Re/configuring possible selves and broadening future horizons: the experiences of working-class British Asian women navigating higher education

Abstract Improving ''non-traditional'' students' access to higher education has been an aim of United Kingdom (UK) governments since 1997. However, less is known about what enables 'non-traditional'' British Asian female students to consider different career options on completion of their studies and if/how their degree course has enabled them to reconfigure their possible future professional selves. In this paper, we draw on interviews to examine the experiences of working-class British Asian women undertaking an undergraduate degree in Greater London. We highlight the support provided by the participants' families to enable their aspirations for higher education. We also examine the importance of work placements in enabling a reimagination of their future possible professional selves. Our data lead us to argue that reconfiguring did occur, and work placements and the confidence gained through placements enabled our participants to construct professional future selves that would otherwise be unthinkable.

Key words British Asian women, widening participation, possible selves, career aspirations, work placement, first-generation

Background

Increasing economic pressure to up skill the global workforce to meet the demands of the growing knowledge and service economies is one imperative that has driven the expansion of higher education in the global north and south (Harvey, 2005). Emerging and developed nations alike are investing significant funds into growing their higher education provision

to deliver a highly skilled workforce. To maximise their country's potential economic returns, governments across the global north have enacted a variety of policies aimed at widening participation to higher education to all social groups, particularly those who have been historically marginalised such as women, minority ethnic and working-class groups (Burke, 2012).

In the UK, improving access to higher education for 'non-traditional' students has been a stated aim of successive governments since New Labour came to power in 1997 (Burke, 2012; Chowdry et al, 2013). Underpinning this aim was a commitment to diversify the student body and the courses they choose to study. It was hoped that these changes would achieve greater demographic representation across social class, gender and ethnicity groupings in different types of occupations.

The Dearing Report published in 1997 stated that access to higher education should be open to all those who qualify for it academically, irrespective of their backgrounds. Following major funding changes to English universities, New Labour, Coalition and Conservative governments have broadly continued a policy commitment to social mobility through wider access and participation policies. The stated aims of these policies are designed to promote and advance intragenerational and intergenerational social mobility (DfE 2017; HMG, 2010, 2011). Intragenerational social mobility reflects status changes in an individual's life, contrasted with

intergenerational social mobility, which refers to status changes over multiple generations. An example of a policy initiative is the Conservative government's white paper, Success as a Knowledge Economy, which aims to 'double the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering university in 2020 compared to 2009 [13.6%], and to increase the number of black and minority ethnic (BME) students going to university by 20% by 2020' (BIS, 2014, p. 14, Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018).

In England, entrenched patterns of social reproduction persist in terms of socio-economically privileged young people attending prestigious, so-called pre-1992 universities and 'non-traditional' students remain clustered in the newer, post-1992 universities that tend to underperform by league table measures. These patterns create social inequalities in career possibilities and aspirations. An example, identified in the aforementioned Sutton Trust report, refers to the Government's flagship Fast Stream graduate programme (2017) which is;

> Less diverse by social background than even the student population of Oxford University. This is likely because a "glass floor" similarly appears to exist for access to jobs, with children from wealthier backgrounds often receiving greater parental support. In an increasingly competitive job market, unpaid internships and 'soft skills' have become more important to securing a top job,

benefiting those from wealthier backgrounds (2017, p. 15).

This example is important because certain students, especially those from middle-class backgrounds, are more likely than their working-class counterparts to access and develop these skills and cultural capital, and to excel in the higher education game (Bathmaker, Ingram & Waller, 2013). They are more likely to benefit from parental support in the form of access to professional networks, financial resources and classed dispositions and self-confidence (Crozier, 2015; Friedman & Lauriston, 2020), further reinforcing social reproduction rather than enabling intergenerational social mobility.

Existing studies on the career pathways of 'non-traditional' graduates would suggest, with fewer material resources, their career trajectories are likely to encounter more challenges to secure graduate employment when compared to their middle-class counterparts (Burke, 2015). Data in 2016 shows that almost one in three graduates are not in graduate jobs (BIS, 2014). The Graduate Labour Market Statistics report (BIS, 2014) shows that not only is the 'graduate premium' narrowing, but certain ' 'non-traditional'' students, especially black graduates, are particularly poorly served by higher education, with only 37% of them in graduate jobs (Guardian, 2016). We recognise the graduate unemployment rate has improved since 2014, however, we also note that the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in England suggests 31% of

graduates are overeducated for the job they are doing (ONS, 2019). Thus, the importance of career support is an important strand of an undergraduate programme of study, especially for 'non-traditional' students to maximise their opportunities for gaining a graduate career.

