


Please cite the Published Version

Davey, Katherine  (2024) Striving to be super: the contradictions of academic success in high-achieving, working-class girls' pathways to high-tariff universities. *British Journal of Educational Studies*. ISSN 0007-1005

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2024.2421206>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

Version: Published Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/636384/>

Usage rights:  [Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Additional Information: This is an open access article which first appeared in *British Journal of Educational Studies*

Enquiries:

If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)



Striving to Be Super: The Contradictions of Academic Success in High-Achieving, Working-Class Girls' Pathways to High-Tariff Universities

Katherine Davey

To cite this article: Katherine Davey (31 Oct 2024): Striving to Be Super: The Contradictions of Academic Success in High-Achieving, Working-Class Girls' Pathways to High-Tariff Universities, British Journal of Educational Studies, DOI: [10.1080/00071005.2024.2421206](https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2024.2421206)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2024.2421206>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 31 Oct 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Striving to Be Super: The Contradictions of Academic Success in High-Achieving, Working-Class Girls' Pathways to High-Tariff Universities

By KATHERINE DAVEY , School of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT: Although higher education is positioned as a site of opportunity for young women in the UK, not all female applicants experience straightforward pathways into this arena. This paper focuses on a group of 16 high-achieving girls from working-class backgrounds who are striving for academic success, in the form of top grades and places at high-tariff UK universities. Against the backdrop of neoliberalism and postfeminism, the stereotype of an academic 'supergirl' incites these young women to construct their pathways to high-tariff universities individualistically and to invest in aspirational futures beyond where they grew up. However, this stereotype also places a heavy burden on them, as young women from working-class backgrounds, to take responsibility for their own outcomes. Using Margaret Archer's concept of 'autonomous reflexivity' to analyse the research findings, the paper shows how the girls find themselves pincered between the powerfully enabling and constraining effects of their social class alongside their academic success. It highlights complexities and contradictions of striving to be a high-achieving, working-class girl that are not currently well understood within the research literature or widening access and participation agenda.

Keywords: working-class girls, higher education, neoliberalism, postfeminism, reflexivity, academic success

1. INTRODUCTION

In the UK, opportunities available to girls have broadened considerably in the years since Sharpe (1976) and Gaskell (1992) were writing about the conventional roles of women who work only until they marry. With lives that have become visibly 'de-traditionalised' (McRobbie, 2000, p. 201), young women in particular have been construed as key beneficiaries of social and economic change (Baker, 2010; Crofts and Coffey, 2017). Encouraged to invest in

This article is derived from Katherine Davey EdD thesis.

ISSN 0007-1005 (print)/ISSN 1467-8527 (online)

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2024.2421206>

<http://www.tandfonline.com>

themselves and their own aspirations through the education system and professional careers (Ikonen, 2020; McRobbie, 2007), expansion of the higher education (HE) sector has framed it as a site of opportunity for prospective female applicants (Allen, 2016). The HE sector offers an array of settings and courses to meet their 'diverse needs and interests' (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016, p. 7) and has become an important arena for assertions about female 'success' and 'unconstrained freedom' (Allen and Finn, 2023, p. 3).

Young women in England are more likely than their male counterparts to enter HE, with the gap between them standing at around 10% points in favour of girls over the past decade (UCAS, 2023). Female students are also more likely to stay on their courses and gain 'good' degree outcomes (Bolton and Lewis, 2023). Furthermore, it is through young women's HE participation that they are understood to be maximising their earlier academic achievements in school, where girls outperform boys in every subject at the age of 7 (Cavaglia *et al.*, 2020) and across all headline measures in their GCSE exams (DfE, 2024). While not all young women are surpassing the achievements of their male counterparts, the gender gap in education means that female achievement is often framed in comparison to male underachievement. This framing reinforces the notion of young women's seemingly straightforward 'success' and positions them as 'subjects of capacity' (Scharff, 2016, p. 217) who embody neoliberal values of ambition, individual fulfilment and self-sufficiency (Allen and Finn, 2023; Francis and Skelton, 2005). This positioning also provides a fertile ground for the postfeminist narrative that girls can 'do, be and have' anything they want in a world where sexism no longer exists to slow them down (Pomerantz and Raby, 2017, p. 13).

Yet the characterisation of young women as 'active and aspirational' subjects of success in the education system (McRobbie, 2007), leaves little space to consider how their experiences are located within the parameters of long-standing social structures. As Gill and Scharff assert, framed around a 'current of individualism', the narrative of girls' success has almost 'entirely replaced [...] any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves' (Gill and Scharff, 2011, p. 7). On the surface, therefore, the girls¹ on whom the research in this paper is based make 'being smart appear attainable without struggle' (Pomerantz and Raby, 2011, p. 550). With a history of high attainment in school, strong predicted grades and plans to attend high-tariff universities,² they appear to live up to the ideal of the 'academically and future focussed' supergirl, who can 'do it all' and 'do it well' (Pomerantz and Raby, 2017, p. 28). Yet, as this paper illustrates, the girls are adopting the neoliberal and postfeminist discourses of female success as young women from working-class backgrounds, whose experiences differ significantly from those of their middle-class peers.

Working-class relations to education have a troubled history, marked by long-standing patterns of marginalisation and limited access to opportunities.

Frequently viewed through a lens of deficiency, working-class students' struggles are framed as personal failings rather than as a reflection of structural inequalities or cultural and institutional biases that privilege middle-class norms (Reay, 2001a). Working-class women in particular occupy a specific position in the pathologisation of the working-class that is associated with others finding them 'wanting and undesirable' but also mark desires for something different as 'pretentious' (Skeggs, 1997, pp. 162–3). Consequently, striving for educational success may disrupt a coherent sense of 'authenticity' for working-class young women as they negotiate a delicate balance between the shame of 'getting out and getting away' and the shame involved in belonging to both a social class and gender that are perceived as 'less' (Lawler, 1999). The complexity of the classed contradictions experienced by high-achieving, working-class girls as they strive to be academically successful and apply to high-tariff universities is, therefore, of central importance in this paper.

