

The influence of parents, places and poverty on educational attitudes and aspirations

Findings
Informing change

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Low aspirations among young people and their families in disadvantaged areas are often seen as explaining their educational and work outcomes. This study challenges that view. It demonstrates that barriers to achievement vary significantly among deprived areas as different factors combine to shape ambitions, and shows that the difficulty for many young people is in knowing how to fulfil their aspirations.

Key points

- Young people had high aspirations; they wanted to go to university and attain professional and managerial jobs in greater numbers than the labour market could fulfil. There was little evidence of fatalism faced with depressed labour markets, or of a belief that not working was acceptable.
- Although all three study areas were disadvantaged, their characteristics differed and their young people's ambitions varied. The London area had a diverse, ethnically rich population and very high aspirations towards professional jobs; the white working-class Nottingham area had lower, more stable aspirations often aimed at traditional skilled occupations. The Glasgow area was a more economically mixed population and had a wide range of aspirations.
- The period between ages 13 and 15 was critical, and the importance of place was underlined by changes in ambitions in the three areas over this time. In Nottingham and Glasgow aspirations for university attendance fell, but increased slightly in London (where they were already the highest).
- Among young people and their families with high aspirations, knowledge of the pathways through education and employment to realise these ambitions was limited.
- The authors conclude that policy to increase social mobility needs to go beyond assumptions about certain communities having low aspirations – it needs to tackle barriers to fulfilling them. Policies also need tailoring to the specifics of areas. Better information is required to support young people in understanding how schooling, post-compulsory education and work fit together.

The research

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Background

Politicians and policy-makers are very interested in aspirations. The strong assumption is that raising aspirations will increase educational achievement, while contributing to greater equity and the UK's economic competitiveness, and that public policy has a key role in ensuring that these ends are attained. Aspirations were a theme of many of the Labour Government's policy papers on children and young people. They were a key component of *The Children's Plan (2007)* and in *Aiming High for Young People (2007)*, and the concerns raised helped to shape the 2009 Inspiring Communities programme. The coalition Government has continued this interest in raising aspirations, again based on the assumption that aspirations are too low among disadvantaged groups.

However, despite this political interest, the links between aspirations and educational and labour market outcomes are not well understood, nor the best ways to raise aspirations. The presumption in policy thinking is that high aspirations imply a sense of career direction and a belief that upward mobility can be achieved through learning. This portrayal can sometimes suggest that aspirations are essentially individual attributes that are freely chosen.

This study was based on the view that effective policies for aspirations cannot be designed without considering wider factors, including educational and economic opportunities and resources. It examined the educational and career aspirations of young people growing up in diverse areas of disadvantage in Nottingham, London and Glasgow.

Aspirations and place

A central question for the study was the influence on young people's aspirations of living in disadvantaged places. The research involved pupils in three schools drawing from neighbourhoods with strong evidence of deprivation, but with otherwise markedly different social and economic contexts. Across all three locations, young people had a very high degree of exposure to local influences, particularly local norms, beliefs and expectations about what is important in life. The study provided little evidence that deprivation influenced aspirations as such, but strongly supported the significance of specific places.

The places young people lived in played an important role in their lives, which varied greatly across the three areas. The London location had a diverse, ethnically rich community. This area had the highest aspirations, which increased between 13 and 15 years of age. The Nottingham area was a predominantly white, working-class community. While many in Nottingham wanted to go to university and attain professional jobs, young people's aspirations were lower than in the other locations at 13 and remained low at 15. A larger number of young people were interested in traditional roles, with boys aspiring to trades and girls to care occupations.

In Glasgow, the school drew pupils from some of the poorest parts of Scotland as well as more affluent areas, and from a wider area of the city than the more neighbourhood-focused London and Nottingham schools. This resulted in aspirations being formed in a far less homogeneous environment, and in a variety of ways. The tendency was also for ambitions to move from being polarised among different groups towards a common level over time. This level was slightly lower at age 15 than at 13, and while it was slightly lower than average aspirations in London it was higher than in Nottingham.

Five findings on the nature of aspirations and their formation arose from the study:

- Young people's ambitions for education and jobs were high. Most hoped to go to university, and aspired to professional and managerial jobs in far greater numbers than the proportions of those posts in the labour market. There was little evidence of fatalism in the face of a depressed labour market, or of a belief that not working was an acceptable outcome.
- Young people's aspirations were not predominantly unrealistic. At 13, the ideal occupations of many were drawn from sport or celebrity, but this had waned by age 15. It was not the case that large numbers of young people wanted to become pop stars or Premiership footballers.
- The data showed that places with a shared status of deprivation could be quite different in their social make-up and how this played out in people's life experiences. Generalisations about attitudes, beliefs and behaviours surrounding aspirations in disadvantaged communities are unhelpful, and need to be avoided.
- Factors affecting aspirations, whether deriving from school, place or family, tended to be consistent and reinforcing, pushing young people towards or away from fulfilling high aspirations. In Nottingham and London, they emerged at school level because the school was so strongly rooted in the community. The more

economically diverse school in Glasgow showed these patterns at a smaller scale. But the overall consistency of factors was striking across all three settings.

- However, patterns of forming aspirations are likely to vary widely across the UK. Areas of greater and lesser deprivation, and with different demographical and social factors, would potentially have other, quite specific outcomes in terms of aspirations. This study deliberately looked at distinctive areas, expecting them to have specific characteristics. But it was not exhaustive, and other challenges could be found in places with different characteristics.

