Organisational Social Mobility Programmes as Mechanisms of Power and Control

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Abstract
Successive UK governments have blamed poor rates of relative social mobility on the tendency of elite occupations to exclude according to social class. Organisational programmes implemented in response aim to identify talented young people from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds, help them identify as ‘legitimate’ professionals, and equip them with relevant knowledge and skills. Based on interviews with 35 participants in one programme and drawing on Foucauldian perspectives on governmentality and disciplinary power, the current study explores how these programmes may reproduce inequalities rather than challenge the status quo. It shows how a dominant discourse of merit invites participants to adopt a subject position that conforms with an idealised professional identity and how they shape their conduct in response. The core contribution is to suggest that social mobility initiatives framed by organisations as mechanisms to empower disadvantaged young people, might be read as expressions of neo-liberal governmentality, unequal power and corporate control.

Keywords
financial services, Foucault, governmentality, professions and occupations, social class, social mobility, socio-economic background

Introduction
Access to elite occupations such as accountancy, law and financial services has become increasingly exclusive according to socio-economic background over the past 30 years (Ashley, 2010; Ashley and Empson, 2013; Cabinet Office, 2009; Social Mobility Commission (SMC), 2015, 2016). Theoretically, this has been attributed to efforts to ensure cultural ‘fit’ (Rivera, 2016), or approached as a form of social closure, where elite firms select candidates using a range of classed characteristics, which they believe help
safeguard status and signal respectability and prestige, to colleagues and especially clients (Ashley, 2010; SMC, 2016).

In policy debates, this trend has been associated with low rates of social mobility in the UK as opportunities for individuals to improve their social status via professional and managerial jobs have been cut off (Cabinet Office, 2009). Large graduate employers have been subject to growing pressure from government and regulators to widen access and have implemented a range of social mobility programmes in response. Typically, these programmes identify academically able students from less privileged backgrounds and, through outreach, work experience, training and mentoring, provide them with the information, knowledge and skills they are assumed to lack. In this way, social mobility programmes are expected to empower young people, by helping to shape their self-image as ‘legitimate’ professionals and thus open access to the elite professions.

Programmes of this type have increased in number and reach over the past 10 years to form part of a ‘social mobility industry’ in the UK (Payne, 2017). There has, though, been little or no critical analysis examining how (and whether) they deliver the anticipated outcomes or how the young participants respond.

A better understanding of both is important because their location within the wider social mobility agenda makes these programmes controversial, including as they suggest a meritocratic order where unequal outcomes result from limited aspiration, rather than structural disadvantages caused by gender, race and social class (Exley, 2019). Payne (2017) points out that policy debates suggest that everyone can win when a fluid society would require weakening the entrenched positions of the most advantaged classes, but there has been little sign of that to date. Against this backdrop, Littler (2017: 2) calls the primacy awarded to merit within the social mobility agenda the central means of cultural legitimation for contemporary capitalist culture, the effect of which is to justify hierarchies of privilege and status rather than dismantle them. One implication is that individuals seeking ‘success’ must move not only up, but also away, from their class origins to ‘get on’ (Reay, 2013).

The current article expands on these concerns by critically reflecting on an organisational social mobility programme, given the pseudonym Grow, as it was implemented in a financial services firm, based on interviews with 35 participants. Social exclusion in financial services is particularly acute. One study found for example that almost 60% of leaders in the sector were educated at private school (The Sutton Trust, 2014), compared with circa 7% of the population in the UK. In contrast, the participants in Grow qualify to take part because their family is in receipt of government benefits indicative of a family income substantially below the national median.

Previous studies examining exclusion from elite occupations have used the work of Bourdieu to illustrate how stocks of capital, and a middle-class habitus, advantage some students over others (Friedman and Laurison, 2019), and have critiqued a model of social inclusion which characterises the problem as originating in ‘deficits’ on the supply side, rather than limited cultural sensitivity on the part of employers (Ashley, 2010).

My particular concern here is with the subjective experience of participants in Grow, which is important in the context of potentially significant asymmetries of privilege and power between them and the programme’s providers. Foucauldian theory lends itself to these concerns and has previously been used in overlapping literatures on professional
socialisation (e.g. Anderson-Gough et al., 2001; Grey, 1994), graduate recruitment (Handley, 2018), unemployment (Boland, 2016), and social mobility policy and practice (Spohrer, 2011; Spohrer et al., 2018). The latter characterise initiatives used within society and schools as a mode of governing which aims to ‘raise aspiration’ by targeting young people’s souls (Spohrer et al., 2018), or highlight the neo-liberal assumptions behind associated forms of disciplinary control (Handley, 2018). They have though tended to examine official documents and textual advice rather than focusing on how localised discourses shape the subjectivity of actors in response. This is an important omission, not least because Foucault (1997: 277) himself felt that power is best understood by analysing everyday practices and related effects.