Against the backdrop of neoliberalism and postfeminism, the paper begins by problematising the stereotype of girls' trouble-free success, particularly for working-class young women. The paper then considers some of the challenges working-class students encounter in the realm of HE. The theoretical framework underpinning the research is presented in the subsequent section, introducing Margaret Archer's concept of reflexivity (2003, 2007). The paper then sets out the research's methodological design, before drawing on Archer's (2007) notion of 'autonomous reflexivity' as a lens through which to explain how the girls construct their pathways to high-tariff universities in relation to situations that they are also in constant tension with. The paper concludes by outlining the significant personal responsibility the girls take on in pursuit of their university goals and highlights the implications this has for the current agenda to widen access and participation in HE.

2. THE 'IDEAL' FEMALE PUPIL

Construed elsewhere as 'successful girls' (Ringrose, 2007), 'top girls' (McRobbie, 2007) and 'smart girls' (Pomerantz and Raby, 2017), high-achieving young women are frequently presented as central figures in the 'neoliberal dream of upward social mobility' (Allen, 2016, p. 807). With its focus on individualism, neoliberalism promotes the idea that personal success and economic and social advancement are achieved through individual effort, merit and competition. High-achieving young women are seen as using their academic success in school to invest in university and graduate careers for their own 'self-betterment' and appear to be paving their ways to bright and ambitious futures (Archer and Hutchings, 2000).

Positioning young women as agents of their own success, postfeminist echoes the neoliberal emphasis on self-responsibility. Described by McRobbie (2004) as the 'undoing' of feminism, postfeminism proposes that, liberated from the success of feminism, girls today are living in an

era where gender no longer matters. With no room for gender inequality, the logic of post-feminism is that girls have access to unlimited success and are responsible for their own futures. However, living up to the 'supergirl' stereotype that postfeminism entails places multiple pressures on high-achieving young women to continually demonstrate 'high expectations and acute self-responsibility' (Baker, 2010, p. 3) as well as endless work on a 'perfect' self (McRobbie, 2015). These pressures can have adverse effects on girls' well-being and mental health (Brinkman *et al.*, 2022; Renold and Allan, 2006; Stentiford *et al.*, 2023). Likewise, 'academic success' does not always sit easily with 'social success' and may trouble relationships with peers and teachers and lead some girls to consciously contain their high achievement (Raby and Pomerantz, 2015; Reay, 2001b; Renold and Allan, 2006). Consequently, the 'pride' girls feel in their educational accomplishments, may operate alongside feelings of 'anxiety, separation and rejection' (Skelton *et al.*, 2010, p. 189).

Gender is not, however, a stand-alone category. Framed through the lens of social class, working-class girls have struggled to gain 'respectability' in the field of education (Skeggs, 1997) and been labelled as 'problematic' in school (Reay, 2001b). This labelling locates them in opposition to the normative positioning of 'girl' with its emphasis on stereotypically feminine attributes like 'niceness' and 'emotionality' (Francis *et al.*, 2017; Reay, 2001b). For all girls, such behaviours may result in pupils drawing attention away from themselves or not seeking help in class, but for working-class girls the consequences of having their needs overlooked in school is particularly limiting since their missed learning cannot easily be compensated for at home (Fisher, 2019). The experiences of many working-class girls do not, therefore, align with the seemingly straightforward 'success' of young women in the education system that positions them as 'ideal learners' and 'ideal neoliberal subjects' in public, policy and media discourses (Scharff, 2016). Working-class girls are, instead, construed as an 'allegedly powerless "other"' in opposition to the ideal neoliberal subject who is predominantly 'middle-class' and for whom educational success is already assumed (Scharff, 2016, p. 218).

Consequently, young women who 'step out' into the HE arena and make themselves available as the subjects of social mobility are arguably investing in a rhetoric that to succeed in life 'becoming middle class should be an aspiration' (Allen, 2014, p. 761; McRobbie, 2007). In contrast, to 'remain working-class, materially or culturally, is to have failed' (Boliver, 2017, p. 425). University is not, therefore, presented only as a site of opportunity for working-class young women, it also appears to offer them the possibility of undergoing a 'positive' and 'worthwhile' change (Archer and Leathwood, 2003). The meritocratic promise embedded in HE is that working-class young people can realise their aspirations to 'move on up' through hard work and determination (Reay, 2021).

3. SOCIAL CLASS AND HE

It might be tempting to believe that the high-achieving, working-class girls in this paper are the deserved beneficiaries of meritocracy. Reay, however, describes meritocracy as ‘the educational equivalent of the emperor with no clothes, all ideological bluff with no substance’ (2017, p. 123). Built on the neoliberal notion that education is a private and individual good, meritocracy misrecognises privilege for ability and legitimises the social exclusion of many working-class students from HE. It is no surprise, therefore, that while all students experience some anxiety in going to university (Penn-Edwards and Donnison, 2011), these feelings are heightened for those from working-class backgrounds (Perez-Adamson and Mercer, 2016). These feelings are not attributable to deficits in the working-class students themselves but originate in the dominance of middle- and upper-class practices and perceptions in relation to HE that ‘underlying meritocratic sentiments’ make invisible (Reay, 2021). Whilst the most advantaged students ‘benefit from the intrinsic and positional benefits of going to a “good” university’ (Leathwood, 2004, p. 38), these benefits come at a high economic, social and personal cost for their working-class counterparts (Archer and Hutchings, 2000). For instance, even as working-class students become more equal in relation to the grades and university places attained by their middle-class peers, this may be at the cost of those whom working-class students love and care for becoming less equal in relation to them (Reay, 2017). While working-class young people who decide to engage with HE may recognise its potential employment and economic benefits, this is balanced with an obligation to hold onto a sense of ‘self’ that is deeply rooted in their social background.

Yet applicants to high-tariff universities, such as the girls in this paper, are likely to have a history of academic achievement in school already accompanied by significant risk and cost to their social identities. In applying to selective institutions, they may see high-tariff universities as an opportunity to ‘fit in as learners despite their class differences’ (Reay *et al.*, 2009, p. 1115) or even search for spaces where they fit in as learners ‘because of’ them (Davey, 2024). By not ‘capitulating to the dominant norm’ these working-class students challenge the ‘middle-class hegemony’ of the universities they attend (Crozier *et al.*, 2019, p. 934). As Reay (2021) argues, the ‘locus for change’ that has traditionally fallen on working-class students needs to be turned onto the culture and ethos of HE and, in particular, onto high-tariff universities. To achieve this shift, it is vital to address complexities that are currently underexplored in the research literature, including how female working-class applicants simultaneously contend with the ‘supergirl’ narrative in pursuit of their university goals.

