BRITISH JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION
2018, VOL. 39, NO. 8, 1143–1159
https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2018.1483821

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group



# Option blocks that block options: exploring inequalities in GCSE and A Level options in England

Jessie Abrahams

Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK

**ABSTRACT**

Despite the expansion of the UK higher education (HE) sector, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds remain less likely than their advantaged counterparts to apply for or be offered a place at university. Whilst attempts to widen access have tended to revolve around raising aspirations and attainment, this article makes a case for the consideration of differential access to subjects seen as directly 'facilitating' university entry. Through exploring opportunity structures in three secondary schools in England (one private, one state in a wealthy area and one in a socio-economically disadvantaged area), this study highlights inequalities in the GCSE and A Level options presented to pupils. Whilst some schools provide a wide landscape of opportunities and support with constructing subject 'packages', others are left to work within timetable blocking systems which restrict subject options. Overall it argues that young people's academic portfolios must be viewed in the context of the opportunities presented to them.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**
Received 13 August 2017
Accepted 30 May 2018

**KEYWORDS**
Inequality; school; options; higher education; access; social class

## Introduction

Ample sociological research has highlighted persisting inequalities within the UK education system through its expansion and, in particular, the under-representation of working-class students at university (Archer, Hutchings, and Ross 2003; Boliver 2013; Reay 2017; Reay, David, and Ball 2005). A major reason cited for this is the 'attainment gap'. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have continued to achieve lower GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) grades than their advantaged counterparts. In 2015 only 33.1% of pupils eligible for free school meals achieved five A*–C GCSEs including English and maths, compared to 60.9% of other (state educated) pupils (DfE 2016, 21). However, Boliver (2013) demonstrates that, even when controlling for differences in GCSE and A Level (Advanced Level) results, young people from state schools or manual class backgrounds remain less likely to apply for or be offered a place at university and, in particular, elite institutions.

This gap might also be explained then through other elements of the university application process such as personal statements and interviews. As of 14 May 2014 UCAS listed on its website that the personal statement is a valuable opportunity for applicants to demonstrate how they 'stand out from the crowd'. Jones (2013) argues that private school pupils have an advantage here through their ability to draw upon symbolically valued forms of

**CONTACT** Jessie Abrahams jessie.abrahams@surrey.ac.uk

work experience (see also Evans 2012). Disadvantaged young people face a further barrier of being unaware or unsupported in how to put their experiences to work to 'play the game' (Allen et al. 2013; Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013). Annette Lareau (2011) argues that middle-class parents utilise their resources to train their children in the 'rules of the game'. Through a process of 'concerted cultivation', they are inculcated with forms of symbolically legitimated capitals acquired through extensive engagement in extra-curricular activities.

What about the role of schools in this? Roker (1993) and Pugsley (2004) highlight how some schools (particularly private ones), through their exceptional careers provision, are able to inculcate pupils with 'an edge', giving them an advantage when applying to university. Reay, David, and Ball (2005) similarly highlight disparity in the quality of careers services arguing that there is a distinctive 'school effect' whereby its 'institutional habitus' plays a part in structuring young people's choices.

Other research has questioned the extent to which all young people are equally free to make 'choices' about their future. Instead arguing that decision-making processes take place within a complex interplay of the internal structures of the habitus alongside perceptions of opportunities on the labour market (Archer and Yamashita 2003; Archer, Hollingworth, and Halsall 2007; Ball et al. 2002; Hodkinson, Sparkes, and Hodkinson 1996). A major study in this area is that of Reay, David, and Ball (2005), who document how university choice is structured by material and psychological constraints as some universities become ruled out as 'not for the likes of us'. The literature on 'choice' in education has presented a robust critique which highlights how, rather than being a free market for all, 'choice' in education is a classed practice (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1996). This literature has tended to focus either on parental choice of schooling (e.g. Reay, Crozier, and James 2011) or young people's choices in terms of university and career pathways (as discussed above). In this article, I build upon the literature through challenging the notion of free choice in terms of young people's decision-making around subject options within schools and the implications this may have for their future 'choices'.

Interconnected with the critique of the notion of 'choice' is the debate over the nature of curriculum provision in England and the implications of this in terms of which subjects are considered most important or valuable. In this paper, I consider this in relation to three schools. For now, it is relevant to outline the organisation of this more widely.

## National curriculum and facilitating subjects

Schooling in England is split into three stages: primary, secondary and upper-secondary. Most secondary schools are required to teach the national curriculum,[1] which includes core subjects (English, maths and science) alongside physical education, religion, humanities, languages and more (DfE 2014b). In the final 2–3 years of secondary education pupils undertake their GCSEs. At this point, alongside the core subjects they are faced with a 'choice' of additional subjects. There are also a number of vocational qualifications which are considered 'equivalents' to GCSEs. The most common of these is the BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council).

Whilst GCSEs have been the basis of secondary schooling since the late 1980s, BTECs and other vocational equivalents are a newer inclusion brought about by the labour government in the early 2000s. Whilst they were not an entirely new type of qualification, up until this point BTECs had mainly been offered to young people post-16 in further education

colleges. The early 2000s then saw a more widespread use of such qualifications at an intermediate level with pre-16 pupils in secondary schools in England. Arguably, they were an attempt to broaden the curriculum, enabling alternatives to GCSEs to be recognised and valuable (Harrison, James, and Last 2015). However, by the late 2000s people became critical of them, suggesting that they enabled schools to 'game' league tables. In 2011, the coalition government commissioned the Wolf review, which was damning of vocational qualifications, arguing that they were 'short-changing' too many young people (Wolf 2011). This was followed by a major roll back and tightening of the curriculum.

