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**A level playing 'field'? A Bourdieusian analysis of the career aspirations of  
further education students on sports courses**

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## Abstract

There is currently a distinct dearth of research into how sports students' career aspirations are formed during their post-compulsory education. This article, based on an ethnographic study of sport students in tertiary education, draws on data collected from two first-year cohorts (n = 34) on two different courses at a further education college in England. The study draws on ethnographic observations, and semi-structured group interviews, to examine in-depth the contrasting occupational perspectives emergent within these two groups of mainly working-class students, and how specific cultural practices affect students' career aspirations. Utilising a Bourdieusian framework, the paper analyses the internalised, often latent cultural practices that impact upon these students' diverse career aspirations. The hitherto under-researched dimension of inter-habitus interaction and also the application of doxa are outlined. The article reveals how the two student cohorts are situated within a complex field of relations, where struggles for legitimisation, academic accomplishment and numerous forms of lucrative capital become habituated. The study offers salient Bourdieusian-inspired insights into the career aspirations of these predominantly working-class students and the ways in which certain educational practices contribute to the production and reproduction of class inequalities.

Key Words: Further education students; Career aspirations; Bourdieu; Sports education; Social class

## Introduction

Bourdieu was particularly interested in the production of 'taste' in the field of education, considering education one of the major sites serving to conserve social hierarchies (Swartz, 1997), including via opportunities for the development and accumulation of 'cultural capital'. This form of capital is accrued through a person's access to practices in specific fields, including education, and strongly influences a person's life chances (Wacquant, 2008). Tertiary education in the UK is divided into two sectors: higher education (HE), predominantly provided by universities, and further education, predominantly provided by further education (FE) colleges. There is a considerable gap in participation rates by socio-economic class, and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2010) notes in relation to trends from the mid-1990s that young people from the most disadvantaged areas would need to treble their participation rate in order to match those from the most advantaged areas. Further education represents an important strand of post-compulsory education in the UK, primarily for working-class students, offering a wide range of vocational subjects at various levels of qualification. In terms of student experiences and career aspirations, both secondary and higher education in the UK have received substantial academic attention (e.g. Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Archer *et al.*, 2007; Elliott & Sander, 2011), whereas FE has largely been overlooked (Thompson, 2009), perhaps because it is predominantly students from working-class, low-income backgrounds who follow the further education pathway. Moreover, there is a distinct dearth of research examining the field of sports education specifically. Whilst an array of studies has been conducted into physical education courses, sport courses remain under-researched, and extant studies predominantly focus upon sports participation rather than sports education *per se* (e.g. Coakley & White, 1992; Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009). The current study therefore aimed to address the research lacuna via an ethnographic case study, and examined specifically the career aspirations of students studying UK BTEC (Business & Technology Education Council) level three sports courses at an FE college in a traditional working-class town in the North of England, with a population of over 200,000 and an industrial heritage based on mining.

In the early 1990s, a number of studies investigated the experiences of UK BTEC students (for example, Bates, 1990; Riseborough, 1992). With the exception of Atkins (2007), however, very little attention has been afforded to these students since this early work, with very little known about their educational experiences and occupational aspirations. Researchers have highlighted that social class has a strong influence on career aspirations (Bates, 1990; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Dumais, 2002; Schoon & Parsons, 2002; Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Patton & Creed, 2007). The current ethnographic study (incorporating autoethnographic elements) was initiated to address this gap, and focused upon two groups of Level 3<sup>1</sup> students, predominantly from working-class backgrounds, following sports courses at the case study college. The courses selected were a BTEC Extended Diploma (higher level) and a BTEC Subsidiary Diploma (lower level) in sport, with a total of 34 students taking part. The research was undertaken via informal observations, formal observations and group interviews, together with autoethnographic reflections, with the aim of investigating in-depth the educational experiences and career aspirations of these working-class students. Here we focus on the ethnographic component of the study. Amongst other issues, the research sought to examine the effects of teacher-student relations, and whether peer relations and group dynamics had any impact upon career aspirations. We first provide a brief review of the literature on career aspirations, and then outline the Bourdieusian theoretical framework adopted. The research project is subsequently described, before addressing the key findings cohering around students' educational practices and career aspirations.