4. THE REFLEXIVE IMPERATIVE

To explain how the working-class girls in this paper mediate the structural and cultural contexts they encounter in their pathways to high-tariff universities, the following sections draw on Margaret Archer's understanding of the concept of 'reflexivity' (2003, 2007). As a predominantly mental activity, reflexivity 'finds its home' in the 'internal conversation' which most people engage with silently and from a young age (Archer, 2007, 2010). This self-talk allows individuals to reflect on themselves in relation to their objective circumstances and vice versa. While reflection is 'the action of a subject towards an object', reflexivity thus involves some 'thought upon the self' and takes the form of '*subject-object-subject*' (Archer, 2010, p. 2). It is this crucial feature of 'the "object" under consideration being bent back in a deliberative sense upon the "subject" doing the considering that distinguishes full reflexivity from reflection (Archer, 2007, p. 2). For example, the question of 'what do I do next with this?' might become 'can I cope with this and do I really want to?' (2010, p. 2). In this way, reflexive deliberation 'consists in people evaluating their situations in light of their concerns and evaluating their projects in the light of their circumstances' (Archer, 2007, p. 34). Reflexivity can never be a completely individualised or isolated activity. It leads individuals to confront the objective circumstances in which they find themselves.

Integral to Archer's reflexivity is the premise that reflexivity is increasingly replacing routine action to shape how people live their lives. New and emerging educational, occupational and social contexts mean that individuals are encountering a 'growing number of novel situations' without pre-existing guidelines for action (Archer, 2010, p. 136). Crucially, unlike the ethos embedded in the neoliberal and postfeminist contexts described earlier, reflexivity does not mean that individuals make their own history or that people live in an unstructured society. Archer recognises how 'individuals start from differentially advantageous places, with different life chances' (2007, p. 54). However, in order to account for variability as well as regularity in the courses of action of those who are similarly situated, she argues that the process of reflexivity is 'radically heterogeneous' (Archer, 2007, p. 11). The heterogeneous nature of reflexivity is key to explaining precisely how high-achieving, working-class girls navigate their pathways through education.

Since the girls are cultivating academic plans that set them apart from their families and similarly situated peers, they are presented in this paper through the lens of 'autonomous reflexivity' (Archer, 2003, 2007). Those who exercise this mode of reflexivity are, it is argued, likely to make self-reliant decisions based on their own judgement and on advice from resources outside their closest social networks. In doing so, they are attempting to 'climb society's "ladders" and to circumvent its "snakes"' (Archer, 2003, p. 350). Although success cannot be guaranteed, in exercising autonomous reflexivity individuals attempt to orientate themselves strategically towards 'enablements' and 'constraints' that

may facilitate or impede their goals. Archer associates autonomous reflexivity with a process of transformation and explains that it ‘makes a crucial contribution to the dynamics of social mobility’ (2003, p. 348). Importantly, autonomous reflexivity is not applied in this paper to show how working-class girls are becoming, or failing to become, more middle-class. While the girls’ individual pathways become framed by social contexts that are different from those in which they started their lives, this does not erase the enabling and constraining effects of the structures relating to social class and gender or the cultural ideas the girls encounter in the education system. Autonomous reflexivity instead offers an original analytical lens with which to observe how they deal with them, as the research in this paper explores.

5. THE RESEARCH STUDY

The research presented in this paper is informed by Archer’s proposition that a qualitative exploration of an individual’s ‘life and work histories’ can provide an understanding of how people engage in reflexive deliberation (2007, p. 98). Based on a qualitative exploration of the life and *educational* histories of 16 high-achieving, working-class girls, the research used ‘stories’ and ‘other “personal materials”’ to understand how events in the girls’ lives had been subjectively experienced (Roberts, 2002, p. 3). This approach involved each girl taking part in an activity where she was invited to draw or write a ‘life map’ of the events, people, places or other factors that had been personally significant in her educational journey, using pens and paper (Figure 1). These creations then supported individual, face-to-face elicitation interviews through which the girls shared first-person knowledge about their journeys alongside their ‘reasons for acting,’ and ‘evaluation of past choices’ (Caetano, 2015, p. 233). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The data were then analysed thematically using both an inductive approach, to delineate the girls’ circumstances and their actions and

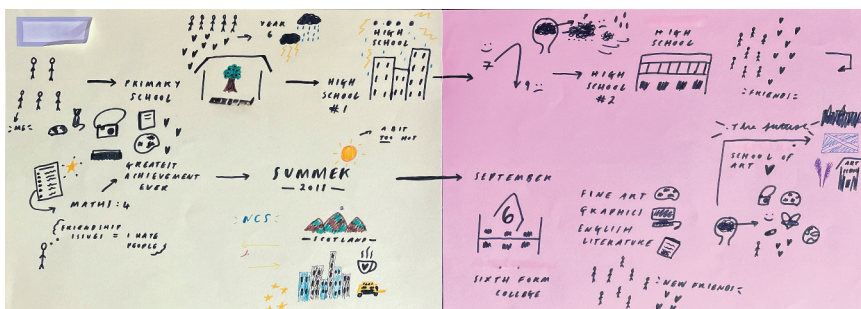


Figure 1. An anonymised example of a ‘life map’, created by one of the girls

interactions with them and a deductive approach using Archer's (2007) work to categorise how the girls were reflexively navigating their educational pathways.

Each of the 16 girls was aged between 16 and 18 years old and living in the northwest of England when the research was conducted,³ between May 2018 and September 2019. Since local context can shape outcomes for children and young people throughout their education, where the girls were living matters (Dorling, 2020). Average pupil attainment at age 16 varies across the local authorities where the girls were living but does not rank within into the two highest quintiles (DfE, 2024). Furthermore, only 13.4% of young people in the northwest of England progress to high-tariff universities, a figure that is significantly lower than the rates of progression for young people living in London (DfE, 2023). The girls attended different school sixth forms and a sixth form college.⁴ These settings were all state funded and none of the schools where the girls studied prior to the age of 16 were academically selective. There is a large 32.8% point gap in rates of progression to high-tariff universities depending on school type, with young people from state-funded settings progressing at much lower rates than those who have attended private schools (DfE, 2023). The girls' intended progression to high-tariff universities therefore stands out against broader trends both in relation to where they were living and the settings in which they were studying.