The outcome of secondary education determines the options open to pupils for upper-secondary education. At upper-secondary, pupils have greater flexibility over the shape of their learning and can either study a wider range of vocational qualifications, undertake apprenticeships or continue on an academic route with A Levels. For A Levels, pupils generally study between 3–5 subjects of their choice. As with secondary schooling, the outcomes of upper-secondary have implications for which future pathways are open to young people. Whilst A Levels are the common route into university, there are key distinctions in regards to which subjects were studied. Maths and further maths; English literature; sciences; geography; history and languages (classical and modern) are often referred to as 'facilitating subjects'. These are subjects which, according to the Russell Group universities, are 'required more often than others' (Russell Group 2015, 26) in terms of degree course entry criteria. Additionally, they are viewed favourably, regardless of which course a student is applying to study. The *Informed Choices* document provided by the Russell Group advises students to take at least two facilitating subjects if they are unsure which degree they want to study, stating that: 'Taking two facilitating subjects will also keep a wide range of degree courses and career options open to you' (Russell Group 2015, 29).

Thus, not all subjects and qualifications hold the same weight. Policy shifts have played a role in determining what are considered valuable and legitimate forms of knowledge over time. However, to what extent does access to these forms of knowledge vary by social-class background? Recent quantitative work by Dilnot (2016) finds the likelihood of studying facilitating subjects at A Level is closely linked to socio-economic status (SES). Pupils from the highest SES quintile were 14.9% more likely to take at least two facilitating subjects at A Level than those from the lowest. Meanwhile those from the lowest SES quintile were 7.5% more likely to choose subjects deemed 'less useful' for access to elite universities (p. 1094). Whilst Dilnot (2016) concludes that a large part of this can be explained through GCSE subjects and attainment, she also suggests that school attended is a related factor.

This paper builds upon this work through considering how structures and practices in schools in England reproduce inequalities in young people's abilities to present themselves as desirable to universities through subjects studied. Specifically, I discuss how some pupils are faced with a timetable blocking system which restricts options, whilst others, unrestricted by such a system, experience a wider landscape of possibilities. This paper also discusses key differences in the type of subjects offered and, drawing upon the theorising of Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) I consider how some forms of knowledge may hold more weight in society. Finally, this paper describes the different ways in which young people are supported in developing a 'package' of useful and valued subjects which can help them gain access to (elite) universities. Building upon the work of Annette Lareau (2011), I introduce the concept of *institutional concerted cultivation* as a way of exploring how some institutions pick up where parents left off in their active attempts to utilise their enhanced knowledge of the rules of the game to equip their pupils with the necessary tools to 'stand out from the crowd'.

## Methods

This paper draws primarily upon qualitative data collected as part of a mixed methods study in three secondary schools in one city in England in the academic year 2014/2015. Data collection began with a survey administered to over 800 pupils from years 7, 9 and 11 in each school. It included questions about parental education and occupation as well as pupils' expectations for HE. Subsequently, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six-to-eight pupils per year per school which included questions around aspirations, expectations and knowledge of HE. Finally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with one careers advisor per school. This interview focused on their role and their perceptions of pupils. As part of the interview I showed careers advisors the *Informed Choices* document and asked them to comment on their use of it. Before moving on to the findings, it is necessary to provide a bit more detail about the three schools.

The first, Grand Hill Grammar,[2] is a private fee paying school, located in a wealthy part of the city. Whilst it is no longer an official Grammar school, it remains selective; pupils sit an entry exam to gain a place. In 2015 almost 100%[3] of pupils achieved the government benchmark of five A*–C GCSEs including English and maths. Survey data collected from pupils attending Grand Hill indicates that the majority of mothers and fathers had been to HE (74% and 75%, respectively) and similar proportions could be classified as falling into NS-SEC 1–3[4] (72% of mothers and 88% of fathers). The second school, Einstein High, is also located in a wealthy part of the city, but differs in that it is state funded. In 2015 almost 90% of pupils achieved five A*–C GCSEs including English and maths. Similar to Grand Hill, survey data indicated a highly advantaged group in terms of parental resources; 70% of mothers and 75% of fathers reportedly attended university and 78% of mothers' and 86% of fathers' occupations were classified under NS-SEC 1–3.

In stark contrast, the third school, Eagles Academy, is in the same city but in an area identified as one of the most disadvantaged in England (bottom 5% according the index of multiple deprivation (IMD)[5]). Eagles is a sponsor led academy[6] that was converted following an Ofsted[7] closure. In 2015 less than 50% of pupils achieved five A*–C GCSEs including English and maths. Survey data indicated that only 9% of mothers and 12% of fathers had attended HE or held occupations classifiable as NS-SEC 1–3. Eagles Academy then is battling against immense political pressure to 'improve' whilst simultaneously working with an extremely disadvantaged cohort. In 2014, 40% of pupils at Eagles Academy were in receipt of free school meals and 18% had a statement of special educational needs (SEN). In contrast, in Einstein High only 4% of pupils were eligible for free school meals and 5% had a statement of SEN. Grand Hill, being an independent school is not required to provide this information to the DfE, so there is no comparison figure for free school meal eligibility, but an internal report suggested that, in 2015, roughly 2% of pupils had a statement of SEN.

## *'Option time in year 8 is extremely important. The decisions you make now will be a significant step for your future life choices'*

As is indicated by this title (a quote from the Vice Principal of Eagles Academy printed in their year 8 options booklet) the decision to take certain GCSEs over others has implications for which pathways remain open to young people. However, to what extent do pupils actually have choice in this matter? Arguably, choice for *all* pupils is largely limited by the national

curriculum's requirements. Nevertheless, pupils in Eagles Academy had the least amount of agency over this process, whilst those at Grand Hill had the most freedom to choose. I was first made aware of these structural differences through interviews with pupils. In Eagles Academy, when discussing motivations for studying a specific subject, pupils often told me that they had no choice, particularly if two subjects they wanted to study appeared in the same 'block'. Thus, I came to learn of the 'blocking system' whereby subjects are pre-assigned to timetable blocks, meaning students must pick one subject from each block rather than being allowed to choose any two subjects. Table 1 presents the option structure provided within each school.