### **Social class and career aspirations**

Within the literature, the terminology surrounding career 'aspirations' has become rather convoluted, with the terms 'aspirations', 'ambitions' and 'interests' being used somewhat interchangeably. Researchers have also differentiated between short- and long-term goals, and educational and employment choices (see Schoon & Parsons, 2002; Rojewski, 2005; Atkins, 2007;

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<sup>1</sup> The level at which students typically enter into FE from secondary school, around the age of 16 if entering direct from school

Patton & Creed, 2007). In the current paper, the term 'aspiration' is employed to represent students' goals for what they aspire to achieve post FE. These can be affected by a multitude of factors, such as the enabling or constraining nature of social class (Dumais, 2002; Schoon & Parsons, 2002; Archer & Yamashita, 2003), gender (Kniveton, 2004; Archer *et al.*, 2007), parental influence (Miller & Cummings, 2009; Dalley-Trim & Alloway, 2010), peers (Dixon *et al.*, 2008), tutors (Riseborough, 1992; Morrison, 2009; Mittendorff *et al.*, 2010) and classroom practices (Bates, 1990; Woodman, 2012). Much of this research has focussed upon secondary education, however, rather than FE, which constitutes the specific focus of the current article.

The role of social class in influencing career aspirations has been the subject of much research (for example, Bates, 1990; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Dumais, 2002; Schoon & Parsons, 2002; Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Patton & Creed, 2007). Generally, this research suggests that aspirations amongst middle- and upper-class students tend to be higher than amongst their working-class counterparts, due to their greater economic and cultural capital, which encourages more ambitious occupational goals (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). As Schoon & Parsons (2002) note, social-class background is often associated with aspirations for education, occupational aspirations and occupational attainment. In addition to social class influences, it has been argued that tutors play an important role in their students' career directions, for example via encouragement (Rowan-Kenyon *et al.*, 2011), providing academic and emotional support (Gallacher *et al.*, 2007; Morrison, 2009), showing an interest (Mittendorff *et al.*, 2010), and by providing specific guidance about directions for study or employment (Riseborough, 1992; Morrison, 2009). In order to investigate these and other factors related to the influence of social class and social capital, Bourdieu's (1984) theoretical framework was adopted.

### **Bourdieu's conceptual framework**

Bourdieu was particularly interested in the field of education, considering it one of the major sites serving to conserve social hierarchies (Swartz, 1997), drawing upon educational credentials and a familiarity with bourgeois culture, which Bourdieu termed 'cultural capital'; a form of capital accrued through a person's access to practices in specific fields, which greatly influences her or his life chances (Wacquant, 2008). For Bourdieu (1984), a *field* is considered a social space within which there are some consistencies in cultural norms and practices. He identified a number of *capitals* that are at stake within fields, including economic (wealth, financial and material assets), cultural (including 'tastes' of knowledge, lifestyles and education), social (such as social connections), symbolic (relating to prestige or honour), and physical/corporeal (the health, fitness and aesthetics of the culturally-produced body) (see Thorpe, 2009; Evans *et al.*, 2013).

Within education, the analysis of capital has predominantly centred on cultural capital. Swartz (1997), for example, considers the Western school system as the primary setting for the performance and accumulation of cultural capital, and Dumais (2002) highlights how schools reward students who have greater cultural capital and subsequently receive higher grades. It has been argued that, rather than redistributing capital, the Western education system effectively contributes to the maintenance of an unequal social system by privileging certain cultural heritages whilst penalizing others (Swartz, 1997). This can have a significant impact upon both academic grades and length of time spent in education. Furthermore, the cultural capital individuals accrue or access can influence their ideas about how to view, interpret and behave in the social world (Wacquant, 2008). The resulting behaviour is termed *practice*, and the body enacts, and is marked by habits that have been absorbed and reproduced through practices occurring in a structural context (Jarvie & Maguire, 1994). Practice is thus both the product of a habitus and also creates a habitus of expected notions of behaviour. These two concepts are dialectical. Culture learnt during socialisation becomes embodied and reproduced through participation in social practices, contouring and embodying an individual's habitus. The term *hexis* has previously been applied in relation to the process by which the habitus becomes embodied. Hexis refers to the manner in which repeated engagement with

lifestyle-based practices of consumption and behaviour becomes culturally and symbolically imprinted upon the body through deportment, in both a corporeal sense (relating to physical capital), and in the presentation of the self (Shilling, 2003; Evans *et al.*, 2013).