Described in the research as 'high-achieving', the girls were predicted to achieve at least grades ABB across three A-Level qualifications. These reflect the typical requirements for entry to high-tariff universities in the UK, including those in the Russell Group (2024) and Sutton Trust 30 (Montacute and Culliane, 2018) where the girls were intending to apply. The girls' predicted grades had also facilitated entry to the university and careers education programme through which the girls were invited to engage in the research. Each girl responded voluntarily to an email or post on the intranet of the social enterprise which led the programme. These invitations set out the criteria for participation in the research. Whilst the girls recognised themselves as meeting some of the criteria, staff at the social enterprise provided additional information to confirm the girls' background characteristics. This enabled the research to use: being the first generation in their immediate family to attend HE as a young participant (by age 19), receiving Free School Meals (FSM), and living in areas with low progression to HE according to the POLAR4 index⁵ (HEFCE, 2017) as proxies for 'working class'. All the girls were the first in their families to attend HE as a young participant, and most met at least one other of the proxy measures. These measures offered a 'pragmatic solution' to capturing the materiality of the girls' backgrounds (Ilie *et al.*, 2017, p. 256). Although the subset of girls identified is arguably not representative of every young woman who might identify as working class, the measures facilitated the identification of a group of working-class girls who buck established trends in HE participation for the purposes of the research. The role of social class in the lives of these girls is explored further in the sections that follow.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Autonomously deliberating individualism

As young people for whom the autonomous mode of reflexivity plays a significant role in their decision-making, the girls are presented here as independent and agentic individuals (Archer, 2003, 2007). Factors that might typically contract working-class students' aspirations of studying 'traditional subjects at traditional universities' have seemingly played a relatively small part in their decision-making (Reay *et al.*, 2005, p. 44). In neoliberal terms, their 'talent', framed as individual merit through academic credentials and sustained since their earlier years of schooling, acted as strong motivation for their progression to HE. The girls had experienced relatively smooth educational pathways to date. Although some had changed secondary schools due to family relocation, none had experienced extended periods of absence or school exclusion. The continuity in their schooling combined with their high attainment constituted significant enablements in the girls' engagement with education over time, as well as their proposed applications to HE. Recognising themselves as academically able, Becky and Rachel describe how university has always been on the horizon for high achievers like them:

I've kind of always just sort of like saw it like the natural progression of my education, I was like 'oh yeah I've done my A-levels I'm going to go to university now' because I do enjoy learning and school and I just think this is the right thing to do for me definitely. (Becky)

From Year 7 to 11 I've always been told that I'm academic and I feel like it's just, dunno, what you do [...] Like I always knew that would go. I used to want to do politics but now I don't but I knew I'd do something academic. (Rachel)

All the girls knew by at least the time they had reached sixth form that they wanted to apply to university. Yet whether their applications would be accepted by the high-tariff universities they were considering and whether they would get the grades needed to be accepted were not pre-givens. As working-class students for whom HE is 'not part of an inter-generational family history or tradition' (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016, p. 62), they have 'broken with contextual guidelines' in favour of making their own way autonomously through education (Archer, 2007, p. 201). The girls do not, therefore, take their academic futures for granted. As Haley explains, the decision to apply to a prestigious university is rarely an obvious one:

It was GCSE results day when I first thought to myself oh I could go to like Oxford or Cambridge maybe like one day but I was just sort of doing as much as I could, trying my hardest and hoping for the best.

As Haley's comments suggest, an application to a high-tariff university is something these high-achieving, working-class girls work for and hope for but it is rarely seen as an entitlement. In contrast to the greater certainty of their

middle-class peers (Maxwell and Aggleton, 2013), the girls are learning to navigate their educational pathways by monitoring their actual circumstances closely (Archer, 2007). They are aware that 'official' indicators of smartness, in the form of grades and academic subjects, offer wide degrees of freedom for their futures (Francis and Skelton, 2005). Yet the girls also know they must traverse a 'goodly quota of unforeseeable contingencies over which they have no control' to make their HE plans concrete (Archer, 2007, p. 202).

This challenge plays out for many of the girls in the tensions that exist for female students between the competing concerns of being 'academically successful' and being 'socially successful' (Raby and Pomerantz, 2015; Reay, 2001b; Renold and Allan, 2006). As their autonomous reflexivity develops, most are not reliant on 'dense and intensive' relationships with peers and often 'see little place for themselves in the social domain' (Archer, 2007, p. 227). Indeed, to elicitate their academic success, many of the girls have carved out spaces that separate them from broader social expectations and allow them to pursue their studies autonomously. This is demonstrated in Alice's account of her academic diligence:

I've always been like the one to get your head down and I've always been the one to like never miss work, always do the work. So I think I was kind of lucky in that aspect, like organised and knowing what I wanted to get done. But also, having the social side of it, I would just completely isolate myself from people.

Reflecting Archer's description of autonomous reflexivity, in an effort to minimise the uncontrollability, Alice focusses intensively on her academic studies and internalises the neoliberal drive to take ownership of her own academic success (Archer, 2007). However, although her efforts enable her to attain high grades, Alice miscalculates the power of her social isolation to disrupt her smooth trajectory through school, the very project she is trying to protect. Having failed to accommodate other people into her plans, Alice explains that she was labelled a 'teacher's pet' and struggled to make friends which took a toll on her mental health. Among the girls, it was not uncommon for stories of personal pride in their academic capabilities to be told simultaneously with feelings of loneliness and marginalisation. While interpersonal relationships came more easily to Alice as she progressed into sixth form and the students around her became more academically similar, the smooth dovetailing of the social order into her pursuit of academic success was 'hard won through painful learning and deliberative self-monitoring' (Archer, 2003, p. 169).

It is because of their autonomous reflexivity that the girls are not 'oblivious to the circumstances that threaten to jeopardise their projects' (Archer, 2007, p. 215). The neoliberal logic that success is a matter of individual choice is a source of tension and unease for some of the girls who know that few of their peers succeed academically. For Estella specifically, this becomes apparent through the 'high achievers' programme that she is part of in her school sixth form. While the programme's aim is to prepare a small group of students for

application to high-tariff universities and prestigious courses, Estella was uncomfortable taking part:

There's this thing called the [high-achievers programme] that one of my teachers set up. And I don't know how I feel about it, because it's good that I'm in it because I have lots of opportunities to do things, like go on taster days, go to talks and stuff, because that's meant to be for the like top few percent in that school. But I don't feel very good about it because like a lot of my friends didn't get to go in it.