In particular, the inclusion of work placement as part of the degree is considered to be especially effective (Brooks & Youngson, 2016). Many undergraduate degrees, especially in the social sciences, now offer at least a final year placement of some description with many offering yearly 'industrial' placement options (Inceoglu et al, 2019). Placements have been noted as invaluable in supporting students' understanding and experience of the world of graduate work (Gbadamosi et al., 2019). When enacted well and structured into the degree programme, rather than viewed as an add on in the final year, placements work well to support students' and build their aspirations (Daniels & Brooker, 2014). These different forms of career service support and placement are aimed at improving graduate employment rates for all students, especially 'non-traditional' students who have typically lagged behind their peers in securing graduate jobs (Hetch, McArthur, Savage, & Friedman, 2020).

 Recent figures produced by the Office for Students (OfS) (2019) revealed that 'among the nation's most deprived students, those who were black, Asian and mixed race were far more likely to attend full-time university courses or apprenticeships than their white counterparts in the last five

years' (Swerling, 2019, p. 1). However, despite this encouraging picture of increased attendance at university, the OfS data also confirmed that there are still wide gaps in access and outcome between the most and least advantaged groups. The report suggested 'students from disadvantaged areas are more likely to drop-out, less likely to gain a first or 2:1, or find graduate employment compared to their more advantaged peers' (Swerling, 2019, p. 1).

Recent research into the experiences of British Asian (and especially Muslim) women in higher education generally agreed that a university degree is considered a desirable achievement by these students as well as their parents (Ahmad, 2001; Ijaz & Abbas, 2010; Khattab & Modood, 2018), despite some suggestions of opposition in more traditional families (Dwyer, Shah & Sanghera, 2008). For Muslim women, higher education can provide social and economic independence, afforded by better employment prospects, despite recognising their added difficulty to navigate the labour market (Dale et al., 2002, Tyrer & Ahmad, 2006). The importance of social capital and network is recognised as a key contributor in their pathways to academic success (Bhopal, 2008, 2010, 2011), especially from family members (Al-deen, 2019, Oplatka & Lapidot, 2012).

In this paper, we seek to build on and add to previous work on black and Muslim student experience in higher education (Harris, Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2016), by drawing on

interview data to examine the experiences of working-class British Asian women undertaking an undergraduate degree in Education at a London university. We define British Asian women as those specifically of South Asian descent who now reside in the UK. The student demographic of the university enabled us to recruit enough students that fall into this category. We sought to understand if and how their degree placement coupled with family support for higher education has enabled them to reconfigure their possible future professional selves (Henderson, Stevenson and Bathmaker, 2019). The research discussed here highlights why it is useful to explore the higher education experiences of British Asian women from working-class families to better understand their unique experiences of higher education and to investigate what they perceived has supported their higher education studies.

In what follows, we begin by providing the context to our study, followed by an outline and rationale for our choice of theoretical framework and methodology. Next, we discuss the key findings focusing on the role of their families and undergraduate programme support that enabled their future career aspirations. In the process of researching these support structures, we identified examples of our participants reconfiguring their future possible selves during the course of their studies. We argue that such reconfiguration is an important element of enabling intragenerational social mobility because our participants were able to reconstruct their aspirations for a different possible future, towards the

end of their three-year degree. We conclude by noting that work placements and the confidence gained through their studies enabled our participants to construct professional future selves and identities that would otherwise have been unthinkable.

Possible selves and cultural capital

To examine how university students construct and develop their identities and aspirations, we draw on the theory of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) as well as the sociological concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Originating from psychology, the theory possible selves was first used to examine the significance of the 'pedagogical self', which involves students re/imagining their identities as they negotiate the lived experiences associated with inequalities arising from race, ethnicity and racism (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2017). Markus and Nurius (1986, p. 954) define possible selves from a psychological perspective as follows:

> An individual is free to create any variety of possible selves, yet the pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual's particular sociocultural and historical context and from the models, images, and symbols provided by the media and by the individual's immediate social experiences. Possible selves thus have the potential to reveal the inventive and constructive nature of the self but they also reflect the extent to which the self is socially determined and constrained.

