheets to fill in and then send off so there was no face to face teaching, whereas in the second lockdown it was all Google classroom video calls and actual lessons."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school**

"When I was at home, I'd have to do online lessons and I struggled majorly with them, with concentrating on stuff, I have symptoms of ADHD so I didn't get any work at all done at home. I flunked all my exams and also back then I had a really, really tense relationship with my mother and having to be around her 24/7 because I had no school to go to, put a lot of weight on me as well."

This led to gaps in some high attainers' knowledge and a reduced ability to stay focused as a result of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

> **"I don't know how to focus for long periods of time when I'm trying to study. Because the tasks set were always quite short, and you could just do them really quickly. So, I wouldn't have to sit for long periods a day at school, like learning. And now my attention's gone down."**
> **- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the cancellation of GCSE exams represented another disruptive life event with potentially positive impacts on motivation levels and negative learning outcomes. Previous research by the Sutton Trust showed how disadvantaged high attainers (58%) were more likely to say that the pandemic has made them less motivated to study than other high attainers (55%).[8] The qualitative research found for some high attainers, the cancellation of GCSE exams increased their motivation as they realised that performance would be assessed in different ways throughout the year. However, like the effects of online teaching during the pandemic, high attainers also noticed a long-term impact in the lack of preparedness for their A-levels as they had not prepared for a 'real exam' for their GCSEs.

> **"The GCSEs they weren't proper exams, they were like 15 minute tests (…) We didn't have to do a lot of work and that's impacted me now because right now it's hard for me to revise like I don't know the techniques."**
> **- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school**

When looking at future plans and aspirations, the cancellation of GCSE exams had the greatest impact of all disruptive life events on this cohort of young people. The precise impact differed, with some high attainers regarding their teacher-assessed or replacement GCSEs as unfair, whereas others thought this allowed them to perform better.

Those young people who regarded the teacher-assessed or replacement GCSEs as unfair and unexpected discussed how it could limit their future choice of A-levels at college and therefore potentially their higher education opportunities.

One high attainer shared their experience, which reflected the importance of socio-economic inequalities and a lack of teachers outlined in chapter 1. This prevented them from doing physics for their A-levels.

> "I think at first I was okay with it [cancelled GCSEs] because they said that they were going to use like our holistic grades from the whole year. But I realised like specially for physics because that's the subject we mainly had more supply teachers for so because I didn't have one specific teacher for that subject they couldn't give me the grade I thought I deserved. Even though like in exams I was getting high grades, they gave me a lower grade.(…) I wasn't able to do physics [at college]."
> - Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

Similarly, being restricted to online learning without extra-curricular activities during the COVID-19 pandemic made it more difficult for young people to gain relevant work experience to reference in university or job applications.

Conversely, the experience of online learning and staying at home made some high attainers more willing to take risks or not take a 'gap year' in order to 'not waste another year' of their life. For one student, having experienced the treatment of teachers and the wider education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic made them at least temporarily less interested in pursuing a career in the education sector.

> "I've seen my teachers dealing with a lot during Covid (…) You could tell it wasn't very organised, it was just sort of 'do this whilst we work out what we're going to do'. So, I think there was a window into the fact that teachers weren't very well supported, and also I've got relatives that are teachers, so it just sort of put me off education."
> - More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school

5. Other inequalities

Inequalities could also go beyond free school meal eigibility, with young people also facing inequalities related to areas such as health, gender and race. While some of these forms of inequality could be interrelated with socio-economic disadvantage, they could also go beyond and affect motivation, wellbeing and performance of both socio-economically disadvantaged and more advantaged high attainers.

5.1. Health

It has been well documented that socio-economic inequality affects health inequality. For example, life expectancy varies by over nine years between males living in the most and least deprived areas of the UK, and just under eight years for females.[9] This research indicated that health inequality had a major impact on educational access and influenced students' ability to learn effectively. Mental health in particular affected motivation levels, the ability to focus and ultimately school performance.

Closely linked to socio-economic inequality, but not necessarily overlapping with qualification for FSM, health issues were found to have an impact on the lives and educational experiences of high attainers.