The practices in which individuals engage are often interest-laden and purposive, shaping the social construction of fields through a process of legitimisation of cultural practice, resulting in the subordination of certain individuals and social groups. For example, practices that are used to dominate others have been described as 'symbolic violence', which, according to Cushion and Jones (2006), helps explain the ways in which order and restraint are established and maintained through indirect cultural mechanisms, as opposed to direct, coercive control. Individuals come to accept the ideals and values of the field as the natural order of things. The very nature of symbolic violence infers 'misrecognition' of power relations, as it refers to an 'invisible' mode of domination that prevents it from being recognised (Cushion & Jones, 2006). This concept is germane to the current study in demonstrating how power relations within FE can subtly affect career aspirations in terms of how tutors, peers and others use their symbolic capital in this strategic way.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus has been utilised within education research to understand the effects of social class upon individuals' decisions to pursue or extend their education, for example by going on to FE or HE (see Dumais, 2002; Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Thompson, 2009). Gallacher *et al.* (2007) highlight the complex ways in which students' habitus<sup>2</sup> are formed and how habitus impacts upon student attitudes towards, and successes in, education, so that those with a middle-class habitus appear to experience far less 'friction' when they are introduced to educational fields (Archer *et al.*, 2007) where middle-class culture tends to predominate. The values and norms associated with education become internalised subconsciously within individuals' perceptions of how to act and behave, which are legitimated through the production of valorised forms of capital. The complexities inherent within social fields such as education should not be underestimated, however, for social actors may occupy different positions within different social fields, so that social

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<sup>2</sup> We use the plural form 'habitus' here, although some writers prefer the term 'habiti'.

class may be both enhancing and restricting at the same time, dependent upon specific context. Whilst habitus is not deterministic, nevertheless, it can orientate individuals' views towards what they consider possible to achieve, based upon their taken-for-granted beliefs regarding the natural order of things; the doxa, which serves as both an enhancing and limiting tool.

According to Blackshaw and Long (2005) Bourdieu considers the doxa as a tacit, deeply-held cognitive and practical sense of knowing what can and cannot be reasonably achieved. Such beliefs are largely subconscious and taken-for-granted. In terms of career aspirations, social class has been found to be a highly influential factor shaping doxic beliefs. Archer & Yamashita (2003), for example, note that career aspirations are influenced by a student's conceptualisation of his or her abilities and preferences, and the perceived match between these and job requirements. If an individual does not perceive a job to be achievable for her/his social class, s/he is unlikely to pursue that job. Dumais (2002) applied this notion to the educational field, contending that students' decisions to invest in education depend largely upon their expectations of whether individuals from their own social class are likely to be successful academically. Swartz (1997, p. 197) argues that those from the working-class 'do not aspire to high levels of educational attainment because ... they have internalized and resigned themselves to limited opportunities for school success'. The *illusio* is the tendency for social actors, regardless of their dominant, subordinate, orthodox or heterodox views, to share a tacit acceptance that their field of struggle is worth pursuing (Swartz, 1997, p. 125) overall; *illusio* is therefore rarely questioned. The pursuit of a game then encapsulates Bourdieu's concepts through practices whereby individuals situated within fields struggle for lucrative forms of capital, influenced by what they believe to be achievable (doxa) through their internalised habitus.

To explore this conceptual framework in relation to the under-researched area of career aspirations of English FE sports students, an ethnographic case study was undertaken, as described below.