The idea of possible selves refers to 'what [people] might become, what they would like to become, and what they are

afraid of becoming' (Markus & Nurius 1986, p. 954). It can be viewed as theoretical approach to capturing and theorising individual potential and any associated ambivalence and contradiction related to 'becoming' or to formulating and achieving an aspiration.

Drawing on the work of Markus and Nurius (1986), Harrison (2018) has developed this theory to draw in sociological understandings of how the influence of social and cultural contexts can shape and re/configure the self. Harrison (2018, p. 209) contends that:

> The sociocultural context thus provides an initial starting point of what sort of selves are known about within the family and/or community, and therefore viewed as possible in the broadest sense— e.g., 'me as a solicitor' or 'me as a parent'. It also normatively shapes the individual's values about what selves are to be considered appropriate or attractive through a stream of 'social communiques' (Nurius 1991, p. 246) that are strongly influenced by class, gender, and ethnicity. Our sociocultural context also has an influential role in determining the types of personal experiences to which we are exposed—where we go, who we meet, and what we see within the physical spaces that we inhabit.

The concept is focused on re/configuring self-identity, especially on self-efficacy and locus of control, but does not really account for unknown barriers and structural barriers (rather, just perceptions of these barriers, such as gender, social class and ethnicity, but these are not necessarily viewed as such by the individuals concerned). Looking through a sociological lens, the ideas informing possible selves set out a useful approach to enable theorisation of how context determines experience and interactions. The self-

perceptions individuals hold, as they exist in the social world, can be scrutinised and problematised. Where an individual reconfigures any normative values they hold, they will have reconfigured their future possible self. The theory acknowledges that 'young people in different social groups will have very different views of what selves are possible for them, which are desirable, and which are probable' (Harrison, 2018, p. 208).

We draw on the concept of possible selves to theorise our participants' evolving career aspirations. We acknowledge what they imagined as feasible and infeasible can changes, especially from the final term of undergraduate studies and their first year after graduation.

In addition, we draw on Bourdieu's (1977, p. 187) theoretical concept of cultural capital, which is 'the exchange-value that accumulated forms of culture have within the social world'. In other words, it is legitimated knowledge (and goods) within a culture/society. Cultural capital can appear in three forms: the 'embodied state', that is, 'in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and the body' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243), such as language, accent and ways of walking (Bourdieu, 1990); the 'objectified state', that is, cultural (material) goods or property such as art and paintings; and the 'institutionalised state', such as educational qualifications, where the possession of capital is formally recognised and acknowledged. For example, in contemporary Western society, legitimate cultural capital may include knowledge of

da Vinci, Shakespeare or Mozart as such expertise may be acknowledged by (members of) mainstream society as valuable and respected forms of knowledge. Likewise, knowledge not legitimated or reified by mainstream society is, in a sense, 'worthless' within that social boundary (Carter, 2003). It is also important to note, however, that cultural capital is neither set in stone nor universally accepted as a concept, either within or across fields (Webb et al., 2002; Lareau & Weininger, 2003).

Cultural capital is acquired via a lengthy process of inculcation within the family group and to a lesser degree via participation in social institutions, for example, in schools and universities (Bourdieu, 1993). As such, success at school (academic, social and cultural) can be attributed to some extent to the 'amount and type of cultural capital inherited from the family milieu' (Reay, David & Ball, 2005, p. 19). This internalised code of cultural capital operates to offer individuals understanding of and 'appreciation for or competence in deciphering cultural relations and cultural artefacts' (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 7). Drawing on Bourdieu's (1977) concept of 'capital' enabled us to understand social class 'culture as a resource' (Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 567) and viewed as a form of knowledge that can be passed down through family generations.

Bourdieu argues that cultural capital is accrued and performed along class lines and thus is distributed unequally within and across social class groups and fractions;

consequently, it offers a way to account for 'the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from differing social classes' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). Bank, Delamont and Marshall (2007, p. 3) argue that cultural capital highlights 'the power dimensions of cultural practices, dispositions, and resources in market societies' and therefore is a useful tool to enable understanding of complex class fractions. This concept enabled us to better understand our participants' acquisition of cultural capital and their resultant choices, and their ability to reimagine their future possible selves, on the basis of their possession, or not, of particular forms of cultural capital (Henderson et al., 2019).