> **"My father's deaf-blind so I've had to care for him for my entire life for – we don't – my mum doesn't earn a lot. In fact […] to go to my current school you have to pay about £20,000 a year; my mum earns slightly more than that."**
> **- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at private school (with bursary)**

This type of inequality could impact high attainers' access to education through not being able to attend school and drive negative perceptions of school due to the lack of support available.

Physical health issues of the young people interviewed heightened the importance of receiving adequate support at school. One high attainer described how his hearing issues impeded his learning and socialising at school and that his school was not providing the support he needed. Until he had undergone surgery and received an implant, his perception of school was negative, and was exacerbated by his loss of self-esteem and confidence, something he only regained after his surgery.

> **"Before I had the implants in, I couldn't even hear. I think the support wasn't there. I didn't really have too much support. Obviously, I was quite new as well to the school and I think I was, like, the first student to have had this kind of situation, but I think the support wasn't the best in terms of mental and physical wellbeing."**
> **- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels**

A more common form of health inequality was found in mental health issues, which affected both disadvantaged and more advantaged young people. Overall, high attainers who suffered from mental health issues were united in their criticism of the absence of adequate mental health support at school. The lack of an adequate support infrastructure was seen as a major contributing factor which prolonged and even exacerbated their conditions.

Mental health issues often had the potential to completely dominate young high attainers' educational experiences. High attainers described a full spectrum of mental health conditions ranging from exam stress and anxiety to ADHD, depression or suicidal thoughts. These could lead to different outcomes such as having negative perceptions of school, driven by a sense of not being adequately supported or misunderstood.

> "I think I just lacked motivation and probably needed a lot more mental health support than I got, and because I didn't get that, I just kind of was like, why would I focus on school when I don't want to be alive? That sounds really sad but if you ask me at a certain point in year 9, 'Do you think you're going to live past 16?', I would have told you 'no' because the support just wasn't there like at all. It's still not."
> - More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school

This could also result in disruptive behaviour and a sense of mistreatment and frequent punishments from teachers. Mental health issues could lead to negative educational outcomes due to not being motivated or not being able to focus, or not attending classes. One student starting a new, highly ranked school felt he received minimal support for his anxiety. The lack of understanding and support affected the ease of his transition to the new school and his ability to feel settled and stable.

> "I wasn't able to get any diagnoses when I was a kid because no one took my case seriously. And I still had a lot of trauma from it. That affected my ability to even settle in at college because I just kept on having panic attacks and everyone was just like, what the hell is going on with this person? And I tried to explain it, and no one [would] take me seriously because everyone would look at the league tables and say this is the best school in the country (…) Shouldn't you be happy?"
> - More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at private school (with bursary)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the relationship between mental health issues and lockdown experience was complex. For those who connected their mental health to family issues, lockdown exacerbated their situation as they were exposed to the people who caused difficulties for them on an ongoing basis. Similarly, those who struggled to concentrate due to conditions such as ADHD experienced increased difficulties with staying on top of school content while struggling with the intrinsic discipline required to switch to and complete online learning. One disadvantaged student struggled with the additional concentration required for online learning, and reported that this led to an inability to complete work and subsequently to do well in their exams.

> "I'm a smart person, so I did well in school, but I also dealt with depression and that made putting the effort in a lot more difficult for me. So, I go to school and I do the bare minimum and that's still being in top sets. But when I was at home, I'd have to do online lessons and I struggled majorly with them, with concentrating on stuff, I have symptoms of ADHD so I didn't get any work at all done at home. I flunked all my exams and also back then I had a really, really tense relationship with my mother and having to be around her 24/7 because I had no school to go to, put a lot of weight on me as well."
> - Disadvantaged participant studying for BTEC

In contrast, for high attainers who suffered from stress as a result of exams, a cancellation of GCSE exams was reported to have improved their mental health. Similarly, the general sense of slowing down during lockdowns was discussed as a positive factor affecting some high attainers' mental health.

5.2. Sexuality, gender and race

Closely linked to inequalities around mental health were inequalities stemming from sexuality, gender and race and their impact on wellbeing, motivation and mental health. These were all forms of inequalities which could affect both disadvantaged and more advantaged young people. High attainers described the emotional stress arising from the need to come out and the negative impact this could have on their overall wellbeing, motivation and relationships. For instance, high attainers described how bullying on the basis of being gay was a defining aspect of their educational experience over the years. Similar to inadequate mental health support, those affected by bullying for their sexuality, suffered even more due to the absence of adequate support at school. This could seriously affect their motivation to do well in school, lead to an overall negative perception of school, and contribute to poor mental health.