### **The ethnographic research**

An ethnographic case study was granted approval by the research team's University's ethics committee. Gratton and Jones (2004) note that case study research involves the intensive study of a specific case or cases in their 'natural' everyday settings, in order to gain rich data regarding the cultures of specific groups, in this case, two specific student cohorts. Observations and participant observation are favoured methods, often in combination with interviews, which researchers employ to understand the specific meanings attached to social actions (Smith, 2010). The research drew upon both ethnographic and autoethnographic approaches, and involved the principal researcher taking part in the participants' social world both as an insider-researcher (a part-time College tutor) and an outsider-researcher (observing the students' 'natural' behaviours in lessons led by other tutors). As Allen-Collinson (2012) highlights, 'insiderness' and 'outsiderness' should be viewed as matters of degree rather than dichotomies, and a researcher's insider/outsider role may well fluctuate considerably depending upon specific context. During his own teaching, the principal researcher's insider role intensified, whilst during the sessions delivered by other colleagues to the same participant group, his 'insiderness' shifted as he adopted more of an outsider observer role. The principal researcher's role was explained to all the student participants, and it was made clear that their participation (or non-participation) in the study would have no bearing on the assessment of their work. This element was scrutinised carefully by the ethics committee prior to approval being granted. An autoethnographic approach also featured within the study, as an autobiographical genre that seeks to 'connect the personal to the (sub)cultural' (Allen-Collinson, 2012, p.205); in other words to make explicit analytic connections between the experiences of the researcher and the researched in order to answer the research questions. According to Wall (2008), the connection between the personal (e.g. self-narratives) and the societal (e.g. the researched phenomenon) offers a new 'vantage point' from which to address key sociological debates such as structure/agency, as pertains to the current study.

The research sample consisted of two purposively selected (Smith, 2010) groups of Level 3 students studying sports courses at a specific FE college in an industrial town in the North of

England. The groups were selected as being well-placed to discuss their career aspirations, being at an age and educational stage where making career/job choices was highly relevant. A total of 34 participants originally took part in the observational element of the study; however by the time that group interviews were conducted, only 30 remained on the courses, due to withdrawal for personal reasons or course transfers. On the days that group interviews were conducted, 24 students actually took part as four were ill/absent and two were away on college-related trips. Of these interviewees, half (n=12) were studying a BTEC Extended Diploma, whilst the other half was studying a BTEC Subsidiary Diploma. At the time of data collection all students were in the first year of their course and ranged in age from 16 to 20, with a mean age of 17.2. Sixteen students were aged 16-17 whilst eight were aged 18-20.

Data collection was undertaken via weekly informal observations (during researcher-delivered lessons) and formal observations, and semi-structured group interviews, over the duration of an academic year. The extended period of informal observations enabled the researcher to develop an understanding of students' interaction and practices (see also Holt & Sparkes, 2001; Reay, 2004). Systematic formal observations then followed, where the researcher analysed students' talk and behaviour during lessons delivered by other tutors. A total of 690 minutes of observations was conducted, around half the time with each student group, with each individual lesson lasting 75-90 minutes. Semi-structured group interviews were held, in order to provide greater insight into the students' opinions and meanings (see Blaikie, 2009). In total, eight semi-structured interviews were held, lasting between 22-40 minutes (averaging 32 minutes) with two to four participants, and sought to explore students' understanding and interpretations of their behaviours. Probing and follow-up discussion points were also used to encourage elaboration and clarification of responses (Smith, 2010). Pseudonyms are used below for all participants, and excerpts from the transcripts are included verbatim, including with local dialect pronunciation. Transcription provided the initial stage of data analysis, followed by deep immersion in, and familiarisation with the data through multiple readings of the transcripts and the process of 'indwelling' (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) in order to

begin the thematic analysis. This involved the initial identification of salient categories, which were then given descriptive coding tags. Commonalities were subsequently identified, characterised, and grouped into overarching categories. These categories were further interrogated and higher order themes were generated, which were then compared with key concepts identified in the literature review of the Bourdieusian theoretical framework.

### **Key findings**

The key findings are considered below, cohering around building cultural capital, cultural capital convertibility, doxic constraints, and relationality and intersubjectivity.