To explore these themes, I ask first, how does Grow seek to shape participants’ orientation towards a professional career and using what techniques, and second, how do participants respond? Using a Foucauldian perspective to address these questions extends our conceptual understanding of social mobility policy and practice in three main ways. First, it offers new insights into the potential of organisational initiatives to open access to elite firms and on whose terms they do so. Second, it considers how social mobility programmes impact the subjectivities of the young people involved, and their capacity to comply or resist. And third, investigating how discourses of aspiration and achievement are reproduced in the organisational context offers a focused lens to better understand the operation of the social mobility agenda at large. Before expanding on these points, I outline the theoretical context next.

**Social mobility and social closure**

Discussions of social mobility often start by distinguishing between relative mobility, which is the chance individuals have of arriving at different class destinations within their lifetime, or absolute mobility, which is the total observed movement between social classes during a defined period. While there is no consensus here, one narrative suggests that, in the UK, rates of absolute social mobility improved in the decades immediately following the Second World War, but that over the past 50 years rates of relative social mobility have remained fairly stable and quite low (Goldthorpe, 2013).

Politicians in recent administrations have raised particular concern with rates of relative social mobility, which suggests that status is determined by achieved characteristics rather than ascribed, and have expressed an intention to deliver a more fluid and meritocratic society in response (e.g. Payne, 2017). To do so, they have often focused on the role played by elite occupations, a concern which can be traced to the publication of the report from The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions (Cabinet Office, 2009). This demonstrates that while professionals born in 1970 typically grew up in a family with an income 27% above that of the average family, this compares with 17% for older professionals who were born in 1958 (Cabinet Office, 2009). Shortly after publication of that report, the Labour government established the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (SMCPC), for which the make-up of professional elites has been a central concern, especially whether their composition ‘reflects merit’ (Ingram and Allen, 2019; see also: SMC, 2014: 16). Subsequent studies published by the SMCPC (the remit of which was later reduced to exclude ‘child poverty’) and others have demonstrated that
client facing and revenue generating ‘front office’ roles in the elite professions are generally reserved for the already advantaged, and that this issue is especially acute in City of London jobs (SMC, 2015, 2016; The Sutton Trust, 2014).

Studies explaining these trends have often drawn from theories of occupational or social closure which theorise exclusion as a means for powerful groups to control and deny access in order to protect their own interests and rewards (Macdonald, 1995). These studies show that elite firms prefer to recruit students from ‘elite’ higher educational institutions, which in the UK mainly refers to the ‘Russell Group’, where students from more privileged backgrounds are significantly over-represented (SMC, 2015, 2016). This trend is especially associated with ‘classical professions’, such as accountancy and law, but extends to more porous occupations, such as management consultancy and financial services, where it is also associated with efforts to appoint for cultural ‘fit’ (Ashley and Empson, 2017; Rivera, 2016).

These preferences narrow diversity on entry but are explicitly justified by firms on the basis that new entrants must have exceptional academic ability to perform unusually complex work (e.g. SMC, 2015, 2016). The UK’s stratified education system makes the relationship between innate ability and credentials uncertain, and an alternative argument is that qualifications act as signals for competence, which allow organisations to discriminate between candidates on apparently legitimate criteria (e.g. Brown et al., 2010). The negative impact on socio-economic diversity is exacerbated as hiring managers select based on embodied markers of higher social status, which are expected to signal expertise to clients and help build trust (Ashley and Empson, 2013).

These findings demonstrate that recruitment and selection techniques based on formal rules are classed and contradict the City’s preferred meritocratic narrative (e.g. Augar, 2000). As pressures to respond have increased, employers have introduced a range of interventions, including the programme explored in this study. Providers of this and other programmes claim a range of positive outcomes for participants in higher education and the labour market but this has not yet been matched by significant change in the demographic composition of new entrants to elite occupations (see: Bridge Group, 2018).

Widening access at entry implies recognition of ‘difference’ yet multiple studies show that professionalism requires rapid assimilation to dominant (middle or upper-class) norms (Ashley, 2010; Sommerlad, 2011). Building on this point, Cook et al. (2012) suggested that exclusionary recruitment practices are a means to ensure that new recruits already conform, and thus avoid the symbolic violence that would otherwise be required. Their analysis builds on previous studies which show how elite occupations and professions are often sites of especially intense socialisation, which ensure that norms of behaviour are internalised by new entrants, so that they quickly come to know who they should be and how they should act (e.g. Grey, 1994).