Schemes such as this are intended to provide certain students with recognition and development of their academic credentials (Francis and Skelton, 2005). However, Estella was increasingly aware that being part of a selective scheme relies on there being others who are not. Realising that she experiences the structural powers of this selective scheme differently to those outside of it, feels unjust for Estella, who observes how this initiative simultaneously enables her own project of becoming a doctor whilst contracting the opportunities of friends who have similar career ambitions. As her statement shows, this creates contradictory conditions for the students selected for these programmes as they find the opportunities subjectively attractive but struggle to deal with the objective environment they confront in practice. In the narrative of neoliberalism, they have been taught to believe they can succeed at anything they put their minds to, and through the realities of their lives in school realise that few of them actually do. So while Estella is able to autonomously use the opportunity as a 'springboard' to doing things that she might never otherwise get to do (Archer, 2003, p. 228), this is not undertaken without significant personal confliction.

The neoliberal context in which these schemes operate means that when provided with opportunities, those who participate are expected to succeed (Reay, 2017). In other words, if an individual seizes the enablements on offer and believes enough in themselves, the implication is that they can do what they want to. Alongside their autonomous reflexivity, this context validates the girls' strong drive towards achieving their university goals and succeeding on their own terms. While they are aware of the 'differentially advantageous places' from which they start their education compared to their middle- and upper-class counterparts (Archer, 2007, p. 54), many of the girls explain how constraints were mitigated by other opportunities their backgrounds had afforded them. Several of the girls described their disadvantage in positive terms in relation to the university access schemes they took part in:

In a way I'm quite lucky that I'm poor, if that makes sense. Even though that's only like come into effect now like I'm in college and like there's more opportunities. (Gaby)

Being from a lower-income family is not a hindrance to your education because there is so many opportunities as long as you do well in school and you excel in school and you're determined to do well. (Giulianna)

Under the mirage of meritocracy, these schemes act as structural enablements that invite students to invest in the notion of individual social mobility and seem to hand them 'the fulfilment of [their] new dreams on a platter' (Archer, 2007, p. 212). This exchange means the girls assume significant personal responsibility for making the most of the university access schemes available to them. As Giulianna explains in relation to the university summer schools she attended:

This year I haven't had time to go on a summer holiday [...] every time I come back home on a Saturday and I would have on the Monday, I would have to hop off again, going to a different university for a whole week again, 'bye mum, bye dad'. It was every single week I had somewhere to go.

Through their exceptionally busy schedules, the girls capitalise on the opportunities made available to them during sixth form as they begin to make important decisions about their futures. In what can be described as a 'something for something' social model (Francis and Skelton, 2005), the girls are striving to meet the expectations set for them in programmes built specifically for them and try to translate this into their future achievement. Accepting of the 'meritocratic myth' (Reay, 2017), their experiences suggest that the girls can beat the odds to succeed, and their success is made legitimate for them by the effort and determination that has gone into it.

The 'myth' of meritocracy

In an education system founded on the principles of meritocracy, the implication for the girls of having access to apparently 'equal' opportunities is that many of them consider any setbacks or struggles in their educational trajectories to be of their own making. While Archer (2007) is clear that people can never be 'master strategists' in their interactions with constraints and enablements, under the 'myth' of meritocracy some of girls misrecognise their personal powers as agents. As Mollie explains:

I know that if I work hard then I'll do really good and then if I don't work hard then I don't.

As Mollie's statement suggests, meritocracy emphasises the role of the individual agent in their own social mobility. Yet meritocracy also instils the idea that failure is the fault of the individual who does not have enough drive to succeed. So, while they attempt to take advantage of enablements, the girls also assume responsibility for how far these take them. Meritocracy thus conceals the ways in which failure can be brought about by structural and social constraints in the education system. These constraints attach 'different

opportunity costs' to the same decisions or actions for people in different social classes (Archer, 2007, p. 18). Specifically, meritocracy draws attention away from the structural injustices that mean working-class students are typically less likely to attain high grades and university places considered to be the 'norm' for their middle-class counterparts. Consequently, low achievement among working-class students may be interpreted as 'pathological', and the causal factors of educational failure rooted solely in the individual (Reay, 2017).

Since they can only circumvent obstacles 'in so far as they are aware of them' (Archer, 2007, p. 295), the journey to university is inevitably risky and scary for high-achieving, working-class applicants. Within the narrative of meritocracy, the girls only have themselves to blame if they do not get there. It is no surprise therefore that individuals like Mollie and Amelia express deep anxieties about their potential for academic failure:

It was just the pressure I put on myself that made everything worse because like, uh I don't know, coz I did perform really well in high school and stuff and then I just thought if I don't get these really good grades, I thought, what's the point? (Mollie)

And I remember [...] the exams I thought I'd done the worst on. Like chemistry, I came out of the exam sobbing [...] the nurse had to send me home because I was absolutely inconsolable, hysterical, like I thought I'd just ruined my life. So I got sent home. (Amelia)

As these examples demonstrate, the risk of exposing their personal deficiencies places the girls under enormous pressure and engages them in a 'constant struggle of self-management and self-improvement' (Tiainen *et al.*, 2019, p. 642). This struggle sometimes affected their health or well-being, yet the girls continued to invest in the neoliberal ethos that individual success is a result of personal effort. They internalised the belief that failures were their fault and were quick to self-blame, engaging in a cycle where hard work was seen as the main means of achieving their goals.

Consequently, although Archer argues that cultural properties, such as neoliberal ideology, 'have first to be found good by a person before they can influence the projects she entertains' (Archer, 2007, p. 17), the girls' accounts show how people may also be influenced by cultural properties that they do not find good. In this instance, the girls are affectively attached to goals that may harm their well-being. Yet despite the ways in which the threat of educational failure takes an emotional toll on the girls and constrains their emotional well-being, the risk of this label becoming personal is a powerful enablement in sustaining their drive for educational success. As Becky's reasons for working, in her words, 'super hard' to achieve her GCSEs demonstrate, academic success is not just about passing her exams. In an educational system that defines young people's

futures as their individual responsibility, academic success is also about individual worth:

I kind of wanted to do well for myself just to show that I can do it and I am capable of getting good grades in these subjects. Part of it was obviously like, I don't know, a little bit of the fear of failure, I was like, I don't want to do bad so I'm going to work really hard just to make sure that doesn't happen.