#### ***Building cultural capital***

Students reported facing various difficulties and challenges during their FE studies, particularly relating to the intersection between their educational field(s) and the social lives and commitments beyond the college environment. Woodman (2012) notes the importance of social life for this particular age group, and highlights how young people have to engage in complex scheduling of their daily practices. Such complexities emerged within the current study, where for the students studied 'social life' meant their 'free-time'; time when they were not in college or undertaking paid work. Students from the Subsidiary cohort in particular expressed valuing their social lives, and indicated that they did not want to be 'tied-down' by having to complete college coursework in their 'own time'. They therefore sought to complete all coursework during College hours rather than have to study at home:

We like realised we don't wanna do it [coursework] at home and we'd rather do it at college, rather get our head[s] down in here than having to do it at home. (*Rob, Subsidiary Group*)

The Subsidiary students appeared to have a habitus that eschewed the sacrifice of short-term time and leisure for educational investment in the longer-term; they sought more immediate

gratification. In contrast, students from the Extended Diploma cohort recognised that completing coursework at home, in their own time, would require the sacrificing of time for social life. For example, Nathan described how his social life had to be sacrificed to athletic training and college work:

Say you're training twice a day and you've got college as well and you've got to put in like three [or] four hours training and another extra like hour or two hours of erm college work you can't get any like social life. (*Nathan, Extended group*)

Students from the different cohorts thus exhibited differing habitus and positions within the educational field, influenced by their interpretation of the significance of educational credentials (i.e. cultural capital). Students on the Extended Diploma seemed better equipped to articulate the complexities of future possibilities, as affected by their present actions (sacrificing social life in the immediate present) and their pursuit of an improved position within the field of education in the longer term. As part of this perspective, students developed notions of what constituted 'life', as relational to work/education. The Subsidiary students appeared to have dichotomised education and 'life' by viewing education as something entirely separate, and this had ramifications for their degree of engagement with the educational process.

### ***Cultural capital convertibility***

Extended course students in particular seemed to valorise their education and the cultural capital that they were seeking to accrue, beginning to recognise the 'convertibility' value of this cultural capital in relation to career plans, and also to their own sporting development:

I've learnt quite a bit with the nutrition [course] which is helping me towards say me gym and me boxing ... it's kind of helping me train differently now to what I was usually training at. *(Neil, Extended course)*

For some of the Subsidiary course students too, there was an explicit recognition of the value of the knowledge and skills developed during their college education vis-à-vis their sporting development and future career:

It's giving me a career, it's helping towards my sport ... cos then I'll be able to tell [th]em all [her coaching group] what type of muscles to train and how to train it. *(Sarah, Subsidiary course)*

The Extended course students in particular seemed to valorise the cultural capital-generating opportunities provided by FE, and highlighted how a college education was directly instrumental in broadening their sports-related career horizons, as encapsulated by Nick:

I think college just makes you realise that there's ... more to sport than you think, like you thought when you were at school 'oh I just wanna be a PE teacher' and then when you get here [college] 'oh I wanna be a physio[therapist]'. *(Nick, Extended course)*

For those students seeking to go on to study at university, the great majority of whom were on the Extended course, there was a recognition that college provided the specific knowledge and skills base required for higher education. A prime example was academic referencing, and the two cohorts exhibited very different perspectives regarding the relevance of learning how to cite the literature appropriately. The majority of the Subsidiary students failed to see the relevance of this and its applicability to everyday life, most likely as a reflection of the occupations to which they were

aspiring, given that very few Subsidiary students were aspiring to attend university. Despite initially struggling with the complexities of academic referencing, for most of the Extended course students, this skill did become incorporated into their educational habitus, as Neil explained on two separate occasions:

It kinda stops people like getting higher marks from just copying everything [and] once you've actually used it a couple of times it becomes a bit like second nature. *(Neil, Extended course)*

[It] looks smart as well your work ... it's actually legitimate work and not just copied and pasted stuff ... when you go to uni[versity] you can use it more and you'll be like natural to do it. *(Nick, Extended course)*