These studies have used the work of Foucault to position elite occupations as sites of subtle but invasive techniques which engender conformity without the need for more coercive or visible forms of power and control (Alvehus and Spicer, 2012; Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Grey, 1994). While repressive perhaps, acquiring a professional subjectivity offers certain pleasures too, including status and respect. Previous research has pointed out that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds may lack both and
struggle to establish themselves as ‘subjects of value’ (Skeggs, 2011). We might then assume that participants in Grow are especially susceptible to similar techniques, which I describe in further detail next.

**Social mobility and social control**

Foucault’s primary interest was in the relationship between power and knowledge and how discourse mediates between the two, with the latter defined as the way in which topics are spoken of or represented, in speech, texts, writing and practice, so that various strands come together or ‘cohere’. An important property of discourse is that it both constructs the objects of which it speaks, and has outcomes and effects, including to define and establish particular ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault, 1980). The latter shape how we relate to ourselves and others and determine how subjects come to perceive themselves and their relation to the world, and discipline themselves in response. Disciplinary control operates through the body and the mind, via forms of surveillance, including processes such as hierarchical observation (e.g. supervision within an organisational hierarchy) and normalising judgement (e.g. indicating what is ‘normal’ and encouraging us to adjust our behaviour in response). These ‘technologies-of-power’ are closely related to ‘technologies-of-the-self’, intentional and voluntary practices through which we police our bodies, thoughts and ways of being, to transform ourselves, and become ‘the principle of [our] own subjection’ (Foucault, 1979: 202–203). Critically, the self-discipline which results is motivated not solely by the threat of punishment but more commonly by rewards associated with being ‘normal’ and, for example, fitting in (Kenny et al., 2011).

Early work using Foucauldian theory in work and employment explored how the productive self emerges as a subject position within neo-liberal capitalist economies to create the ‘appropriate’ employee (Townley, 1994). As noted above, disciplinary power regimes have also been widely theorised in the professional context, including as a particularly effective form of ‘aspirant control’, where professionals are encouraged to regard the idea of a career as a central means for realising the ‘project of the self’ (Grey, 1994). Studies in this context show how inhabiting a professional subjectivity involves a range of legitimised practices, relating to appearance, presentation, commitment, enthusiasm and (especially) hard work (Grey, 1998; Ingram and Allen, 2019; Michel, 2011). Compliance suggests cultural ‘fit’ and explains why subjectivities are so carefully managed within professional firms, while offering professionals the illusion of autonomy and choice (Alvehus and Spicer, 2012; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009). Along with language and text, physical artefacts and everyday practices often act as technologies-of-power, as, for example, office space, budgets and timetables, and the presentation, habits and behaviours of colleagues signal the rewards of professionalism and offer guidance on how individuals might achieve this ‘ideal’ (Cutcher et al., 2019).

These studies have offered important insights into power and control in professional life but have tended to focus on professionals who are already employed, while the current study examines non-normative groups, who are outside the organisation’s formal control. Literatures on social mobility (Spohrer et al., 2018), graduate recruitment (Gebreiter, 2019), unemployment (Boland, 2016) and employability (Handley, 2018)
have, on the other hand, explored this transitional zone. Handley (2018) positions employability as a discourse which encourages self-assessment against an idealisation of the graduate employer and subjectification of the ‘employable graduate’ using Foucault’s concept of governmentality, conceptualised as a means to shape the conduct of populations and individuals, by ‘working through their desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs’ (Dean, 2010: 18). Governmentality is aligned with neo-liberalism and is said to privilege a discourse of individualised empowerment, so that individuals seeking to realise their possible selves become the market-ready ‘entrepreneur of the self’ (Apple, 2001; Stahl et al., 2021).

In their exploration of social mobility programmes aimed at school children, Spohrer et al. (2018) show how neo-liberal governance operates in a distant yet pervasive manner to work on the interior of subjects, who are expected to increase their self-control, strive towards continual self-improvement, and maximise their chance of happiness and ‘success’. Social mobility practice is criticised here by placing additional pressures to succeed on people who are already in precarious circumstances (Spohrer, 2018: 4; see also: Maslen, 2019), yet there is evidence that young people can resist official discourses and prioritise alternative values instead (Archer et al., 2005). The current study extends Foucauldian theory on work and employment to show how social mobility is operationalised within the organisational context and explore how disadvantaged young people negotiate discourses of aspiration and ‘success’.