As Table 1 demonstrates, there are extensive differences in the GCSEs offered to pupils in each school. This can be seen in both the core compulsory subjects and the additional options. For example, in Eagles Academy and Einstein High pupils take science as a (double) GCSE, whilst in Grand Hill they take biology, chemistry and physics as three separate GCSEs. Moreover, in Eagles Academy pupils are sorted into either science GCSE or BTEC based on teachers' perception of 'ability' level. This is problematic, not least because it is a powerful form of labelling which renders some 'less able' from a young age, but also because the BTEC is not as valuable on the credential marketplace as the GCSE. Indeed, Cornish (2017) describes GCSEs and associated grades as having a 'gatekeeping function' to post-16 options. As was noted in the Wolf (2011) review, unlike the GCSE, BTEC science does not have a progression route to A Level sciences. One year 11 pupil I interviewed in Eagles Academy hoped to become a midwife, but had been streamed into BTEC science. As such she told me that she would have to re-take science as a GCSE alongside her A Levels.

Further inequalities can be seen across the schools in regards to the language and humanities. In Eagles Academy, pupils must select one humanities subject; their choice is limited to either history or geography (but not both). Meanwhile in Einstein High pupils may opt for a humanities subject but they are *not required* to do so. In Grand Hill, similar to Eagles Academy, pupils must choose a humanities subject, however, their choice is not limited to one and they are presented with many more options (geography; history; philosophy, ethics and religion; business studies; classical civilisation; Greek or Latin). A similar structure is in place for languages. In Eagles Academy and Einstein High pupils choose only one language, whilst in Grand Hill pupils can take as many languages as they want. In Eagles Academy the choice is of either French or Spanish, Einstein High also offer German and Grand Hill also offer Russian.

### *Option blocks that block options*

Once students have their compulsory GCSEs in place and have selected from the languages and humanities they can choose two more subjects (or three in Einstein High). It is at this point that the gravest inequality between the schools becomes apparent. In Eagles Academy, pupils are required to choose one option from block A and one from block B. In practice this means they choose: art, drama or product design GCSE or sport BTEC from block A and then art, music or IT GCSE or construction or health and social care BTEC from block B (see Table 1). During my interviews in Eagles Academy I came across a lot of young people who had been affected by this system. Some had been forced into a trade-off, taking their least favourite subject in order to take a different subject of their choice. For example, when

**Table 1.** GCSE and BTEC options by school

| | Grand Hill Grammar | Einstein High School | Eagles Academy |
|---|---|---|---|
| Compulsory GCSEs | *All pupils take all of these*<br>Maths<br>English Language<br>English Literature<br>Biology<br>Chemistry<br>Physics | *All pupils take all of these*<br>Maths<br>English Language<br>English Literature<br>Science GCSE | *All pupils take all of these*<br>Maths<br>English Language<br>English Literature<br>Science GCSE or BTEC |
| Humanities | *Pupils select at least 1*<br>Geography<br>History<br>Philosophy, Ethics and Religion<br>Business Studies<br>Classical Civilisation<br>Greek<br>Latin – language and literature =2 GCSEs | *Not compulsory to select*<br>N/A – all listed below | *Pupils select only 1*<br>Geography<br>History |
| Languages | *Pupils select at least 1*<br>French<br>German<br>Russian<br>Spanish | *Pupils select only 1*<br>French<br>German<br>Spanish | *Pupils select only 1*<br>French<br>Spanish |
| Other options | *Pupil select up to 2*<br>Art and Design<br>• Fine Art<br>• Fine Art with Textiles<br>Computing<br>Dance<br>Design Technology<br>• Electronic Products<br>• Product Design<br>Drama<br>Food and Nutrition<br>Music<br>Physical Education | *Pupils select 3 subjects*<br>GCSEs:<br>Art and Design<br>Design Technology<br>• Food Technology<br>• Product Design<br>• Textiles<br>Drama<br>Geography<br>History<br>Music<br>Photography<br>Physical Education<br>Psychology<br>BTECs:<br>Business Studies<br>IT Practitioners<br>Animal Care | *Pupils select 1 from block A and 1 from block B*<br>**Option block A**<br>GCSEs:<br>Art<br>Drama<br>Product Design<br>BTECs:<br>Sport 1<br>Sport 2<br>**Option block B**<br>GCSEs:<br>Art<br>IT<br>Music<br>BTECs:<br>Construction<br>Health and Social Care 1<br>Health and Social Care 2 |

I asked Charlotte, a year 11 pupil, why she had chosen music, sport science, history and French, she said:

**Charlotte:** … I didn't really pick sport science I chose health and social care, but they didn't give it to me they gave me sport science instead.

**Jessie:** Ok so why did you want to do health and social care?

**Charlotte:** … I don't know we didn't really have a lot of options … and you're kind of like even though you don't want to do something, even if you don't really know much about it, it's kind of what's more appealing to you than the other thing and … Sport science was like the bottom one I don't really, I don't like it at all.

**Jessie:** So they just allocated you into that one, there wasn't a choice between any other ones?

**Charlotte:** They told me afterwards it's because like health and social care and music are on like the same block so they're on at the same time so I couldn't have had both.

The above excerpt with Charlotte illustrates how the blocking system disadvantages pupils in Eagles Academy by restricting and limiting their choices. They are often left with an undesired course, perhaps because it seems more appealing than the rest.

This kind of restriction upon choices was not prevalent in the other two schools. In Einstein High and Grand Hill pupils had a vast array of subjects to choose from and had the freedom to select any combination, regardless of timetabling. In Einstein High pupils select from 11 GCSEs and three BTECs. In Grand Hill they can choose from 21 GCSEs; BTECs are not an option. In addition to this, I noted an important distinction in the type of subjects offered and the encouragement and supporting of particular pathways over others. The next section considers these issues and the classed signals these different subjects send off.