"I did have quite a lot of homophobic abuse from people that the school just didn't do enough about. (…) Like obviously the scales of homophobia isn't like oh 70s, I'm getting my house bricked like, but it's just like casual things that the school never really dealt with or did enough about to stop or they never cared enough about to stop."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school

For those who experienced this type of bullying, a positive aspect of COVID-19 lockdowns was a chance to escape the in-person bullying that came from learning within a school environment.

Figure 3: Case Study Example: Identifying as transgender was linked with years of depressive thoughts that affected motivation and a sense of hope for the future

Sam, a disadvantaged high attainer currently studying for BTEC, described how realising they were transgender was the moment that defined the rest of their school years, which were "hellish". This led to serious challenges in staying motivated and forming friendships due to a lack of other people in their position.

Sam felt that staff at the school had a fundamental lack of understanding. The time and effort of staff was focused on children who misbehaved rather than those like her in top sets who might have other potentially more complex issues. The lack of support was directly linked with their severe depression.

While they were in a better psychological place at the time of interview, they shared that they had planned on suicide before they reached 18 due to these struggles. This suicide attempt eventually happened and failed. Once they reached 18 and became an adult, they experienced a perspective shift which increased their motivation. This involved recognising others would not look out for them and that they had to take actions into their own hands and prioritise themselves and what they loved above everyone else.

"I'm a smart person, so I did well in school, but I also dealt with depression and that made putting the effort in a lot more difficult for me (…) My mental health is directly correlated to me realising I was trans when I was like 11. It was terrible from when I started high school."

And it's a really odd [educational] system. They neglect kids who are struggling with their mental health and they focus on like kids who are a***holes like just for just to be a***holes."

Another important factor with potential to impact young people's experiences was a sense of racial disparities and racism. For those affected, experiences of racism could be a defining factor shaping their educational experience over many years. As shown in the quote below, this negatively affected their motivation to do well in school while risking harming their mental health in the long run.

"I suppose that I just haven't been happiest, haven't been able to do activities I want to do (…) I think it's kind of been like a snowball effect from throughout the years of just school in general treatment that I've been, treatment towards me from other students and some teachers like bits of racial abuse and it kind of started from there. And it's powered on and led to where it is now."
- More advantaged participant studying for A-levels at state school

High attainers reflection on inequalities: Perceptions of privilege

Though not directly explored through the research questions, young people interviewed raised some interesting questions about privilege and identity. High attainers' perceptions of whether they were privileged or not did not always align with their social categorisation. Instead, for high attainers, particularly more advantaged ones, perceptions of their own privilege were highly contextual and relative.

One more advantaged high attainer did not consider themselves as privileged - despite acknowledging their own middle-class upbringing - when comparing themselves to financially well-off peers in their school. This student considered themselves to be less privileged due to their position within their school, and not wider society.

Similarly, living in the north as opposed to the south of England could result in more advantaged young people not considering themselves as privileged. These geographical differences were associated with social and economic differences that contributed to an identity of less privileged.

Within the group of more advantaged high attainers, privately educated high attainers without bursaries clearly stood out as they identified a strong sense of personal privilege which was built around an awareness of the differences between private and state education. For these attainers, privilege was transparent and part of their identity.

In addition to this economic dimension of privilege, privilege could also be seen in terms of relationships, health or education. This reflected what mattered most to high attainers in their individual context. While disadvantaged high attainers tended not to consider themselves to be economically privileged, their wider definitions of privilege, and perceptions of their own status as a result, were varied. Some felt privilege could be based on attending a state school rated 'good' by Ofsted, having good relationships with their household or the emotional support they received from their parents, as illustrated in the example below.

"I'd say I come from a good household that did everything that they can, so I definitely wouldn't say that I'm deprived, but I wouldn't necessarily say that I'm privileged…I feel like the school that I've gone to, they provided me lots of opportunities and advantages and I'd say I'm privileged in that.