### ***Doxic constraints***

The degree to which students positively engaged in the learning process also appeared to depend to some extent on their perceptions of potential career limitations, as well as career aspirations. Blackshaw and Long (2005) describe Bourdieu's concept of doxa as a tacit cognitive and practical sense of knowing what can and cannot reasonably be achieved. Students were clearly divided along cohort lines, and this at times manifested itself in their doxic conceptualisation. Generally, the Extended Diploma students' doxic values appeared to be more expansive than those of their Subsidiary counterparts, with just a few anomalous cases. Within the Subsidiary cohort, a number of students regularly exhibited a lack of their own self-belief, alongside disengagement from their college education. The habitus of these students seemed significantly to limit their access to, and therefore accumulation of, various lucrative forms of capital (e.g. cultural, social and symbolic) within the educational field. This in turn contoured students' choices to foster low aspirations and perceptions of their own abilities. Students' habitus contoured their (in)ability to consider various practices (such as course work feedback) holistically and as of relevance to their longer term career

plans. The following data extract from Samuel highlights the hindering effects of the intersection between the habitus and doxa. During the interviews, Samuel (in addition to other students) reflected on the relevance of receiving assessment feedback in any detail, if the piece of work had 'passed':

I've read t' feedback on referred work to see where I've gone wrong but if I've passed it I won't read it ... when you've already passed it, you think that's as good as I can do, I dun't [don't] see why you'd need feedback. (*Samuel, Subsidiary course*)

Here, Samuel appeared to devalue the purpose and worth of assessment feedback, suggesting that his attitude towards feedback provision might be a reflection of his relatively narrow doxic values. Samuel revealed that (just) 'passing' assessments was commensurate with his expectations: passing a piece of work was 'as good as I can do'. Although he could have used the feedback in order to help achieve higher grades in the future, he eschewed this possibility. Samuel later confirmed his low doxic values, admitting the difficulties he faced in achieving even a pass mark in his assessed work:

I'd like to try to get a distinction but I'm finding it hard ... it's hard doing all like extra work, it's hard enough to even pass itself to be honest. (*Samuel, Subsidiary course*)

This attitude reflected the lack of self-belief and relatively low doxic values endemic among the students studying on the Subsidiary course, who seemed **less able** to look beyond the immediate context and to recognise the longer-term value of tutors' support via the provision of feedback. These attitudes limited the extent to which they sought to improve academically and to accrue cultural capital required to excel at college. Samuel was typical of students who appeared relatively content with their social position within the education field and did not seek to challenge this through the pursuit of the various capitals on offer. This ultimately restricted career aspirations.

Conversely, students (predominantly on the Extended course) who sought actively to challenge their social position had greater levels of self-belief and were able to recognise the importance of capital accumulation and the potential symbolic convertibility of this capital in relation to their future endeavours.

### ***Relationality and intersubjectivity***

The case study FE College, as an institutional setting, promoted the accumulation of cultural capital. Generally, students appeared to appreciate the 'friendly vibe' they perceived within the institution, and felt that it promoted a culture conducive to enhancing students' career development. It appeared, however, that the degree to which students internalised this culture and its practices, and thereby formed a secondary educational habitus, depended upon an array of factors influencing their position within the field. Practices accepted as worthwhile by some students were rejected by others, as noted above in relation to learning how to reference correctly. Furthermore, student practices were shaped and mediated by the practices of tutors and other institutional staff. Institutional practices have been found to influence the formation of sub-groups within wider cohorts. In an educational context, Bates (1990), for example, found that inter-group tensions emerged between those who successfully negotiated assessment workloads and those who struggled to meet deadlines. In the current study, the Subsidiary cohort was found to be marginalised by a number of institutional practices in terms of their potential post- FE endeavours.

It is often assumed that FE students' next step in their careers should be guided towards Higher Education (HE) study (see for example, Holdsworth, 2009; McCune *et al.*, 2010; Hinton, 2011) and to this end, the practices of the FE college studied appear to direct Level 3 sports students towards this goal. This particular institutional practice was, however, problematic on two fronts: first, HE study may not be the most suitable avenue for some students, particularly those who have struggled to accrue cultural and symbolic capital. Second, even when an institution recognises the aforementioned, it would be highly problematic to use the student cohort or a particular student