The study

This paper draws on research examining the career readiness of undergraduate students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. By ''non-traditional'' we mean first-generation university students, those from low-income households, those from minority ethnic/racial backgrounds, mature students (age 21 or over on university entry), and/or students with a declared disability.

We selected a post-1992 university located in Greater London to recruit participants. The university is committed to widening participation and attracting and supporting 'non-traditional' students. The university has gained a good reputation amongst British Asian students – evidenced through their high demographic representation in the

institution, which has over 70 per cent black, minority ethnic (BME) students. The university's positive reputation is also generated through informal/community networks/word of mouth - for the structural and institutional support it provides to 'non-traditional' students (Fuller et al, 2011).

We carried out 18 semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes to one hour each, with six British Asian female students over 12 months. The sample was purposefully constructed to comprise of 'non-traditional' students studying a BA Education degree, and other variables including gender and ethnicity, to achieve a varied sample. Participants were self-selecting as the research study information was circulated to them through their programme leader. If they met the criteria they were able to come forward to participate. At the end of the interviews, participants were invited to provide their own pseudonyms and all of them took us up on this offer during the first interview.

We took a three-stage approach to data collection to gain a longitudinal understanding of if and how participants' constructions of their future possible selves changed over time and also to achieve data triangulation (Denzin, 2006). As Patton (2002) notes it is through the use of multiple data sources that we develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena. First, we held face-to-face interviews with each participant between March-April 2018. Second, we emailed participants a short interim list of open-ended questions that

constituted an email interview. These were sent and received during November 2018 and yielded generally rich, descriptive data. We then carried out a third interview, face-to-face, in May 2019. Participants were keen to share the depth and breadth of their studying and career experiences throughout the three phases of data collection. At the time of the first interview, the students had just completed the final year of their BA Education degree. The second interview took place six months after graduation and the final interview took place 12 months after graduation.

Insert table 1 here

To recruit participants, we sent out emails to the BA Education course leader to request they share details of the study with their students. The email explained the criteria for participation, which included 'non-traditional' students (mature, minority ethnic and first in the family). From our initial recruitment email, twelve students came forward, but only six matched our purposive sampling criteria to recruit British Asian females who self-identified as coming from working-class family backgrounds. In this paper, our focus is on six British Asian females from working-class backgrounds, based on parental occupation as represented in the Great British Class Survey (2011).

We want to briefly acknowledge the complexity of constructing social class background for our sample. All of our participants came from working class families based on parental occupations as suggested in the model of social class

developed by Savage et al (2013). However, there were some difficulties in the participants' cultural interpretations of their family's class position, as illustrated through our first interview with Noor. During the first interview, we asked each participant to self-identify their class background, but Noor struggled to do this, explaining:

> In terms of social class, I often discuss that with my parents, and my mum often says that we are somewhere in the middle-class, but that's not the kind of middle-class you associate with people of Britain. Over here, middle-class is completely different, the concept is completely different, but for me I think I sit within the middle-class spectrum kind of area (Noor, interview one).

Noor's mother is a housewife and her father is a bus driver. Whilst Noor places herself somewhere in the middle class, based on our measure of parental occupation, we have placed her within the working class. We acknowledge that this difference in positioning is problematic, something Noor herself acknowledged when reflecting on culturally different interpretations of what constitutes social class and privilege in the context of British society. These different constructions of social class derived from cultural understandings of occupational status, highlight the tensions and slippages that exist in perceptions of what constitutes class in the UK (Savage,)

The research complies with the ethical protocols set out by the British Education Research Association (BERA) (2018) revised ethical guidelines. We obtained institutional ethical approval prior to commencing data collection. In the process

of our fieldwork, participants were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity through removing any identifying features from the data. We protected the rights of participants; they were advised they could withdraw at any time and/or not answer questions throughout the research process. We also offered each participant the opportunity to read and review their transcripts and our subsequent data interpretations.

The data analysis process is thematic (Corbin and Strauss, 2014) and informed by a social constructionist perspective, which understands social phenomena as socially constructed and discursively produced (Burr, 2003). To organise the data we used the qualitative software NVivo. A provisional coding framework was established after the authors independently coded the interview transcripts by relevant themes, which was then discussed and compared, with any differences on the application of codes debated until a consensus was reached. While some original language from the transcripts was maintained, data in the coding framework were then summarised by key points in a process comparable to a 'funnel', where concepts became more abstract. Here, we moved 'back and forth' between the data and analyses in an iterative process through which the dimensions of concepts and themes were refined or expanded through the comparison of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Below, we discuss the key themes we identified through the conceptual lens of future possible selves as well as cultural capital.