**Research context and design**

Grow rests on the assumption that eligible students, who are aged between 16 and 18, have high aspirations but may not know how to realise them. The charity operating Grow aims to compensate by collaborating with organisations across the UK to implement their programme in a range of professional contexts. The aims of the programme are to level the playing field with more privileged peers, through the development of soft skills, including the confidence to pursue a professional career, as well as networking, teamwork and presentation skills. The current study focuses on Grow’s implementation in a financial services firm in London, where the programme works as follows. Typically, around 50 students from around the UK are selected during their penultimate year at school. Students are alerted to the programme via their school and complete an application form. Eligibility depends on academic potential and on relative disadvantage, including parental level of education and/or income. Successful applicants are offered a two-week internship at a leading firm, during which they are engaged in activities such as work shadowing, workshops explaining the different job roles available across the sector and entry routes in, and are given short projects to complete.

The data for the current study comprise interviews with 35 students who took part in the programme during its first year. Students were selected to represent the diversity of the full cohort in terms of gender and ethnicity, which they were asked to self-identify on a voluntary basis. Students are identified in the findings via a unique reference, which also indicates their sex (male/female) and their ethnicity, using the short codes outlined in Table 1.
Access was provided as the author was commissioned by the programme provider to evaluate Grow’s impact on students. Participants were aware that the data could be used in academic outputs and provided their informed consent. The students were interviewed by the author towards the end of their internship. Interviews took place at the firm, took up to 90 minutes and were recorded, transcribed and entered into NVivo Version 12 software (QSR International). The initial aim of data collection was to assess the changes participants reported during the internship, and to do so, the same topic guide was used throughout, covering what they had learnt about a career in finance, how this knowledge had been communicated to them, whether they found a career in the sector more or less attractive as a result, and what they thought might be required of them in order to ‘become’ professional.

### Data analysis

Foucault did not provide definitive rules about how to approach discourse analysis, but his notion of ‘genealogy’ offers important guidance, by encouraging us to explore the processes, practices and procedures through which knowledge and truth are produced. This can be achieved by examining how practices of power are embedded in ‘systems of representation’, which represent what we know about a topic at a particular point and place in time, and requires that researchers are deeply familiar with their topic and data in order to identify key themes, along with discursive strategies and techniques. As they do so, they are advised to look for absences and silence, resistance and counter-discourses in relation to the specific context and power-knowledge networks at play (Carabine, 2001). These concerns guided my analysis and, along with close attention to previous literature analysing similar topics, helped me to formulate my two research questions:

**RQ1:** How does Grow seek to shape participants’ orientation towards a professional career and using what techniques?

**RQ2:** How do participants respond?

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**Table 1.** Sample group demographics.

| Race/ Ethnicity         | Male | Female | Total |
|-------------------------|------|--------|-------|
| White British (WB)      | 6    | 5      | 11    |
| White European (WE)     | 3    | 0      | 3     |
| Asian Indian (AI)       | 1    | 0      | 1     |
| Asian Pakistani (AP)    | 1    | 2      | 3     |
| Asian Bangladeshi (AB)  | 0    | 3      | 3     |
| Asian Chinese (AC)      | 1    | 1      | 2     |
| Black Caribbean (BC)    | 2    | 1      | 3     |
| Black African (BA)      | 3    | 2      | 5     |
| Mixed Race (MR)         | 1    | 0      | 1     |
| Asian Other (AO)        | 2    | 1      | 3     |
| **Total**               | 20   | 15     | 35    |
Data analysis began by extracting relevant sections of transcripts relating to each research question, following which they were sub-divided into more detailed codes. For my first research question, I was alerted to relevant themes when students discussed what they had learnt about who professionals are, how they act, and who they should ‘be’ to fit. This revealed a dominant discourse of merit which constructed professionalism as achievable, and close attention to the students’ transcripts revealed that this was communicated predominantly through language and talk. Professionalism was also constructed as aspirational and again, as students described their experiences during the internship, it became clear that physical artefacts, symbols and everyday practices played an especially important role here.

Thinking about my second research question, I was especially interested in whether and how students orientated themselves to professionalism following the internship, which in turn implies interest in their changing subject positions. Subjectivities are formed as individuals come to a new understanding of their self, often as internalised dialogue is mediated by discourse and in relation to cultural norms. Accessing this internal dialogue may not be possible, but indications are provided by considering how individuals monitor and regulate their conduct in response to the discourses in which they are situated. Again, these concerns guided my analysis, with particular attention to how students positioned themselves against the professional norms constructed within Grow, and in relation to wider systems of representation in which they were situated, including the very discourse of disadvantage which underlines their eligibility to take part. As they negotiated between these discourses, most students indicated that they would willingly comply with corporate norms, but a minority offered more qualified consent. I present these findings in two empirical sections next, which map on to research questions one and two.