sub-group as the unit of analysis, as *intra* cohort/group students' capital accumulation and career aspirations may well differ considerably, as was the case in the current study. On the basis of the data collected, however, there did appear to be a salient divergence between the career pathways towards which students were steered, depending on to which cohort they 'belonged'. On the one hand, the Extended cohort students were offered organised trips to various universities, in order to sample the practices HE study might entail. This exposed these students to a brief yet potentially inspiring insight into university student life. On the other hand, the Subsidiary Diploma students were marginalised in this regard, as they were not offered the same opportunities but rather were firmly steered towards considering full-time employment as the more suitable pathway following completion of their FE course.<sup>3</sup> In Bourdieusian terms, this can be understood as symbolic violence enacted upon the Subsidiary Diploma students by the institution. This symbolic violence may contribute to the reproduction of restricted doxic beliefs with regards to potential achievement, and consequently lower career aspirations. In the case of the students studied, the more studious members of the Subsidiary cohort who exhibited skills and qualities akin to their Extended Diploma counterparts might thus have been disadvantaged by this institutional practice. Tutors could be considered as enacting symbolic violence upon their students by affording them only the opportunities which the tutors themselves assume (often tacitly) constitute the correct option for a particular individual.

The students themselves were aware of tutors' habitus, recognising the different ways in which tutors taught and generally acted, and how these had influenced, or could potentially impact upon students' educational development during their time at college. Subject knowledge (i.e. symbolic and cultural capital) was identified as a particularly important element by students:

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<sup>3</sup> Some Subsidiary students do progress on to the second and third years of their respective course (in essence, the Extended Diploma) and may be offered trips to university taster-days at a later date, but only if they progress to the extended programme.

If you [i.e. the tutor] know your subject ... not just the bare bones of what you've got to teach ... you can add little things in for people who are interested. *(Nathan, Extended course)*

Tutors' in-depth knowledge of the subject was appreciated by students, and conversely students tended to be highly critical of tutors whom they perceived to have weaker subject knowledge and of those who did not clearly explain curriculum content, as Chris noted:

He'll stand at back of the room and read [the] presentation word for word and then go onto [the] next thing, he don't explain it, just keeps going through [the slides]. I like it like when they dun't have to look at it [the presentation] they can just like tell ya what you're gonna be doing and explain sumat [something] to ya. *(Chris, Subsidiary course)*

The above type of teaching practice appeared, on the evidence of the observations, to result in some students disengaging from the learning process. In contrast, lessons perceived as interesting due to the specific ways in which tutors taught and acted in class (i.e. their habitus) seemed to be ascribed greater symbolic worth by students and greatly to facilitate student engagement:

It wa[s] interesting, you actually looked forward to coming in on a morning. *(Lauren, Extended course)*

It is important to acknowledge, however, that interesting lessons alone do not necessarily have a direct impact upon students' career aspirations. Students did, nevertheless, allude to ways in which their tutors' practices were viewed as positive in terms of students' educational development:

She'll explain sumat and like she'll make it easier to understand ... [she] gives us ways to remember stuff. *(Chris, Subsidiary course)*

When I did my presentation with you, you told me how to improve how I was like presenting, so that helps you like in other assignments. (*Lauren, Extended course*)

In Bourdieusian terms, the above interview excerpts can be viewed as students' acknowledgement of the symbolic capital of their tutors. Moreover, these data suggest ways in which students' habitus may be changed as a direct impact of tutor practices and habitus; for example, Lauren appeared to have accepted and valued the feedback she was given regarding how to improve her presentation style. There is in the research literature, however, a lacuna in terms of Bourdieusian studies that address how one habitus affects another, as is addressed in the Discussion and conclusion section. Tutors were also found to have influenced students' perceptions regarding the worth of their qualification. In the Subsidiary cohort, a number of students indicated their desire to leave the course and pursue full-time employment, however after consultation with various staff members, these students were persuaded to continue and eventually they passed the course. The following data extract from a formal observation emphasises the importance of tutor support and encouragement:

At the end of the session, Mark asked Brent [tutor] if he could have a chat because he didn't know what he was going to do regarding the future and that he 'wasn't coming back next year'. Brent stressed the importance of the qualification and that Mark should view this as a means to an end as the qualification was required to get the job Mark desired. (*Formal Observation 4, Subsidiary Group, 22 February 2013*)

It is clear here that Mark felt he had a good rapport and relationship with Brent in order to feel able to ask him for advice and perceived Brent to have the symbolic and cultural capital (knowledge) to provide him with appropriate guidance. It also seemed that Brent was able to affect Mark's habitus

directly. He encouraged Mark to appreciate the worth of pursuing his college qualification so that the short-term aspiration of wanting to earn money was overwritten by acknowledgement of the potential worth of Mark's qualification in the longer-term, particularly regarding a desired job.