The 'myth' of the meritocratic supergirl

The girls' actions to guard against failure are not only tied up with social class but are also influenced by their gender. There is a heavy burden on these female students to invest in the meritocratic 'supergirl' stereotype, which perpetuates the idea that by making the 'right' choices and working hard girls can be who they want to be (Pomerantz and Raby, 2017, p. 50). In this way, neoliberal and postfeminist views come together to position girls as 'exciting figures of assumed feminist success and neo-liberal drive' who can do so much with so much ease (Pomerantz and Raby, 2017, p. 38). Yet the 'successful girls' discourse also compels the working-class girls in this paper to always do more and do it better to stay on top (Ringrose, 2007). Consequently, only excellence will act as enough of an insurance to guard against failure. Nat, for example, berated herself for the one subject in which she received a GCSE grade lower than what she was predicted:

everybody was just like celebrating and I was there like 'uh'. And it's so frustrating because I don't know why I do this to myself but, coz I should be like, 'oh it doesn't matter, look at the 90% good stuff' but I just pick out the one thing and I can't deal with it.

Nat's reaction demonstrates the lived realities of striving to align herself with the 'supergirl' stereotype. In the girls' drive for perfection, this stereotype is both elasticating the girls' high attainment whilst contracting their ability to recognise their achievements through the 'self-surveillant, hypercritical attitudes' that the girls present in relation to their school work (Reay, 2001b, p. 158).

Yet, Nat is 'reflexively aware' of how she often misrecognises the notability of her performance (Archer, 2007). Like for many of the girls, she knows there is a gap between how she takes things to be and how they actually are. She is also beginning to think about the simultaneously constraining and enabling effects of social class and gender that surround this:

I think, probably from certain places you get that graft more, I think, like, I've always felt like I need to graft. Not even just because of class but I think because I'm a girl. And I know that, coz, I've never even felt that I've been discriminated

or anything that serious but I think sometimes when boys are annoying and cocky, especially in like classes like maths especially, because a lot of lads in that class are so smart and that's what kind of gives me the drive as well coz I'm like uh I need to get on with it, you know what I mean? Be that dark horse.

Nat's drive to be a 'dark horse', someone who unexpectedly succeeds, presents a strong metaphor for the experiences of the girls in this paper. The girls are grafting exceptionally hard to progress in an education system where girls are assumed to be thriving in their studies and professional ambitions, but where for working-class students the risk of 'failure looms large' (Reay, 2006, p. 301). As neoliberal subjects, caught in the double bind of gender and class at the same time as the girls strive for academic perfection, the girls are also trying to prove themselves worthy of their achievements. In contrast to the postfeminist image of young women 'having it all', these working-class girls find themselves pincered between the powerfully enabling and constraining effects of their personal characteristics alongside their academic success.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has shown, through the lens of autonomous reflexivity, how a group of high-achieving, working-class girls manage the neoliberal insistence on meritocracy and the postfeminist call for perfection during their pursuit of HE. The ideologies they encounter incite them to construct their pathways to university individualistically and to invest in aspirational futures beyond where they grew up. Consequently, the girls buy into the message that 'personal determination and hard work are what make for individual success' (Archer, 2007, p. 298). However, this message appears to have been beneficial to them throughout their schooling, bringing the girls into contact with opportunities that they might not have otherwise encountered and leading to exam results and predicted grades that promise to facilitate entry to high-tariff universities.

Enablers, however, rarely exist without concomitant constraints. While the girls show commitment towards their academic goals, through their autonomous reflexivity they also take on significant personal responsibility for fulfilling them (Archer, 2007). As neoliberal and postfeminist views come together to reinforce notions of 'effortlessly' successful girls, there is a heavy burden on young women to be individually successful and take responsibility for their own outcomes. However, recognising the 'differentially advantageous places' from which the working-class girls in this paper started their education compared to more affluent peers (Archer, 2007, p. 54) shows the deep class-based anxieties that overshadow these particular young women's pathways to HE. Striving to be 'super' is scary and risky for these girls who fear being exposed for what they 'lack' (Reay, 2021). The girls express strong feelings of personal guilt and self-blame when they struggle academically, experience moments of indecision or do not achieve perfect grades. This drives them to work exceptionally hard in their

studies, whilst sometimes damaging their health and well-being. Consequently, they are constructing their educational pathways in relation to situations they are also in constant tension with.

Whilst it is rare that these tensions are formally recognised within the access and participation agenda, the toll that striving to be ‘super’ can have on working-class girls is worthy of further consideration. The Office for Students, as the regulator for HE in England, plays a pivotal role in shaping the landscape of access and participation. Its regulatory priorities set out the importance of ensuring that young people have the ‘key qualifications and pre-requisite knowledge’ to enter and succeed at university (OfS, 2022) and direct HE providers to deliver activities that will ‘raise pre-16 attainment’ for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (OfS, 2023). This focus on academic success highlights the significant role that official indicators of young people’s educational attainment play in facilitating entry to HE. Certainly, qualifications and predicted grades constituted an important ‘enablement’ in the plans the girls in this paper had to attend university. However, the regulator’s emphasis on measurable academic outcomes also poses challenges. ‘Constraints’ are not easily ‘fixed’ in the lives of working-class applicants by interventions aimed solely at raising attainment. Indeed, activities that prioritise academic performance risk perpetuating the pressures that young women, in particular, experience to do well in school. While this paper does not argue against initiatives that support working-class girls in their journeys towards HE, it calls for a more expansive understanding of the tensions working-class girls may encounter as they participate in them.

8. DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

9. ORCID

Katherine Davey  <http://orcid.org/0009-0003-0340-4422>

10. NOTES

1. ‘Girl’ is a term used deliberately and affirmatively to voice the experiences of the 16 young women who contributed to the research upon which this paper is based. Girl is used dialectally to include both young and adult women in the region of England where those who took part in this research were living. They used ‘Girl’ to refer to themselves and each other during the research activities and each self-identified as ‘female’.
2. ‘High-tariff’ universities are considered to be more prestigious and harder to get into than other HE institutions (Bolton and Lewis, 2023). They demand high entry grades, typically at least a profile of ABB across three Advanced Level qualifications (or equivalent), often in traditional academic subjects. The term ‘tariff’ originates from the UK’s Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) Tariff, which

converts applicants' pre-entry qualifications and grades into numerical values or 'points' (UCAS, 2024). High-tariff universities represent the top third of universities ranked by students' tariff points on entry.