Professional identities and the meritocratic promise

The students acknowledged that prior to their engagement in Grow what they knew about finance was based on media portrayals or information provided by their friends, family and teachers at school, which often presented the sector in quite negative terms. Students expected that professionals would be predominantly white and typically male, probably ‘posh’, and ‘unfriendly’, ‘intimidating’, ‘unkind’, or ‘aggressive’. Grow appeared largely successful in challenging these preconceptions, as most students came to understand professionalism in quite different terms.

This was achieved as students were immersed in the everyday life of the firm, and as the artefacts and symbols that surrounded them helped to construct professionalism as glamorous and exciting. The firm’s head office is in an exclusive area of London, the office building is sleek and modern, and inside it is decorated with expensive art. For most students this was unlike anywhere they had been before and while they found the environment intimidating at first, most also claimed that it was impressive, even awe-inspiring. As one student (28/F/AC) said: ‘I love the air! I love the big buildings . . . I love everything!’

During the internship, students explained how they paid close attention to how current professionals presented and conducted themselves, noting that they were smart, both in
intellect and dress-sense, enthusiastic and totally committed to their work – observations which helped to cement an impression of professionalism as representing especially interesting and engaging work. One student (25/M/AO) explained how he had noticed professionals really ‘enjoy what they do’, and that their job ‘makes them who they are’, suggesting his growing understanding of career as some sort of ‘project of the self’ (Grey, 1994). Another student (4/M/AC) described how witnessing work as a way of life and of self-expression was ‘eye-opening’, especially in comparison to his family who he felt approached their relatively routine work in more instrumental terms.

These impressions of professional life were underscored as students were included in team meetings and taken out to lunch and dinner, during which current professionals modelled corporate life as characterised by collaboration and co-operation and, above all, as fun. One result was that students often used metaphors of the family to describe the firm as a benign and nurturing environment in which, for example: ‘Everyone cares about everyone else’ (20/M/WB).

Discourse is rarely singular, and within everyday practices and talk a more individualistic and competitive side of professional life was revealed, though this was perhaps more muted overall. For example, while the ‘performance’ of students was assessed, this seemed to be downplayed by the employees with whom they interacted, and the basis for this measurement was somewhat opaque. Some clues were provided as students were offered feedback during activities and tasks and were reminded during training that they should aim to ‘stand out’ from their peers. One student (3/M/WB) described learning that he must ‘compete with the others to make the most impact’, and this was encouraged as they were taught how to quickly communicate a memorable ‘personal brand’.

This more individualistic emphasis was in tension with the community spirit outlined above but most students seemed confident that the pressures of professional life would be countered by the substantial rewards, of which the potential for financial security was one. As one student (8/M/BA) said: ‘Not everyone can win . . . [but] if you do become a professional here, you’re probably made for life’.

Grow’s purpose was also to ensure that students considered professionalism accessible, and central to this objective was a dominant discourse of merit. An emphasis on merit permeated every aspect of Grow as, during conversations with current professionals, and during training and events, the students were repeatedly encouraged to believe that a career in the sector is open to literally ‘anybody’ with ambition, talent and an orientation towards hard work. Again, this meritocratic order was communicated partly through everyday routines, especially as applied to hard work, as students were expected to work on projects and tasks with deadlines which required them to stay up late into the night. This was presented to them within the programme primarily as a means to develop their skills, but students often interpreted this as a means to measure themselves against professional norms and check that: ‘we’ve got the right stuff’ (5/M/WB). However, perhaps reflecting uncertainty among current employees that they could model ‘merit’, an emphasis on merit was predominantly communicated to students through language and talk. As one (17/F/WB) student said: ‘All the presentations are just like work hard and you can do anything . . . everyone has just said that’.

As the students explained what they had learnt about professional life, they revealed how individualistic discourses of aspiration and achievement associated with the wider
social mobility agenda were reproduced within the organisational context. An important feature of Grow is also that students are arguably offered a somewhat partial representation of professional life. There are several explanations why this might be the case, including where current employees wish to protect young people from the more uncomfortable realities of employment in the financial services sector. Meanwhile, the emphasis on merit may reflect the subjectification of current professionals within neoliberal discourses of achievement and ‘success’, while their tendency to ‘disappear’ social identities may suggest a preference to avoid more visible and coercive forms of power. Nevertheless, as professionalism was constructed in somewhat idealised terms, students were situated within a relatively narrow ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault, 1980). I turn now to explore their response.

(Undisciplined: Control, compliance and qualified consent)

In this section, I address my second research question, to explore how students navigated discourses within Grow. I do so in two parts: to show first how most students willingly disciplined themselves and second how others refused to comply or offered their qualified consent.