The supportive family

The first theme relates to the influence of family socio-economic background and ethnicity to understand these influences on our participants' aspirations to participate in higher education. We wanted to understand if and how our participants' families had supported their aspirations to study and to understand any motivations for these aspirations. Our participants shared several examples of family aspirations that had influenced their desire to study:

> My mum is a housewife but she wanted me to go ahead and do my degree and have a good life. So whenever I talk to her she always made it clear that; "I want you to study, and I didn't have that opportunity, but ... if you have that sort of ambition, and you have support from your husband, I would like you to go ahead and do your degree" (Bushra, interview one).

> I had my grades, and they were really good, they were better than what I expected, so my dad encouraged me, he said, "Maybe you should look for an institution that is ranked high on the league table." And I was like, "Okay, why not?" (Noor, interview three).

> I think it's really made me want to do something like, get a high achieving job. So not just working at a retailer shop, we want to progress my career. And I've got support from my family for doing that as well. (Mariyah, interview one).

Consistent with recent research (Ahmad, 2001; Ijaz & Abbas, 2010; Khattab & Modood, 2018), our British Asian working-class female students recognised the support of their families, including both immediate and extended members, who have encouraged their decisions and choices. Our participants'

families provide practical and emotional support, for university study and subsequent graduate employment. Parents were reported as ambitious for their children's futures, particularly mothers, who wanted their daughters to achieve more than their own status as housewives. Indeed, an interesting finding from our study was the support our participants received from their fathers and/or husbands, as in the example of Noor and Bushra. These examples challenge the gender stereotype about the sorts of culturally acceptable pathways that are typically open to British Asian females and suggests that family support is diverse and broad.

The family aspirations and socio-cultural resources, or what Bourdieu (1986) refers to as cultural capital, encouraged participants to aspire and work towards upward intergenerational social mobility through gaining an undergraduate degree and graduate employment. When reflecting on her aspirations to study for a degree Casey (interview one) commented that:

> as I've got older, and I've got children, as well, I've realised how important education is, and also, it was really to sort of climb the social mobility ladder, really.

Through her marriage and becoming a mother Casey was encouraged and motivated to study. Over the course of her degree her horizons, along with the rest of the cohort, were broadened further, notably through placement opportunities.

Placements: broadening future possible selves

Placements were cited as a transformative experience for our participants. When asked to reflect on their experiences and aspirations over the course of their degree, especially the degree programme, the placement module was singled out to be one of the most important features. In response to the question, how do you think the programme of study prepared you for your career?, participants discussed the importance of having first-hand work experience to broaden their career aspirations and to help them build valuable cultural capital relevant to their future career pathways (Bourdieu, 1984).

For instance, Mariyah explained that 'the placement module, I think that was really good in preparing us for our future careers'. For Bushra (interview one) the placements had contributed to her understanding of teaching. She told us that:

> After having my first placement in Key Stage 1i… I realised I can work with Key Stage 1, but I may be better off with Key Stage 2ii. Then I started my second placement with Key Stage 2. I thought that Key Stage 2 is better than Key Stage 1, for me as a teacher. I had that decision-making process. I've been through that process, but that course really helped me to move along. To see where I am as a teacher.

Regina similarly explained that she had work placements across different phases of education, which provided her with insights into her own abilities and preferences in terms of the age of stage of children she wanted to work with. She explained that:

> The practical element was really important because I did my placements in a primary school, a nursery, and a secondary school. And of those, my favourite was the primary. But yeah, that was really helpful in deciding that I did not want to work in the secondary school. And I'm not too sure about the nursery; I don't think it's for me (Regina, interview three).

As a result of her placements, Regina was able to refine her possible future self. Likewise, Zara (interview one) discussed how the yearly placement has informed her career pathway, particularly her third year which led her to undergo postgraduate training (PGCE):

> The placements … I did led directly to the career path I have chosen because ... [it] is the school I'm training with now. So that was an opportunity for me to build a rapport with the school and get to know the Head and get to know the staff and the routine of the school and whether I agree with the school ethos and want to train, then work there in the future.