3. Ethical approval was granted by the university where the author completed this research. Informed consent was obtained from participants and data were anonymised.
4. A 'sixth form' is an educational setting for young people between the ages of 16–18 in England. A sixth form may be attached to a secondary school or operate solely as a sixth form college. Students attending a sixth form setting typically study towards advanced post-school qualifications.
5. The Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) classification demonstrates geographical variation in rates of HE participation among young people by grouping local areas of the UK into one of five quintiles. Quintile 1 represents the lowest rate of HE participation. Quintile 5 represents the highest rate of HE participation. POLAR4 is the most recent iteration of the POLAR classification.

REFERENCES

- Allen, K. (2014) Blair's children': young women as 'aspirational subjects' in the psychic landscape of class, *Sociological Review*, 62 (4), 760–779. doi: [10.1111/1467-954X.12113](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12113)
- Allen, K. (2016) Top girls navigating austere times: interrogating youth transitions since the 'crisis', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 19 (6), 805–820. doi: [10.1080/13676261.2015.1112885](https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2015.1112885)
- Allen, K. and Finn, K. (2023) GirlBossing the university side hustle: entrepreneurial femininities, postfeminism and the veneer of 'female success' in times of crisis, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 27 (3), 333–351. doi: [10.1177/13675494231177160](https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494231177160)
- Archer, L. and Hutchings, M. (2000) Bettering yourself'? Discourses of risk, cost and benefit in ethnically diverse, young working-class non-participants' constructions of higher education, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 21 (4), 555–574. doi: [10.1080/713655373](https://doi.org/10.1080/713655373)
- Archer, L. and Leathwood, C. (2003) Identities, inequalities and higher education In L. Archer, M. Hutchings, and A. Ross (Eds) *Higher Education and Social Class: Issues of Inclusion and Exclusion* (London, RoutledgeFalmer), 175–191.
- Archer, M. S. (2003) *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Archer, M. S. (2007) *Making Our Way Through the World: Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Archer, M. S. (2010) Introduction: the reflective re-turn. In M. S. Archer (Ed.) *Conversations About Reflexivity* (London, Routledge), 1–14.
- Baker, J. (2010) Great expectations and post-feminist accountability: young women living up to the 'successful girls' discourse, *Gender and Education*, 22 (1), 1–15. doi: [10.1080/09540250802612696](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250802612696)
- Bathmaker, A.-M., Ingram, N., Abrahams, J., Hoare, A., Waller, R., and Bradley, H. (2016) *Higher Education, Social Class and Social Mobility: The Degree Generation* (London, Palgrave Macmillan).

- Boliver, V. (2017) Misplaced optimism: how higher education reproduces rather than reduces social inequality, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38 (3), 423–432. doi: [10.1080/01425692.2017.1281648](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2017.1281648)
- Bolton, P. and Lewis, J. (2023) *Equality of access and outcomes in higher education in England*. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9195/CBP-9195.pdf>
- Brinkman, B. G., Brinkman, K., and Hamilton, D. (2022) *Girls' Identities and Experiences of Oppression in Schools: Resilience, Resistance, and Transformation* (London, Routledge).
- Caetano, A. (2015) Personal reflexivity and biography: methodological challenges and strategies, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 18 (2), 227–216. doi: [10.1080/13645579.2014.885154](https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2014.885154)
- Cavaglia, C., Machin, S., McNally, S., and Ruiz-Valenzuela, J. (2020) Gender, achievement, and subject choice in English education, *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 36 (4), 816–835. doi: [10.1093/oxrep/graa050](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/graa050)
- Crofts, J. and Coffey, J. (2017) Young women's negotiations of gender, the body and the labour market in a post-feminist context, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26 (5), 502–516. doi: [10.1080/09589236.2015.1130610](https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2015.1130610)
- Crozier, G., Reay, D., and Clayton, J. (2019) Working the borderlands: working-class students constructing hybrid identities and asserting their place in higher education, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 40 (7), 922–937. doi: [10.1080/01425692.2019.1623013](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2019.1623013)
- Davey, K. (2024) Bucking the trend: high-achieving, working-class girls and their strategic university decision making, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 45 (3), 1–15. doi: [10.1080/01425692.2024.2322711](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2024.2322711)
- DfE. (2023) *Academic year 2021/22: widening participation in higher education*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education/2021-22>
- DfE. (2024) *Key stage 4 performance*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance>
- Dorling, D. (2020) Foreword. In T. Ivinson and G. Ivinson (Eds) *Poverty in Education Across the UK: A Comparative Analysis of Policy and Place* (Bristol, Policy Press), viii–xxvi.
- Fisher, H. (2019) Managing the 'popular girl' and 'challenges at home' discourses at secondary school: the perspectives of 12–14 year old girls, predominantly from lower-income white British families, *Research Papers in Education*, 35 (5), 1–26. doi: [10.1080/02671522.2019.1601760](https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2019.1601760)
- Francis, B., Archer, L., Moote, J., de Witt, J., and Yeomans, L. (2017) Femininity, science, and the denigration of the girly girl, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38 (8), 1097–1110. doi: [10.1080/01425692.2016.1253455](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2016.1253455)
- Francis, B. and Skelton, C. (2005) *Reassessing Gender and Achievement: Questioning Contemporary Key Debates* (London, Routledge).
- Gaskell, J. (1992) *Gender Matters from School to Work* (Milton Keynes, Open University Press).
- Gill, R. and Scharff, C. 2011 Introduction. In R. Gill and C. Scharff (Eds) *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (London, Palgrave Macmillan), 1–17. [10.1057/9780230294523](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230294523)
- HEFCE. (2017) *POLAR4 classification: a local geography for classification for young participation in higher education*. Available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/2017/201729/HEFCE2017_29_.pdf