Self-discipline and subjectification to professional norms

Discursive techniques used within Grow offered the students a new set of subject positions from which they could understand themselves and from which they could speak. In response, a high proportion told how they had already embarked on or anticipated efforts to transform themselves in pursuit of the (ideal) professional self they would like to become (Stahl et al., 2021). The effect for many was to change their self-concept and improve their confidence, as they came to understand themselves as members of an elite and exclusive club. As one student (25/M/AO) put it: ‘They said, “We’re looking for bright, smart, hard-working employees”. By which they meant us!’

The primary form of self-discipline was an orientation towards hard work, especially as they redoubled their efforts towards educational success, particularly aimed at leveraging the symbolic value of an elite degree. According to one (32/M/AP) student: ‘One of the [managers] . . . was telling us how important A-levels are . . . that has made me work harder to achieve those grades’.

Students explained how they would discipline their body as well as their mind to produce themselves as ‘ideal’ professionals. They thought this would involve being prepared to ‘sleep less’ (31/F/WB), and require a suitable performance, of initiative, energy and enthusiasm, as well as adjustments to their presentation and dress, as the following student explained:

[The internship] has given me a really strong mindset of what I want to do . . . I’ll have a different approach to how I actually live . . . I kind of want to adapt my kind of dressing style as well . . . I didn’t try to the best of my ability but from seeing all of these people and how they have managed to achieve so much, that’s definitely something I’m going to reflect on myself. (14/M/BA)
The student quoted here characterised himself as having lacked in direction, whereas Grow had offered him the focus he needed to succeed. Reflecting the more individualistic side of professional life, he illustrates how he had been inculcated into a system of knowledge which encouraged him to see himself as an autonomous subject, responsible for regulating his own conduct, to become the archetypal ‘entrepreneur of the self’ (Du Gay, 1996). In short, he accepted that ‘success’ or ‘failure’ would lie solely with him. Another student reinforced this impression, saying: ‘I know it’s up to me now, but if I work hard doing this it has the potential to change my life’ (28/F/AC).

As these students describe how they would ‘reflect’ and work on themselves, they indicate having internalised a sense of being under surveillance, as Grow worked to shape their conduct through their desires, aspirations and beliefs (Dean, 2010). To achieve upward mobility and realise their ‘possible selves’ (Stahl et al., 2021), students often positioned themselves in competitive stance in relation to peers. However, they approached this in highly positive terms, as a means to realise psychic and material rewards so that, as one student suggested, the ‘determination’ to get noticed could be interpreted as a form of self-mastery and even self-care:

I worked really hard when I was here, and I tried to get noticed . . . once you have had a taste of something really good, it is pretty hard for something else to compare . . . that has made me more determined. (17/F/WB)

This student indicates how, having been exposed to the bright lights of the financial services sector, she had come to interpret her current position in life differently, and perhaps in less positive terms. This also explains why the changes anticipated by students were generally positioned by students in benevolent terms, as they felt that the technologies-of-power provided within Grow offered them the knowledge with which they could transcend the conditions of their birth, and a foundation from which they could distance themselves from their past. Not all students characterised their background in abject terms, but many agreed that becoming professional would help them ‘feel like a big shot’ (6/M/AO), and thus achieve the value and respect that they often felt had been relatively lacking to date (Skeggs, 2011).

The young woman quoted above (17/F/WB) explained that where she grew up was a source of shame as ‘people look down on you’ for living there. She went on to say in relation to Grow: ‘this is how I’m going to get out’. This student confirmed that while upward mobility would require both literal and psychic distance from her past, this was a means to liberate herself from a precarious start, which she would gladly exchange for the rewards offered by an enterprising and strategising self (Apple, 2001). As she went on to say: ‘It’s like there’s a new me . . . I’ll work on myself and do what it takes’. In sum, discourses of aspiration and achievement evident within Grow encouraged her and her peers to approach self-discipline as the necessary price to realise their desires (Foucault, 1986).

Reluctant subjectivities and refusing to comply

My analysis so far has illustrated how discourse acts as an instrument and effect of power. Foucault (1979: 10) acknowledged though that discourse can also provide the
‘starting point for an opposing strategy’. In the current study, a minority of students were more circumspect about the demands expected of them within Grow. Some chose to disidentify in relatively complete terms, with others offering qualified consent.