These then were some of the key findings of the ethnographic study, cohering around students' college experiences and career aspirations. Certain implications for the substantive and theoretical literature emerged and are discussed below.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The current study investigated an under-explored area in the research literature, in focusing on the career aspirations of sports students in FE. Adopting a Bourdieusian theoretical perspective in examining students' experiences highlighted the complex ways in which certain educational practices contoured their career aspirations. The ethnographic case study approach has, inevitably, some limitations with regard to generalisability, given the focus on two cohorts of students within just one FE college in the North of England. Furthermore, the use of a Bourdieusian theoretical framework inevitably brings its own limitations in terms of what can effectively be analysed, including the relative neglect of the role of inter-relationships or intersubjectivity of habitus in Bourdieu's work, and the lack of attention to the intersubjective nature of practice (see also Bottero, 2009). The importance of addressing this particular lacuna is addressed below. The Bourdieusian theoretical perspective did, however, help identify and analyse some key elements within the study.

Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus emerged as highly salient in understanding the career aspirations of the two student cohorts studied. The habitus of both students and tutors were found to be pivotal in students' development of particular aspirations. Differences in habitus between the two student cohorts became evident; for example, some students (mainly from the Subsidiary cohort) appeared to consider their educational habitus as entirely separate from their 'life' habitus, and this generated difficulties for them with regard to cultural capital accumulation and doxic values. It was evident that doxa also played a key role in the possibilities that education held for the

students, who tended either to 'buy into' (relatively-speaking) or to reject the more scholarly practices (such as learning how to reference) required to build cultural capital for later conversion into other lucrative forms of capital. Doxa remains a relatively unexplored concept within existing research literature on education (Hunter, 2004), particularly in relation to FE. Nevertheless, it emerged as highly salient for the sports education students in the current study because of the future-oriented, temporal nature of career aspirations that goes beyond past experience (*habitus*) and the practices of the present context. In terms of their career aspirations, students' doxa held a certain ideological power so that their actions were shaped not only by their *habitus* but also by their perceptions of what was realistically achievable. In this case, the Extended Diploma students demonstrated a more expansive doxa and appeared better able to conceptualise the longer-term value of their actions vis-à-vis future career possibilities. Despite tutors' hard work and best efforts to encourage students in adopting cultural capital-building practices, it became clear that the Subsidiary Diploma students required greater support in terms of challenging doxic assumptions, and instead tended to focus upon the immediate outcome of individual assignments in a somewhat dualistic 'pass-fail' manner.

As noted above, there is currently a distinct gap in the literature regarding interpersonal *habitus* interaction, and the ways in which one *habitus* affects another. This encroaches upon what might, in other theoretical traditions (such as symbolic interactionism and sociological phenomenology) be termed 'intersubjectivity' (Allen-Collinson & Owton, 2014). This lacuna in the literature may be due to Bourdieu's own approach to relationality and his relative neglect of investigation into social relationships (Bottero, 2009). Bottero (2009, p. 404) for example argues that Bourdieu 'ignores the variable interactional properties of ... [social] space, and so downplays the intersubjective character of practice'. In contrast, King (2000) has suggested that Bourdieu does, to some extent at least, recognise the intersubjectivity of social life, but to date there has been little academic attention accorded to investigating at the micro-level the complexities of social interaction from a Bourdieusian perspective. Within the educational field, it is clear that key social actors (such

as tutors and student peers) can influence students' aspirations; it is less clear, however, exactly *how* the habitus of these actors interact with the habitus of the students. Within the current study the interaction between the habitus of different social actors emerged as a key finding. Future research could certainly explore in greater detail the processes and effects of the interplay of habitus. This is particularly important, as this interactional dimension could well have implications for the practices of lecturers, administrators, and managers within further education, including those involved in sports education, in terms of the need to adopt a more flexible approach to develop and enhance aspirations for students on *all* courses (whilst remaining cognisant of student abilities), not just those deemed to be preparation for higher educational endeavours.

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