The inclusion of work experience as part of a degree is a growing trend across the social sciences, particularly in education, where students spend time in educational establishments (typically in schools, but increasing also museums, learning centres and as youth workers) to develop their experience in a range of professional settings. Providing students with yearly placements is a useful way for students to accrue cultural capital by developing their understanding of, and competence in, deciphering reified forms of cultural knowledge (through literature, language and the arts) (Bourdieu, 1984, 1993).

For our British Asian participants, the work placements have provided them with the space to experience employment, often for the first time, and to understand the forms of work they would most enjoy in the future. The placement module opened up possibilities to apply for jobs that demanded prior experience, which would otherwise be difficult to obtain if placement was not a part of the degree. Furthermore, the placement module, we argue, was important to help participants reimagine their possible future selves in roles they had not previously considered (Harrison, 2018). By spending time in different educational cultural and social contexts, our participants were able to envisage a possible self through engaging in 'personal experience that shapes assessments of desirability and probability, as well as providing some of the positive experiences of being that self' (Harrison, 2018, p. 209). Building and developing their existing cultural capital was also a feature of the process of reimagining their future selves (Reay, Ball & David, 2005). Through developing cultural knowledge of education in a range of professional contexts, participants were able to gain confidence in their professional knowledge, skills and abilities, which is now discussed.

The degree programme: Confidence building

The final key theme discussed in this paper relates to the role of the degree programme itself to strengthen students' self-confidence. Four of the participants had not planned to be

teachers at the start of their programme, rather, they were considering working as teaching assistants. Two participants wanted to teach but had no sense of the workload involved and did not feel they had the confidence required. Throughout the course of their studies, all six participants felt they had developed 'confidence' through their undergraduate studies and this was a key ingredient in propelling their career aspirations and plans. Low levels of confidence amongst 'non-traditional' students is a theme in the existing literature. Connor et al. (2001) highlighted that 'students from lower social class groups appeared to have lower levels of confidence about their ability to succeed in higher education than those from higher social class backgrounds' (cited in Henderson et al., 2019, p. 3); our data concur with Connor et al's finding.

During interview one, students were asked about the features of their studies that had helped them develop their career aspirations. They all talked about the importance of building confidence through their studies, as illustrated by Bushra who explained that 'I feel more confident with my knowledge now. The way they have enhanced my knowledge, and shaped my perspective for a future career, I think played a very important role. My course is very important.' Regina similarly noted that her placement experience 'give you that confidence.' All of our students are first in their families to complete a degree programme of study. Whilst their parents were supportive, they arguably do not possess the insider knowledge and associated concerted cultivation (Lareau,

2004) necessary to understand the expectations of participating in higher education. Therefore, a lack of confidence could have been a barrier resulting in them holding back on their aspirations for future careers (i.e., 'not for me'). Building confidence was identified as a key ingredient to their future career potential. Our participants noted that confidence was developed through work placements, group work and engaging with and succeeding in course assessments.

A good example of the development of confidence is apparent in Casey's changing perceptions of her confidence levels. Through the three interviews, we developed a sense of how her confidence was building throughout her studies and into her first year of working in a school as a teaching assistant:

> I actually feel more confident, as well… now I feel like I can just go out there and sell myself (Casey, interview one).

> My studies have provided me with the confidence to follow my goal as a teacher. I feel my new position at work has bought me closer to my chosen career. I plan to enrol onto [a] teacher training next year, which is being offered to me by my current employer (Casey, interview two).

> I think, doing this degree, especially the work placements that I did actually helped me move on. [...] I kind of felt that the experience I've gained through the work placements, made me feel, "Actually, I can do this. I can move on and maybe try a different role in a different setting." So yeah it was a confidence building thing (Casey, interview three).

Through building confidence, Casey explained she now felt ready to 'take the plunge and become a teacher', a career

pathway that had felt like a distant aspiration at the start of her degree. Through her placements she gained valuable practical experience, and this was supported by the theoretical knowledge from the programme. She commented that now she had reached the end of her degree she had gained 'knowledge about schools and I think also some of the modules like child psychology modules and sociology, really opened my mind as well. So, that's why I feel that I want to get involved in teaching'. We concur with Lareau and Weininger (2003, p. 598) that 'academic skills should not be excluded from the purview of cultural capital research. Academic skills are, instead, part of what we should be conceiving of as cultural capital.' Thus, we argue that through her placement and undergraduate studies, Casey was able to develop her 'micro-interactional processes whereby individuals' strategic use of knowledge, skills, and competence comes into contact with institutionalized standards of evaluation' (Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 569). Through the process of gaining knowledge, skills and competence, comes the acquisition of cultural capital that can be deployed.