Policy implications

The policy focus on aspirations has, for some years, been driven by two concerns: the level of education and skills of the UK population; and economic/social inequality and social mobility. Aspiring to a high level of achievement is seen as part of the key to individual progress and the ambition for the UK to remain internationally competitive. However, there is a lack of clarity about whether aspirations are fundamentally too low, especially among people from disadvantaged backgrounds, or are in fact rather high, but cannot be realised because of the various barriers arising from inequality.

Aspirations are a valid and understandable focus for policy attention, but effective intervention needs to take into account the following six principles.

1. Aspirations are high but uneven

The study's evidence of generally high aspirations among young people challenges assumptions that there is a problem of low aspirations among young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds. It raises a fundamental question about how two important policy aims can best be brought together: ensuring that enough people in the UK aspire to highly educated roles; and breaking the transmission of disadvantage from generation to generation. This study's findings suggest that there is little problem with the first aim: young people collectively have aspirations higher than the outcomes likely to be delivered by the labour market. The second aim, however, is more problematic. The finding that aspirations differ significantly in different places suggests a need to identify and work in a focused way with those families and communities where ambitions are less likely to lead to the desired outcomes.

2. Place matters

The places studied were all disadvantaged to some degree, but the aspirations of young people within them were distinctive. It is incorrect to characterise deprived neighbourhoods as places where aspirations are always low. Policies need to recognise that aspirations may be influenced by social class, culture and history or people's direct experience of the place they live in. Like other studies, this research reinforces the evidence that young white working-class people are among the least aspirational.

Aspirations are strongly influenced by place, and it follows that policies to address them must be local. A universal approach is likely to be less effective because of the distinctive nature of how aspirations are formed in different types of social setting. The initial approaches and early experiences of the *Inspiring Communities* programme in England made it clear that there are plenty of ideas about how stronger aspirations might be built within disadvantaged communities. It is disappointing that the programme was cancelled before it really got underway, and that the current Government's social mobility strategy contains no specific proposals for community-based approaches to raising aspirations, leaving this to local action.

3. Higher aspirations are not enough

Aspirations are sometimes seen within policy-making as the critical factor in young people's success. However, it is not enough for young people to aspire: they also need to be able to navigate the paths to their goals. In the areas studied, it appeared that many parents or young people did not really understand what it takes to progress in education and attain desirable employment. Addressing lower aspirations means allowing young people and their parents to see the range of possibilities open to them, but also ensuring that they understand what it will take to fulfil their goals. However much a young person wants to be a lawyer, this ambition is incompatible with leaving school at 16.

An obvious but vital observation is that for young people to obtain good jobs, such jobs have to be available and young people have to be able to access them. The study found a lack of fit between young people's employment ambitions and the kinds of jobs available in the local labour market. Students need exposure to a greater range of occupations, along with a better understanding of job content. To that end, contact with school alumni in a range of positions might be helpful, as well as greater contacts with local businesses.

As young people from disadvantaged backgrounds do not attend university in the same proportion as their more advantaged peers, it is likely that many of the young people in this study who said that they wanted to go to university will be disappointed. This supports the need for development of policies to widen access to university and incentivise staying on at school.

4. Aspirations are complex and require informed support

Aspirations are both short and long term, and young people may desire different things simultaneously. The full range of possibilities for educational outcomes and jobs is often hidden or unimagined, particularly when families have little experience of higher education and professional jobs. This means that young people need detailed help to take the pathways likely to lead to their longer term goals, including better career advice and more access to work experience. Continual support is needed at every stage of young people's development, as well as mechanisms to ensure that young people who do not take advantage of opportunities at the traditional school age are not marginalised for life.

5. Individuals' aspirations are influenced by multiple reinforcing factors

Aspirations are hopes for the future regarding education and jobs. But young people build on them through their own ideas and how they respond to the pressures of school, community and society. This study found that factors relating to place, family and school tended to coalesce around particular views of future options and reinforce each other. Policy needs to recognise how aspirations are deeply affected by individuals' experience, such as their level of engagement with school, the influence of peer groups and the attitudes of family members towards work and education.

There have been several one-dimensional programmes for raising aspirations. The current Government's proposals to expose school students to high achievers as motivational visitors and to involve them more in work experience through partnerships with business can be useful in some circumstances. But young people have many other powerful influences on their world views, so these interventions are unlikely to be fully effective in raising aspirations and in helping those high aspirations to be fulfilled.

6. Parents are important

Parents and families play a key role. The study found clear alignment between what parents said they wanted for their children, and what young people aspired to. Supporting aspirations involves working with parents as well as with young people, particularly where parents face disadvantage themselves. This is a key strategy for ensuring that pathways to achieving young people's aspirations are known and clear to all involved.

About the project

This study examined the educational and occupational aspirations of young people in three disadvantaged UK locations, and explored the factors that shaped these ambitions. The research sought to understand the contexts, structures and processes through which aspirations were formed, moving beyond the view that aspirations are a matter of individual choice. The research was conducted in areas of London, Nottingham and Glasgow. Working within secondary schools, 490 students aged approximately 13 were interviewed individually in 2007–8; 288 of the same students were interviewed again in 2010 at around age 15. These interviews were supplemented by focus groups with young people and further interviews with parents, teachers and community representatives.

For further information

The full report, **The influence of parents, places and poverty on educational attitudes and aspirations** by Ralf St Clair, Keith Kintrea and Muir Houston, is available as a free download at www.jrf.org.uk

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