## *'They wanted something that shows intellect, that's why I do Latin'*

Grand Hill's emphasis on languages and the classics appears to signal that their pupils are likely to have an 'abstract mastery' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979) and a high level of cultural capital. An example of this is the option of 'classical civilisation' or 'Latin'. Interestingly some pupils appeared to be distinctly aware of the value of this qualification, feeling that by studying it they demonstrate a particular form of intelligence. This sentiment is neatly captured in the title of this section, which is a quote from Nile, a year 9 boy from Grand Hill. Melissa similarly signalled this when remarking that Latin 'shows quite a lot':

> I chose Latin because … not that many people have Latin it's quite an odd one. It's not that odd but I think it shows quite a lot and also our school does it as two GCSEs … so then you're doing 12 which sounds like you're doing lots of GCSEs which is exciting and I like Latin as well it comes quite easily. (Melissa, Year 9, Grand Hill Grammar)

Melissa alludes to the fact that, through doing Latin in Grand Hill, you are able to gain 12, rather than 11 GCSEs. Whilst it is classified as two GCSEs (literature and language), pupils only use one of their optional subjects rather than two when selecting it. Melissa's comment that 'not many people have it' suggests she feels that there is something valuable in the exclusivity that comes with studying Latin. It is interesting to compare the subject of Latin GCSE with the option of construction BTEC offered at Eagles Academy. In contrast to the abstract mastery and powerful cultural capital signalled by Latin, construction arguably signals the development of 'practical mastery' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979) and a different form of cultural capital. It could be argued that the inclusion of subjects which are directly relevant to and based upon skills and knowledge forms developed by young people from working-class backgrounds is a positive and inclusive development of the curriculum (Harrison, James, and Last 2015). However, as discussed in the introduction, subjects such as construction BTEC are perceived to be of lower academic standard and not as valuable on the post-16 educational marketplace. This is not a new debate, Bowles and Gintis (2011 [1976]) argued that vocational education represents the most powerful form of stratification, with working-class people being streamed into routes which have continually been positioned as of less academic worth than courses based on abstract and theoretical learning.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) discuss how class inequality is manifested in education through the 'organization and functioning of the school system' as it establishes, through its practices, an (arbitrary) hierarchy of disciplines. With the most abstract being valued

more highly than those more concrete. In this way, they argue, that the system 'retranslates inequalities in social level into inequalities in academic level' (p. 158). Thus, the class structure is reproduced through 'misrecognition' as subjects which the dominant classes have a head start in developing become legitimated as superior forms of knowledge, whilst the subjects in which the working-classes strengths lie are devalued. Arguably then, some forms of knowledge (arbitrarily) hold more power in society. Also, as is illustrated in the differential options at Eagles Academy and Grand Hill, young people remain more or less able to access a range of subjects which will equip them with qualifications which hold symbolic value beyond the school gates. This is not to suggest that all schools *can* or *should* offer all pupils the option of Latin. As will be discussed later in this article, these schools are operating within vastly different contexts which restrict or enable what is possible for them and their pupils. Rather, the purpose is to highlight that young people are not equally able to access all subject options and combinations.

## A Levels

The inequalities noted regarding GCSE 'choices' re-emerged with respect to A Levels. The Einstein High pupils were able to select from the most A Level subjects (35), closely followed by Grand Hill, which offers 32 options. The Eagles Academy pupils had the fewest options (22) and once more the options were arranged in a blocking system. Table 2 documents the subjects offered at A Level in each school.

Grand Hill are clear on their website that timetables are 'constructed around student choices', meaning that pupils can opt for any combination of subjects listed in Table 2. They specify that 'it is very rare for a student to be unable to study all of their first choice subjects'. Einstein High also adopts this choice structure. However, in Eagles Academy, as can be seen in Table 2, A Levels (similar to GCSEs) are arranged into blocks. This is problematic for pupils, as it often restricts which subjects they can study, in turn having implications for which university or career routes are open or closed to them. It also means that they may be forced to take subjects that they are not particularly interested in. For example, when I asked Holly, a year 11 girl at Eagles Academy why she had chosen computing, photography, music production and business she said:

**Holly:** I picked music production cos there was nothing else in that column I wanted, cos you get four columns and you could only do one in each column and it's either computing, no IT Applied BTEC but then I wouldn't be able to do photography and I really wanted to do photography so I had to do computing.

**Jessie:** Ok and what about business, why did you choose that?

**Holly:** Because there was nothing else in that column that I wanted to do.

Holly spoke about wanting to do creative writing, something not offered at Eagles Academy. Whilst these pupils could theoretically (and in some cases do) go elsewhere to study these subjects, due to their location (on the outskirts of the city) their options are relatively limited. Many spoke of wanting to stay at the school as it was familiar and they felt a sense of security within it. Arguably, their 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson, Sparkes, and Hodkinson 1996) were being structured by what they knew; they had limited opportunities to experience and learn about educational provisions outside of their school. It is interesting to compare Holly's