The combination of engaging in an undergraduate programme with yearly placements and the family support for education they received, our students were able to aspire to future possible selves that represented relative occupational social mobility when compared with the jobs carried out by their parents.

Conclusion

In this paper we have drawn on longitudinal interview data to examine the experiences of six first-generation British Asian women from working-class families undertaking an undergraduate degree in Education. We have examined the support provided by their families, undergraduate programme and institutions to investigate any reconfiguring of their future possible selves that they perceived occurred during the course of their studies.

Our data lead us to argue that participating in work placements, which in turn built our participants' confidence, and was coupled with the family support and cultural capital they benefited from, enabled these 'non-traditional' students to engage in higher education. They all graduated, and through their undergraduate studies, were able to reconfigure professional future selves and identities that would otherwise be unthinkable. Our data aligns with existing research on British Asian women that suggests a university degree is considered a desirable achievement by these students as well as their parents (Khattab & Modood, 2018) and husbands. Informing this aspiration, is a desire for self-improvement, which we suggest is further evidence to show that aspirations for upward social mobility and education is supported by the family. However, we also note that our focus on education studies does fall into a gender stereotype as very few males study this subject area.

Whilst the acquisition and deployment of cultural capital are most prominent among privileged social groups, such as those who are white, middle-class and especially male, our students, as working-class females from minority ethnic backgrounds, also demonstrated their access to family resources that can support aspirations for upward social mobility (Basit, 2013). The question, however, is the extent to which these forms of family cultural capital are sufficient for these aspirations to be realised. From the perspectives of widening participation, the barriers to access is clearly not just about raising aspirations, but to ensure barriers to higher education does not make it more difficult for students to engage (DfE, 2017).

We also identified the importance of work placements to broaden students' horizons - the placement module offered unique access, with support, for 'non-traditional' students to gain valuable experience to strengthen their CV/portfolio - akin to concerted cultivation of the middle-class (Lareau, 2004). The placement module has functioned to facilitate and support our 'non-traditional' students, through the structures of the degree, which has the potential to equalise opportunities and outcomes for students from different starting points. Here, the placement modules appear to have provided students with additional knowledge and experience, or cultural capital, which can inform their evolving identities of possible futures. In other words, the design of the degree programme can actively support and broaden educational and career aspirations, especially those students from 'non-

traditional' backgrounds. The influence of degree programme and associated modules on students' aspirations are not always the priority of educational research or policy, so the apparent importance of the placement module for our students is an important finding from our small study. This finding highlights the different but equally important roles that various aspects of the university experience can have for students. We agree with Thompson (2017, p. 143), who argues that 'even a relatively short period of structured placement can be of significant benefit to students and provide them with an opportunity to assess their career direction and gain valuable experience'.

The final theme examined was the importance of confidence building for our participants. We suggest that future possible selves are only achievable if students feel confident to reimagine themselves as something quite different from their existing sphere of experience. This leap of imagination requires structural support for 'non-traditional' students navigating the higher education terrain. Through building confidence, our participants developed cultural capital that has enabled them all to proceed into further study or professional, middle-class occupations, which has the potential to be a social mobility success story.

Our findings point to the importance of not only theoretical and academic input from university degree courses, but the need for extensive work experience. The findings show that this group of British Asian participants all benefited from

placements as these experiences developed their confidence in themselves. These experiences shaped their conceptions of their possible future selves, which were reconfigured to include careers that they had not previously considered (Harrison, 2018). Our data lead us to recommend that undergraduate courses should consider embedding work placements in each year of study, as the experiences these opportunities afford are of particular value to 'non-traditional' students. Reflecting back, our participants felt better equipped to navigate and understand the range of professional careers available to them through their yearly placements. We also suggest that widespread inclusion of yearly placements can help build 'non-traditional' students' confidence, which again is an important aspect of these students entering the job market feeling equipped and prepared to compete and work with their middle-class, more socio-economically privileged peers.

In sum, for the young women we interviewed from British Asian families, where gendered expectations for the future are a feature of their lived experience, we found that the university can provide transformative spaces to enable a reimagined and reconfigured possible future selves.

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[i] Key Stage 1 in England typically refers to children aged between 5 and 7.
[ii] Key Stage 2 in England typically refers to children aged between 7 and 11.

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