I'd say I'm also privileged to have a good support system around me that has pushed me to want to do good, and to do good educationally. And my parents definitely always say 'oh if you need this for your school then just let me know'.

So yes, I would say I'm privileged in that sense because a lot of people don't have that opportunity too. They don't have parents that are concerned about their education."

- Disadvantaged participant studying for A-levels

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to better understand the educational journeys and future plans of high attainers, and how these differ depending on their socio-economic background. The research showed that there is no clear trajectory and set of future plans, with several differences and similarities in experiences between disadvantaged and more advantaged young people.

Regardless of socio-economic background, young people shared a variety of common factors shaping their educational experience. This included the importance of relationships with parents, teachers and friends, an intrinsic motivation to perform well in school as well as the gravity of disruptive life events in reshaping their educational journeys. Across socio-economic backgrounds, young people also shared experiences of bullying and its detrimental effect on their wellbeing as well as other forms of inequalities. Thinking about their future, both disadvantaged and more advantaged young people were predominately guided by their personal interests in subjects or fields of study.

Despite the similarities in young people's experiences and plans for the future, socio-economic inequality was also a critical driver for differences in young people's experiences. This was particularly important for the quality of and access to education. Disadvantaged high attainers were particularly affected by a lower quality of education defined by staff turnover, lack of teachers and generally poor quality of (online) teaching. In addition, high attainers in state education were also particularly disadvantaged in their learning during the pandemic in comparison to privately educated students. Differences in education were critical in shaping the experiences and learning outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While many high attainers tended to emphasise a positive and close relationship with their parents, parents differed in their level of involvement and type of roles depending on the socio-economic background. Similarly, while intrinsic motivation was shared across high attainers from different backgrounds, it was disadvantaged young people who showed more consistent levels of motivation throughout their education while emphasising the importance of hard work in life. The importance of socio-economic inequalities was further intensified by how these interacted with inequalities stemming from (mental) health, sexuality, gender and race.

Thinking about the future, disadvantaged young people were not only guided by their personal interest but also by making their parents proud, future salary prospects or caring and financial responsibilities towards their parents.

Ultimately, it was the combination of inequalities, relationships, personal characteristics and life events which shaped high attainers' educational journey and future plans. To adequately support high attainers requires a nuanced understanding of the combination of factors which are shaping their past, and their future opportunities.

Appendix: Achieved sample

Opportunity Boost sample		
All drawn from the Boost sample		
All high achievers (marks the top 3rd for KS2)		
Category	**Variable**	**Interviewed**
	TOTAL	**15**
Gender	Male	6
	Female	9
	Non-binary	0
Ethnicity - confirm from screener	Non white British	8
Region	Greater London	5
	South East	1
	South West	0
	West Midlands	2
	North West	2
	North East	1
	Yorkshire and the Humber	1
	East Midlands	1
	East of England	2
	Scotland	0
	Wales	0
	Northern Ireland	0
Lockdown learning	Attended school in first lockdown	2
School type	Sixth form college	5
	School	8
	FE / training provider / specialist college	2
	Not in education	0
Apprenticeship	Not interested in doing any apprenticeship, or interest in a vocational course	0
School	New school as GCSE	7
	Same school as GCSE	8

Comparator sample		
All high achievers (marks the top 3rd for KS2 or GCSE for private school sample – 3 or more 7 or above, or A or above for iGCSE)		
NONE classed as disadvantaged		
Category	**Variable**	**Recruited**
TOTAL		**19**
		Independent school	State / other
Social class (NS-SEC)	Higher managerial and professional	2	9
	Intermediate occupation	2	4
	Routine and manual occupations	0	1
Gender	Male	10	
	Female	7	
	Non-binary	2	
Ethnicity	Non white British	6	
Region	Greater London	5	
	South East	2	
	South West	1	
	West Midlands	0	
	North West	4	
	North East	0	
	Yorkshire and the Humber	1	
	East Midlands	0	
	East of England	5	
	Scotland	0	
	Wales	0	
	Northern Ireland	0	

School type	Sixth form college	5
	School	14
	FE / training provider / specialist college	0
	Not in education	0
Apprenticeship	Not interested in doing any apprenticeship, or interest in a vocational course	2
School	New school as GCSE	9
	Same school as GCSE	10

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