Taking each stance in turn, more complete disavowal was often triggered as students noted that ‘success’ had been constructed within Grow primarily in relation to status and financial wealth. While these discourses had proved highly attractive to many of their peers, these more resistant students argued against fixed status hierarchies, with professional work positioned towards the top. They explained that learning about professionalism had involved learning about themselves, to know that a professional role might enhance their position according to others but would damage their own self-respect. These students often drew on wider systems of representation, including those which positioned the financial services sector in negative terms, and one student explained how he had ruled himself out of the sector as his aspirations were aligned with more egalitarian goals:

I wasn’t sure if I was quite comfortable with making rich people richer, while the poor stay poor . . . I don’t think it’s where I want to go . . . just money. (12/M/AI)

This student imagined his future in relation to an alternative ‘ethic of success’ which was not defined solely in and through the marketplace (Du Gay, 1996). Another student explained that his observations and experience during the internship had confirmed rather than challenged his expectations that his classed identity made him a poor fit. He explained that the subject position offered within Grow was not aspirational given a childhood in which he had witnessed his parents make significant sacrifices in the name of long hours. As indicated in previous studies (Archer et al., 2005), this student’s background offered an alternative and resistant subject position which was distinct from that suggested by the organisational power regime. As he said:

I don’t want to feel like I have to change the way I talk to be able to fit in . . . what I would call successful is finding a job that you love. (26/M/WB)

Disidentification did not always require students’ total withdrawal from a professional career, or complete disavowal of the possible rewards, as several students also positioned their background as a source of pride but in this case to enable a form of qualified consent. This stance was most evident among ethnically diverse women who were especially likely to express their doubts about the meritocratic narratives found in Grow, and question whether corporate cultures were as inclusive as they had been encouraged to believe. These students were often interested in professional work and said that they had enjoyed their time with the firm overall but, as one said (22/F/AB), because of her gender, background and ethnicity: ‘There’s no way I belong here’.

These students were concerned about how they might balance evident pressures to assimilate to professional norms with an ‘authentic’ sense of self. One way in which they did so was to resist the notion of professionalism as individualised empowerment (Apple, 2001), to position it as a means to ‘give back’ to family and friends. This might involve providing them with financial support, but also implied their intent to change
professional cultures, as students suggested that should they ‘become’ professional, their very presence might help them dismantle exclusionary norms. Summarising these themes, the woman quoted above said, ‘If I can get in here, and do a good job, then maybe I can change how people think and then others like me will be able to make it here too’, while another suggested that, ‘If I can do this and achieve success, I can help my family in the future . . . that’s what I really want’ (18/F/AB).

As these students expressed their commitment to the collective empowerment of marginalised groups, their background acted as an incentive to forms of subjectification that might help them provide others with a ‘better’ life. Paradoxically, this may amplify the effect of disciplinary control on subjects who otherwise choose to resist. These students did suggest that their ‘transformation’ towards professional norms would stop short of fundamental attitudinal or behavioural change, and acknowledged that regardless of their efforts, corporate cultures may continue to exclude people like them. As the woman quoted above (18/F/AB) went on to say: ‘I worked really hard but in the end I’m not sure whether they really want someone like me on their team’. Ultimately, these students were left with the sense that the relevance of social identities would remain a fundamental ‘truth’, despite attempts within Grow to ensure they were discursively ‘disappeared’.

**Discussion and conclusion**

I have outlined in this article how successive administrations in the UK have tasked ‘elite’ employers with facilitating social mobility by opening access to a wider demographic. Many have responded by offering help and support to young people from less privileged backgrounds who may aspire to a professional role. However, while these programmes are positioned as empowering, their location within the wider social mobility agenda suggests numerous problems. For example, while social mobility is positioned by its advocates as a means to ensure the fair allocation of rewards, critics suggest that it rests on a ‘myth of merit’ which helps to legitimise hierarchies of privilege and status and justify the inequalities that result (Littler, 2017). Further, while upwards social mobility suggests certain material and psychic rewards, the ‘price of the ticket’ is often assimilation to middle-class norms (Friedman, 2014). Finally, given limited opportunities at the ‘top’, upward mobility is possible for only a limited few (e.g. Payne, 2017), yet individualising narratives obscure this basic truth, and may also cause those who are ‘left behind’ to blame themselves.

Critical analysis of organisational programmes has been neglected to date but this is important, not only to shed light on their likely impact on social mobility, but also because this offers original insights into how discourses of aspiration and achievement are operationalised at the local level, and whether agency is available as young people respond.

To achieve these aims, I have extended Foucauldian perspectives already widely used in studies of work and employment to understand disciplinary power, into this transitional zone. I have demonstrated how the students participating in Grow were immersed in discourses of aspiration and achievement, which are associated with both the wider social mobility agenda (Littler, 2017) and with a more localised obsession with ‘merit’ (e.g. Ho, 2009; Michel, 2011). The apparent aim behind these technologies-of-power
was to ensure that the young participants find professionalism attractive and achievable, to motivate their transformation in response. This analysis suggests that Grow fits within a human capitalist ethos of employability where the acquisition of knowledge and skills is expected by policy-makers to enable ‘success’. This individualist model is aligned with a form of neo-liberal governmentality where participants are expected to objectify themselves as projects to be worked on and improved, so that they internalise professional norms, and become ‘entrepreneurs of the self’ (Du Gay, 1996).