**Table 2.** A Level options by school.

| Grand Hill Grammar | Einstein High | Eagles Academy | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Pupils select any combination* | *Pupils select any combination* | *Pupils select one subject per block* | | | |
| | | Block 1 | Block 2 | Block 3 | Block 4 |
| Art | Art | Art & Design | | | |
| Fine Art | Fine Art | | | | |
| Theatre Design | | | | | |
| Biology | Biology | | | Biology | |
| Business Studies | Business Studies | | | | Business Studies |
| Classical Civilisation | Classical Civilisation | | | | |
| Chemistry | Chemistry | | Chemistry | | |
| Computing | Computing | Computing | | | |
| Critical Thinking | | | | | |
| Dance | Dance | | | | |
| DT | DT | | | Technology | |
| Product Design | Product Design | | | | Product Design |
| Systems and Control | | | | | |
| Theatre Studies | Drama and Theatre Studies | Drama | | | |
| Economics | Economics | | | | |
| English Language | English Language | | English | | |
| English Literature | English Literature | | | | |
| | English Lit & Lang | | | | |
| | Film Studies | | | | |
| | Food Technology | | | | |
| French | French | French | | | |
| Geography | Geography | | Geography | | |
| German | German | | | | |
| Greek | | | | | |
| | Government & Politics | | | | |
| History | History | History | | | |
| Medieval & early Modern | Ancient | | | | |
| American & Modern World | 20th Century | | | | |
| IT | IT | | | | |
| Latin | | | | | |
| Mathematics | Mathematics | Mathematics | | | |
| Further Mathematics | Further Mathematics | | | | |
| | Media Studies | | | Media | |
| Music | Music | | | Music | |
| | Music Technology | | | | |
| Sports Studies | Physical Education | | | | Physical Education |
| | Photography | | Photography | | |
| Physics | Physics | | | | Physics |
| Psychology | Psychology | | | | |
| Religious Studies | Religious Studies | | | | RE & Philosophy |
| Russian | | | | | |
| Spanish | Spanish | | | Spanish | |
| | Sociology | | Sociology | | |
| | Textiles | | | | Textiles |
| | | (6) | (5) | (5) | (6) |
| Total (32) | Total (35) | Total (22) | | | |

story of institutional restriction around A Level choices with a year 11 girl from Einstein High, Victoria:

**Jessie:** Ok so what are you thinking about doing after your GCSEs, are you thinking about going on to A Levels?

**Victoria:** Yeah I think realistically I probably will do A Levels but I've been talking to my parents recently and I dunno because they don't do all the subjects

> which I'm interested in here, so for instance history of art they don't do here and I know they do it at [private boarding school] but I'm not going to go to [private boarding school] cos it's like a boarding school [laughs] … yeah my parents were like if you wanted to do history of art you could always do home schooled history of art and then only do two or three in school.

**Jessie:** Would that mean that they would be teaching you?

**Victoria:** No I'd have like a tutor.

Victoria has an enhanced freedom to choose from an array of subjects not offered at her school—or any school for that matter—due to her parents' financial ability to pay for a private tutor. In addition to differences in the array of subjects available, similar to the situation with GCSEs there is notable inequality in relation to the type of subject offered. The next section considers inequalities in the extent to which careers advisors guided pupils towards understanding 'the package' of A Levels and the importance of certain 'facilitating subjects' over others.

### *'I'm usually talking to them about the importance of the package'*

The careers advisors in Einstein High and Grand Hill appeared paramount to the knowledge of the value of A Level options and indeed advice on which ones to take. In Einstein High, for example, pupils saw the careers advisor's main role as one of supporting them with GCSE and A Level choices. Discussion and promotion of facilitating subjects was different across the schools. The pupils in Grand Hill were aware of how doing a science subject would enable them to 'keep options open', one pupil told me that when making A Level choices the school advised them to 'try and get a science in there'. In addition to this, there emerged an interesting discussion around the 'packaging' of pupils. In Grand Hill the careers advisor emphasised spending a lot of time talking to pupils about 'the package' of A Levels, considering how their subject choices look together and which ones will leave them with the most options open. When discussing the *Informed Choices* document, Grand Hill's careers advisor says:

> Yeah it's very useful. It's not really an issue in this school because typically the A Levels we're offering are pretty much the A Levels which Russell Group Universities like, but I mean most universities if they have any requirements at all it's usually of two, it's never more than that occasionally at a medical school but usually it's a requirement of two it's maths and physics or biology and chemistry, or something of that sort. So I'm usually talking to them about *the importance of the package you know, and how it works as a group and whether it looks like a good combination that will leave plenty of doors open*. So I'm kind of trying to get that balance between, I don't want them to choose subjects just because somebody thinks they look good, I do want them to choose subjects because they love it because they have a, you know, a love of learning. They want to do those subjects but they can also see it as a useful combination and I would make them aware of certain things like 'look if you are serious about economics at a top university it's probably best to do maths with it if you can, if you hate maths well let's talk about that but you know if you're good at maths that would be my advice, put maths with it'. (Careers Advisor, Grand Hill Grammar)

These practices of the careers advisor at Grand Hill can be understood as a form of what I call *institutional concerted cultivation*, whereby professionals in the school are actively building upon the advantages young people from middle-class backgrounds are afforded at home (Lareau 2011) through further cultivating and packaging them. The careers advisor in

Grand Hill, much like the parents in Lareau's study, is working to train pupils in the rules of the game through utilising resources and knowledge afforded to the institution due to its dominant position in social space. The pupils I interviewed at Grand Hill appeared to have internalised these messages and their narratives illustrated a tacit awareness of 'the package' as they told me about the importance they placed on the specific A Level combination. For example, when I asked one year 11, Harry, why he had chosen the specific subjects he had, he said:

> Well mainly just to do engineering. I mean all engineering courses ask for maths, that's the only common theme, but most of them ask for further maths and physics as well, it's usually maths, physics is what they ask for … further maths as well and … DT is listed as an additional helpful subject and plus I just really enjoy DT so there'll be that and then geography is slightly related I mean it depends what field of engineering you want to go into but certainly for civil engineering something like that then geography would be helpful for that as well. (Harry, Year 11, Grand Hill Grammar)

Here Harry is clear on how all of his A Level choices tie nicely together to create a package for doing some form of engineering. In contrast, at Eagles Academy, the careers advisor told me that he rarely used the *Informed Choices* document, not least because their pupils were unlikely to apply to such elite institutions; but also, as I was told, it does not take into consideration the student and their specific 'ability':

**Careers Advisor:** It's a difficult one because, taken out of context, it's not always helpful for the students or the parents cos they'll just read you know for whatever, to enter physics you'll need these facilitating subjects, you need this that and the other, but it doesn't put it into any context for them so, whilst it's very useful, it's also a little bit dangerous I feel, in the wrong hands.