- Ikonen, H. (2020) Having a top-class mindset? post-feminism and the co-construction of class and mindset among young Finnish women, *Gender and Education*, 32 (7), 944–960. doi: [10.1080/09540253.2019.1632420](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2019.1632420)
- Ilie, S., Sutherland, A., and Vignoles, A. (2017) Revisiting free school meal eligibility as a proxy for pupil socio-economic deprivation, *British Educational Research Journal*, 43 (2), 253–274. doi: [10.1002/berj.3260](https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3260)
- Lawler, S. (1999) ‘Getting out and getting away’: Women’s narratives of class mobility, *Feminist Review*, 63 (1), 3–24. doi: [10.1080/014177899339036](https://doi.org/10.1080/014177899339036)
- Leathwood, C. (2004) A critique of institutional inequalities in higher education: or an alternative to hypocrisy for higher educational policy, *The School Field*, 2 (1), 31–48. doi: [10.1177/1477878504040576](https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878504040576)
- Maxwell, C. and Aggleton, P. (2013) Becoming accomplished: concerted cultivation among privately educated young women 1, *Pedagogy Culture & Society*, 21 (1), 75–93. doi: [10.1080/14681366.2012.748682](https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2012.748682)
- McRobbie, A. (2000) *Feminism and Youth Culture* (London, Macmillan).
- McRobbie, A. (2004) Post-feminism and popular culture, *Feminist Media Studies*, 4 (3), 255–264. doi: [10.1080/1468077042000309937](https://doi.org/10.1080/1468077042000309937)
- McRobbie, A. (2007) TOP GIRLS?, *Cultural Studies*, 21 (4–5), 718–737. doi: [10.1080/09502380701279044](https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380701279044)
- McRobbie, A. (2015) Notes on the perfect, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 30 (83), 3–20. doi: [10.1080/08164649.2015.1011485](https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2015.1011485)
- Montacute, R. and Culliane, C. (2018) *Access to Advantage: The Influence of Schools and Place on Admissions to Top Universities* (London, The Sutton Trust).
- OfS. (2022) *The emancipatory promise of education*. Available at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/blog/the-emancipatory-promise-of-education/>
- OfS. (2023) *Regulatory notice 1: access and participation plan guidance*. Available at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/bfd27f68-7634-4237-8e6c-36bb8e436631/regulatory_notice-1_access_participation_plan_guidance_december_2023.pdf
- Penn-Edwards, S. and Donnison, S. (2011) Engaging with higher education academic support: a first year student teacher transition model, *European Journal of Education*, 46 (4), 566–580. doi: [10.1111/j.1465-3435.2011.01501.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-3435.2011.01501.x)
- Perez-Adamson, C. and Mercer, N. (2016) How do different types of schools prepare students for life at Cambridge? *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 46 (1), 19–35. doi: [10.1080/0305764X.2015.1009364](https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2015.1009364)
- Pomerantz, S. and Raby, R. (2011) ‘Oh, she’s so smart’: girls’ complex engagements with post/feminist narratives of academic success, *Gender and Education*, 23 (5), 549. doi: [10.1080/09540253.2010.538014](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2010.538014)
- Pomerantz, S. and Raby, R. (2017) *Smart Girls: Success, School, and the Myth of Post-Feminism* (California, University of California Press).
- Raby, R. and Pomerantz, S. (2015) Playing it down/playing it up: girls’ strategic negotiations of academic success, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 36 (4), 507–525. doi: [10.1080/01425692.2013.836056](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2013.836056)
- Reay, D. (2001a) Finding or losing yourself?: Working-class relationships to education, *Journal of Education Policy*, 16 (4), 333–346. doi: [10.1080/02680930110054335](https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930110054335)
- Reay, D. (2001b) ‘Spice girls’, ‘nice girls’, ‘girlies’, and ‘tomboys’: gender discourses, girls’ cultures and femininities in the primary classroom, *Gender and Education*, 13 (2), 153–166. doi: [10.1080/09540250120051178](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250120051178)
- Reay, D. (2006) The zombie stalking English schools: social class and educational inequality, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 54 (3), 288–307. doi: [10.1111/j.1467-8527.2006.00351.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8527.2006.00351.x)

- Reay, D. (2017) *Miseducation: Inequality, Education and the Working Classes* (Bristol, Policy Press).
- Reay, D. (2021) The working classes and higher education: meritocratic fallacies of upward mobility in the United Kingdom, *European Journal of Education*, 56 (1), 53–64. doi: [10.1111/ejed.12438](https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12438)
- Reay, D., Crozier, G., and Clayton, J. (2009) ‘Strangers in paradise’? Working-class students in elite universities, *Sociology*, 43 (6), 1103–1121. doi: [10.1177/0038038509345700](https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038509345700)
- Reay, D., David, M. E., and Ball, S. J. (2005) *Degrees of Choice: Class, Race, Gender and Higher Education* (London, Trentham).
- Renold, E. and Allan, A. (2006) Bright and beautiful: high achieving girls, ambivalent femininities, and the feminization of success in the primary school, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 27 (4), 457–473. doi: [10.1080/01596300600988606](https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300600988606)
- Ringrose, J. (2007) Successful girls? Complicating post-feminist, neoliberal discourses of educational achievement and gender equality, *Gender and Education*, 19 (4), 471–489. doi: [10.1080/09540250701442666](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250701442666)
- Roberts, B. (2002) *Biographical Research* (Milton Keynes, Open University Press).
- Russell Group. (2024) *Our universities*. Available at: <https://russellgroup.ac.uk/about/our-universities/>
- Scharff, C. (2016) Gender and neoliberalism: young women as ideal neoliberal subjects. In S. Springer, K. Birch, and J. Macleavy (Eds) *Handbook of Neoliberalism* (London, Routledge), 245–254.
- Sharpe, S. (1976) *Just Like a Girl* (London, Penguin).
- Skeggs, B. (1997) *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London, SAGE).
- Skelton, C., Francis, B., and Read, B. (2010) Brains before ‘beauty’? High achieving girls, school and gender identities, *Educational Studies*, 36 (2), 185–194. doi: [10.1080/03055690903162366](https://doi.org/10.1080/03055690903162366)
- Stentiford, L., Koutsouris, G., and Allan, A. (2023) Girls, mental health and academic achievement, *Educational Review*, 75 (6), 1224–1254. doi: [10.1080/00131911.2021.2007052](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2021.2007052)
- Tiainen, K., Leiviskä, A., and Brunila, K. (2019) Democratic education for hope: contesting the neoliberal common sense, *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 38 (6), 641–655. doi: [10.1007/s11217-019-09647-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-019-09647-2)
- UCAS. (2023) *UCAS undergraduate end of cycle data resources 2023*. Available at: <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-data-resources-2023>
- UCAS. (2024) *UCAS tariff points*. Available at: <https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/applying-university/entry-requirements/ucas-tariff-points>

Correspondence

Katherine Davey

School of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK.

Email: K.Davey@mmu.ac.uk