For most of the students, these technologies-of-power encouraged their consent, which they often celebrated as they anticipated their empowerment via subordination to corporate demands. For this group, Grow was understood as an important means to correct what they came to ‘know’ as objective deficits in information and knowledge, while offering subjective benefits including confidence and self-belief. In the absence of other options, and given what was often an economically precarious start, these students’ compliance might legitimately be seen as the actions of ‘active, choice-making’ subjects (Kuhn, 2009: 682), including as students considered that desirable subject positions previously considered unobtainable were now within their grasp (Foucault, 1991).

Other students adopted a less compliant approach, often as their subordination within wider structures of inequality and power provided them with the counter-capital to resist. A more reflexive stance towards Grow allowed some to challenge the ‘myth of merit’ constructed within the programme and meant that institutionally sanctioned discourses did not always conceal alternative ‘truths’ (Archer et al., 2005), reminding us perhaps that the success of disciplinary control is ‘proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms’ (Foucault, 1980: 86, cited in Lukes, 2005: 90). Both groups of students demonstrated considerable agency, though with different purposes and in different ways.

Nevertheless, whether programmes such as Grow can facilitate social mobility is uncertain, and if so, it is questionable on whose terms this might be achieved. Power often operates through the illusion of autonomy and an individual’s freedom to choose typically takes place within tight constraints (McNay, 2009). A less positive reading is that regardless of their particular stance, their very eligibility to take part in Grow positions the students as a problematic group and suitable ‘object’ to be managed (Spohrer et al., 2018: 336). My analysis demonstrates that within the programme, professional life was constructed in idealised terms, including to ensure that the salience of gender, race or class were largely ‘disappeared’. Participants were then asked to position themselves within a relatively narrow ‘ethic of success’, and thus measure themselves against a pathway more commonly taken by peers who are white and middle class, which is constructed within the programme as equally available and perhaps ‘ideal’.

However, as a minority of the students could see, a meritocratic order does not become ‘true’ simply by stating that it exists. Perhaps most problematic is that the solution to inequalities in access is not located in the systems and processes which discriminate, but primarily with the students themselves. Given limited evidence of change in the cultures of elite firms, should students seek to gain access, they may find that their social identities continue to play a material role (SMC, 2015, 2016). From this perspective, their compliance may represent an example of Berlant’s (2011) ‘cruel optimism’, in which the object of the students’ desire is simultaneously an obstacle to their flourishing.
Programmes positioned as mechanisms to empower disadvantaged youth might then be read as more problematic expressions of (unequal) power and corporate control.

My attention to organisational efforts at social mobility has provided an opportunity to examine how the controversies that characterise the wider agenda play out at the local level where they are both reflected and reproduced. My focus has obviously been on the young people involved, though a limitation of the study is how students’ identities develop dynamically over time, while a notable absence is the managers’ and mentors’ identities. Consideration of how these are reflexively shaped in relation to the students with whom they interact is an area which deserves additional research. This might add to sociological research on the characteristics of professional elites, whereas this study’s current contribution to the literature is primarily to suggest that, as a result of their own subjectification within discourses of individualism, aspiration and merit, existing members of elite firms may inadvertently help to preserve the status quo, even when their intention is to help effect change.

This contradiction points towards another, namely that social mobility is inversely correlated with inequality, which has become increasingly pronounced in the UK in the past 30 years (e.g. Brown, 2017). The activities of financial service firms are heavily implicated in this development, including as they drive the extremely high pay which underpins growing income differentials (e.g. Piketty, 2020). This suggests that the very organisations tasked by governments with facilitating social mobility simultaneously play a systemic role in limiting the prospects for macro-level economic change which might have a more progressive effect. Elsewhere, merit has been theorised as performing a sort of ‘social magic’ by masquerading as a progressive force for change, while helping to preserve the status quo (Ingram and Allen, 2019). A related danger is that organisational social mobility programmes act as a form of cultural legitimation, which allow elite employers to align themselves with egalitarian values, while protecting their own power and interests as they reproduce exclusionary professional norms. A more productive approach might be to focus on driving systemic change in the structures and cultures of elite occupations and firms, while, at the level of society and the state, considering the meaning and consequences of ‘failure’ in a context defined by increasingly unequal relations of economic capital and power.

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