**Jessie:** Ok so what type of context do you mean?

**Careers Advisor:** The context of looking at the student holistically, so for example if, to get onto a physics degree, it said that they must have maths and maybe further maths in A Levels, one has to be mindful as to how suitable those subjects would be for the student. If the student was, if their strength wasn't in maths or their interest wasn't in maths or indeed do they appreciate whether they actually need to have a physics degree or not for what they want to go into. It's a very quick fix but it's not always the right fix to say oh for physics you need maths and further maths oh well that's what you're gonna do then off you go … it might not be appropriate or suitable for them.

Here we come to understand that, within Grand Hill, horizons were being broadened, whilst in Eagles Academy the careers service often began by narrowing horizons to a starting point of what is a likely possibility for their students. The careers advisor in Eagles Academy appears here to be engaged in direct work upon the habitus. Through 'looking at the student holistically' the Careers Advisor is working to ensure that aspirations are suitable for 'someone like them'; that habitus is attuned to the field. Arguably, Eagles Academy face the challenge of *constrained cultivation*. Due to their location in the field and the disadvantaged nature of the community they serve, they must work with a restricted range of possibilities for their pupils.

Without an understanding of 'the package' and its role in 'keeping options open', the pupils in Eagles Academy tended to use their four A Level options in a different way. Whilst they similarly made carefully thought through choices which attempted to keep various career routes open, this was done through taking a fourth subject irrelevant to the 'package', but useful as a 'back up'. They tended to see their A Levels as an opportunity to develop a range of knowledge and skills which would be useful in different contexts. For example, when I probed Jake, a year 11 from Eagles Academy, on whether he had established any plan-B to becoming an architect he said:

> Well I've been told in sixth form I get four subjects and I was thinking I could use three of them for architecture and one of them for something quite different, I wouldn't mind teaching, I wouldn't mind being a, teaching something practical like sport, or science I really enjoy science. (Jake, Year 11, Eagles Academy)

Jake goes on to tell me that he is hoping to stay in Eagles Academy for A Levels and take maths, physics, product design and sport—which would be his 'back up' subject. I later learned that this would not be an option for Jake, as physics and product design are in the same column; blocking any would-be architects in Eagles Academy from building an optimum A Level 'package'[8].

## *Exposing structures of inequality: institutional concerted cultivation and constrained cultivation*

> The different types of curriculum give very unequal chances of entering higher education. It follows that working-class children pay the price of their access to secondary education by relegation into institutions and school careers which entice them with the false pretences of apparent homogeneity only to ensnare them in a truncated educational destiny. (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 158)

Whilst Bourdieu and Passeron were writing about the French education system, which was arguably more truncated than the contemporary English education system, this article demonstrates that young people still face inequality in schools in regards to the curriculum and options available in different institutional contexts. Rather than meritocratically providing all young people with equal opportunities, schools appear to be sorting pupils into different tracks and positions (Bowles and Gintis 2011 [1976]). This is important because, when pupils leave school, they become measured according to a standardised benchmark whereby their educational outcomes are taken as indicators of their individual choices and ability. Thus far, I have suggested that schools such as Grand Hill and Einstein High engage in a process of *institutional concerted cultivation*, whilst Eagles Academy face the challenge of *constrained cultivation* as they operate within a context of restricted possibilities for their pupils. This section considers this in greater depth, presenting some tentative reflections on the distinct circumstances facing each school which may render them more or less able to provide their pupils with unrestricted subject choices rather than imposing timetable blocking systems.

It is not difficult to work out why Grand Hill might be able to offer such freedoms to their pupils. Being a private school, they likely possess the greatest resources. The interesting question is why the distinction in practices between the two state-funded schools? Unfortunately, this was not something I asked schools about directly. Nevertheless, at this point I offer some discussion as to why this may be the case. As indicated above, we might

begin from a rational point of school size and resources. One could deduce that a school with less pupils and resources may have less teachers, impacting upon their flexibility around timetabling. Eagles Academy's sixth form is far smaller than Einstein High's. In 2014 they had 50 pupils on roll, whilst Einstein High had 800 (half of which were housed in their partner school). At secondary level the difference is smaller, in 2014 Eagles Academy had 700 pupils enrolled, whilst Einstein High had just under 1000. Due to the disadvantaged nature of their cohort, Eagles Academy would likely receive *more* money per pupil than Einstein High through pupil premium payments. At the same time, Einstein High may benefit from the resources of their large sixth-form centre. The distinction could also lie in how they choose to spend their money.

All schools are working within a framework of interests. It is hard to believe that Eagles Academy do not have their pupils' best interests at heart. Being a school previously closed by Ofsted, they are under constant political pressure to 'improve'. Measures of improvement tend to relate to league table position, Eagles Academy thus has a strong interest to help pupils achieve qualifications which will reflect well on their league table position. Einstein High, being a 'high performing', oversubscribed school, has greater freedom to cater to pupil choice. Due to the increased marketization of education, parental 'choice' at secondary level has become a prominent narrative. Sociological literature has critiqued this, arguing that choice is a privilege of the middle-classes (Ball et al. 2002; Reay, Crozier, and James 2011). Arguably, Einstein High and Grand Hill's constructing of timetables around pupil 'choice' may be a part of their marketing strategy as they compete with other schools for pupils. Eagles Academy, being an under-subscribed school in an isolated community have little need to market themselves to parents as they have limited 'choice' in where their children go to school.

Lareau (2011, 1) describes the way in which middle-class parents see themselves as 'developing' their children through 'cultivating' their particular talents 'in a concerted fashion'. I argue that some institutions can be seen to be functioning in a similar manner, actively working to cultivate their pupils with the capitals needed to take up dominant positions in society. Grand Hill and Einstein High, through their privileged position in the field, are able to draw upon extensive resources to enable pupils to 'keep their options open' through imposing minimal institutional restriction upon subject combinations alongside careful moulding and packaging through careers advice and guidance. Other findings of my research shed light upon the workings of *institutional concerted cultivation* through observation of a careers day in Grand Hill where pupils are trained in the rules of the game, provided with powerful contacts and taught how to mobilise and capitalise upon them effectively (Abrahams 2017). The decision at Grand Hill and Einstein High to construct timetables around 'pupil choice' is an example of *institutional concerted cultivation*, as the school works to position itself and its pupils in an advantaged position in the field with the best possible subject combinations. In contrast, Eagles Academy is working within a framework of restrictions which leaves them faced with the challenge of *constrained cultivation*. With limited resources alongside political pressures around particular measures of improvement, they face constraints in relation to supporting pupils into destinations in an unrestricted manner. The blocking system itself is an example of this *constrained cultivation* as the institution works to ensure pupils secure qualifications but face restrictions over possible combinations. The remainder of this article considers some implications of this inequality noted at the school level.

## Implications

Whilst this paper has presented an analysis of inequalities in options and choice structures within secondary schools, there are important implications for universities which must be considered. As was discussed in the introduction, much of what we know about inequalities in university admissions relate to differences in measurable indicators of 'ability' or 'potential' (academic achievement or grades). For this reason, attempts to equalise the playing field have tended to focus around finding suitable alternatives to these. A large proportion of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK have begun to use contextualised data when making admissions decisions. This means taking into consideration individual, area or school-level indicators of disadvantage which may impact upon an applicant's ability to demonstrate their academic potential.

A 2015 report from the body 'Supporting Professionalism in Admissions' (SPA) documents that, out of 68 surveyed HEIs, 84% were using contextualised admissions. SPA found the most common indicator was whether an applicant is in care or a care-leaver, but other indicators also include parental experience of HE, POLAR, disability and more (for full list see SPA 2015). Whilst the use of contextualised admissions is indeed progressive, arguably there remains further work to be done (Mountford-Zimdars, Moore, and Graham 2016). One way it could be developed relates to the consideration given to 'the package' of A Level subjects an applicant possesses. Subjects are not part of contextualised admissions; universities do not consider the breadth of A Level options a candidate was presented with when considering school-level disadvantage, subsequently admissions offers are unlikely to be altered in line with any notable inequality here. However, a simple look at university websites indicates that subjects remain central to entry requirements.

The centrality of subjects to the admissions process is illustrated in the mere production of the *Informed Choices* document which, as mentioned, lays out important information around facilitating subjects. This Russell Group (2015) advice has directly influenced policy, with the government introducing a post-16 performance indicator of AAB A-Levels to be made up of at least two facilitating subjects (DfE 2014a). Whilst not all courses have specific requirements, many list 'preferred' subjects. As of 10 August 2017, the London School of Economics (LSE), hinting directly at the need to develop a useful portfolio of A Level subjects, list on their website: 'The School considers not only the individual qualifications offered by applicants but also the combination of subjects offered'. They also list 'non-preferred subjects' which include: accounting, art and design, business studies, creative writing, design and technology, health and social care and more. This is university wide guidance, arguably indicating an institutional preference for certain forms of knowledge over others (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Whilst it is not clear the extent to which these factors actually impact admissions decisions, they are central to the information disseminated from universities to schools and the wider public. As such, this article makes a case for universities to take into consideration the differences in options offered to young people, incorporating a degree of flexibility in entry requirements of subjects.

## Conclusion

Diane Reay (2017), in *Miseducation*, provides a comprehensive account of the painful, continual and systematic exclusion the working classes have faced within the UK education system. This article adds to the literature through an account of the reproduction of social

class inequality in the structures and practices of three contrasting schools in England. I have highlighted how Grand Hill Grammar and Einstein High, schools serving an already advantaged cohort, are able to utilise their resources to offer pupils unrestricted GCSE and A Level options alongside extensive support with understanding and developing a valuable 'package'. I argue that this can be understood as a form of *institutional concerted cultivation*, as the school works to cultivate and develop a particular middle-class young person, adept in the 'rules of the game' and equipped to 'stand out' in the competition for university places. Meanwhile Eagles Academy, working with an extremely disadvantaged cohort and under political pressure to 'improve', have limited resources. They are working within a restrictive framework which includes the use of a timetable blocking system having the effect of limiting the possibilities for their pupils relative to the other schools. In this way I argue that Eagles Academy work with a form of *constrained cultivation* as they attempt to use what they can to secure their pupils some form of qualifications and destination. Political rhetoric around reducing inequality in education asserts the need to increase the information, advice and guidance given to young people so that they can make better choices (e.g. BIS, 2011). It is essential that we remain critical of this notion of 'choice' in education, recognising its classed nature. Furthermore, I argue that we must understand young people and their package of GCSE and A Levels in context of the *opportunities* they were given from which to make such choices.

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge Professor Ann-Marie Bathmaker and Professor Rachel Brooks for their helpful comments on a first draft of this paper. The author would also like to thank all pupils and careers advisors for their open and honest insights and to all schools for allowing access and enabling the research to take place. Thanks is also due to Professor David James, Dr Sin Yi Cheung, Dr Nicola Ingram, Professor Diane Reay and Professor Louise Archer for their support with the development of this research. Finally the author would like to acknowledge and thank the two anonymous referees for their engagement with this paper and their helpful comments.

## Notes

1. Some schools, such as private schools, have flexibility over this.
2. All schools and participants have been given Pseudonyms.
3. Exact figures have been disguised to protect the anonymity of the schools.
4. NS-SEC (National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification) is the official scale used in the UK to classify occupations. It is most commonly used in a condensed form with groups 1–8 (1 being professional and managerial and 8 being long-term unemployed). Categories 1–3 are typically used to indicate 'middle-class'.
5. IMD is an index used in the UK to measure and classify the deprivation of an area. It combines various indices of deprivation including income, employment, health, education, crime and more.
6. Sponsor-led academies are state-funded schools which are established and managed by government approved 'sponsors' (including businesses, 'high performing' schools, elite universities). They are often established to replace local community schools closed down by Ofsted as 'failed schools'.
7. Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) is the inspectorate and regulatory body for government funded education and children's services in the UK.
8. Whilst these subjects are not always essential requirements for Architecture, according to the *Informed Choices* document (Russell Group 2015), some courses require an arts/science mix. They also list maths, design technology (product design is the 'equivalent' at Eagles), physics and art as 'useful' subjects for this degree pathway.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## References


Abrahams, J. 2017. "*Schooling Inequality: Aspirations, Institutional Practices and Social Class Reproduction.*" Unpublished doctoral thesis., Cardiff University.

Allen, K., J. Quinn, S. Hollingworth, and A. Ross. 2013. "Becoming Employable Students and 'Ideal' Creative Workers: Exclusion and Inequality in Higher Education Work Placements." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34 (3): 431–452.

Archer, L., S. Hollingworth, and A. Halsall. 2007. "'University's not for Me — I'm a Nike Person': Urban, Working-Class Young People's Negotiations of 'Style', Identity and Educational Engagement. *Sociology*." 41 (2): 219–237.

Archer, L., M. Hutchings, and A. Ross. 2003. *Higher Education and Social Class: Issues of Exclusion and Inclusion*. London: RoutledgeFalmer

Archer, L., and H. Yamashita. 2003. "Knowing Their Limits? Identities, Inequalities and Inner City School Leavers' Post-16 Aspirations." *Journal of Education Policy* 18 (1): 53–69.

Ball, S. J., R. Bowe, and S. Gewirtz. 1996. "'School Choice, Social Class and Distinction: The Realization of Social Advantage in Education'." *Journal of Education Policy* 11 (1): 89–112.

Ball, S. J., J. Davies, M. David, and D. Reay. 2002. "'Classification' and 'Judgement': Social Class and the 'Cognitive Structures' of Choice of Higher Education." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 23 (1): 51–72.

Bathmaker, A.-M., N. Ingram, and R. Waller. 2013. "Higher Education, Social Class and the Mobilisation of Capitals: Recognising and Playing the Game." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34 (5–6): 723–743.

Boliver, V. 2013. "How Fair is Access to More Prestigious UK Universities?" *British Journal of Sociology* 64 (2): 344–364.

Bourdieu, P., and J. C. Passeron. 1979. *The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relation to Culture*. London: The University of Chicago Press.

Bourdieu, P., and J. C. Passeron. 1990 [1977]. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. 2nd ed. London: Sage.

Bowles, S., and H. Gintis. 2011 [1976]. *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

Business, Innovation and Skills. 2011. *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System. (Cm.8122)*. London: HMSO.

Cornish, C. 2017. "Case Study: Level 1 Skills to Succeed (S2S) Students and the Gatekeeping Function of GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) at an FE College." *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 22 (1): 7–21.

Department for Education. 2014a. *Reforming the Accountability System for 16 to 19 Providers*. London: Department for Education. [Accessed 13 August 2017]. Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/365979/DfE_consultation_response_16-19_Accountability_final.pdf

Department for Education. 2014b. *The National Curriculum in England*. London: Department for Education. [Accessed 10 August 2017]. Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-secondary-curriculum

Department for Education. 2016. *Revised GCSE and Equivalent Results in England, 2014 to 2015. [Statistical first release]*. London: Department for Education. [Online]. [Accessed 8 August 2016]. Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/494073/SFR01_2016.pdf

Dilnot, C. 2016. "How Does the Choice of A-Level Subjects Vary With Students' Socio-Economic Status in English State Schools?" *British Educational Research Journal* 42 (6): 1081–1106.

Evans, S. 2012. "Unpicking that 'Something Special': Student Background and the University Application Process." In *Educational Diversity: The Subject of Difference and Different Subjects*, edited by Y. Taylor, 99–119. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Harrison, N., D. James, and K. Last. 2015. "Don't Know What You've Got 'Til it's Gone? Skills-Led Qualifications, Secondary School Attainment and Policy Choices." *Research Papers in Education* 30 (5): 585–608.

Hodkinson, P., A. Sparkes, and H. Hodkinson. 1996. *Triumphs and Tears: Young People, Markets and the Transition from School to Work*. London: David Fulton Publishers.

Jones, S. 2013. ""Ensure that You Stand Out from the Crowd": A Corpus-Based Analysis of Personal Statements According to Applicants' School Type." *Comparative Education Review special issue on Fair Access to Higher Education* 57(3): 397–423.

Lareau, A. 2011. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. London: University of California Press.

Mountford-Zimdars, A., J. Moore, and J. Graham. 2016. "Is Contextualised Admission the Answer to the Access Challenge?" *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education* 20 (4): 143–150.

Pugsley, L. 2004. *The University Challenge: Higher Education Markets and Social Stratification*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited.

Reay, D. 2017. *Miseducation: Inequality, Education and the Working Classes*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Reay, D., G. Crozier, and D. James. 2011. *White Middle-Class Identities and Urban SCHOOLING*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Reay, D., M. David, and S. J. Ball, 2005. *Degrees of Choice: Social Class, Race and Gender in Higher Education*. Staffordshire: Trenthan Books.

Roker, D. 1993. "Gaining the Edge: Girls at a Private School." In *Youth and Inequality*, edited by I. Bates and G. Riseborough, 123–138. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Russell Group. 2015. "Informed Choices: A Russell Group Guide to Making Decisions About Post-16 Education." 4th ed. [Online]. Accessed 14 September 2016. Available from: http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/media/5320/informedchoices.pdf

Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA). 2015. *SPA's Use of Contextualised Admissions Survey Report 2015 (with HEDIIP)*. SPA. https://www.spa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Research-CA-survey-report-2015_1.pdf

Wolf, A. 2011. *Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report*. London: Department for Education. [Online]. Accessed 14 September 2016. Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180504/DFE-00031-2011.pdf