

Educational aspiration and attainment amongst young people in deprived communities

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Abstract

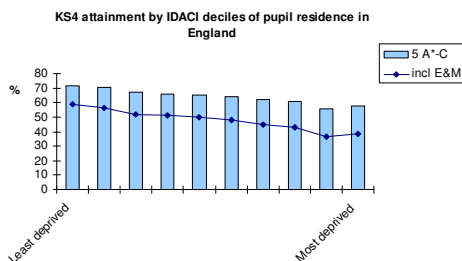
This paper explores patterns of – and influences on - the aspirations of young people living in different types of deprived community. It examines the potential of community-based approaches in helping young people to set ambitious aspirations and support them to fulfil their potential. The study combined qualitative research with over 150 young people, parents and practitioners in three deprived neighbourhoods with original analysis of the ALSPAC and LSYPE studies.

Empirical data consistently demonstrate that parents are the most important influence on children's aspirations. Ethnographic and qualitative enquiry highlights the importance of understanding community context, both in terms of understanding the influence of social norms on parents and children and of the mechanisms through which aspirations are transmitted from parents to children. Our enquiry finds that certain community characteristics are associated with low educational aspiration – such as close knit social networks, a sense of isolation from broader opportunities and a history of economic decline. High levels of bonding social capital and low levels of bridging social capital can restrict young people's horizons and access to opportunities. Our evidence suggests that there is considerable untapped potential in many deprived communities and that locally-led and tailored programmes could be effective in mobilising community resources, opening up opportunities and ultimately improving outcomes for young people.

Keywords: aspirations; educational attainment; deprived communities

Introduction

Progress has been made in narrowing the educational attainment gap between the most deprived areas of England and the rest. At Key Stage 4, the attainment gap between the bottom 10% of Lower Super Output Areas and the average narrowed by over 6 percentage points (2001-2006). However, educational attainment remains stubbornly lower in deprived areas and is strongly associated with area deprivation.



Source: DCSF (2008)

Young people's aspirations – the goals they set for the future, their inspiration and their motivation to work towards these goals –

have a significant influence both on their educational attainment and their future life outcomes [Gutman & Akerman 2008b; Strand 2007, Schoon & Parsons, 2002].

We know from previous research that parents and family have a particularly important influence on the formation of young people's aspirations [Strand 2007]. However, less attention has been paid to the ways in which young people are influenced by the people and places where they live. This paper focuses on the influences of community level factors on the aspirations of both parents and children. From a policy perspective, our enquiry explores the potential to raise educational attainment in deprived areas by supporting young people, families and the wider community to foster high aspirations.

Method

The findings presented in this paper are based on a multi-strand methodology comprising:

Desk-based research and consultation

- Literature review
- Seminars with community workers and with academics (including expert 'think pieces' by Ruth Lupton, Keith Kintrea and Leslie Morrison-Gutman)
- Meetings with policy makers and NGOs
- Mapping of national interventions and review of evaluation evidence

Secondary data analysis

- DCSF attainment data
- Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents & Children
- Longitudinal Study of Young People in England
- MOSAIC neighbourhood typologies

Community based research

In depth research was undertaken in three deprived areas with low educational attainment: an inner city; a changing suburb of London; a Northern town. These neighbourhoods were selected because they shared similar deprivation and attainment levels but varied significantly in demographic make up, levels of population mobility and economic and social history.

This included:

- 50 interviews (10-15 in each of the three areas) with senior managers (e.g. Directors of Children's Services, Head teachers; Directors of Regeneration) and frontline workers (e.g. Youth workers, police officers, neighbourhood managers)
- Qualitative workshops with 60 young people aged 11-14 (2 workshops in each of the 3 areas)
- Qualitative workshops with 50 parents of 11-14 year olds (2 workshops in each of the 3 areas)
- Collation of key neighbourhood statistics and contextual data

Findings

This section summarises findings on:

- the complex nature of aspirations
- the differences in levels of aspiration by gender, ethnicity and area deprivation
- the characteristics of neighbourhoods in which young people tend to have lower aspirations
- the influence of community-level factors

Aspirations are complex

*"Aspirations are distinguishable from expectations; there is a difference between what people **hope** to achieve and what they **expect** to achieve"* Lupton & Kintrea (2008)

As the quotation above illustrates, any enquiry into 'aspirations' must necessarily be concerned with the dynamic processes influencing young people's hopes, expectations and ultimately the extent to

which their achievements reflect fulfilment of potential.

Whilst much of the empirical data on 'aspirations' in fact measures educational intentions and expectations, anthropological and qualitative enquiry reveals that children and parents often have a much broader conceptualisation of what they want – and expect - to achieve in life. This will often be expressed in straightforward terms of 'being happy' and having a fulfilling family life [Evans; SETF; Park].

Many young people have big dreams for their futures. However, high goals, coupled with uncertainty about how to reach them, can lead to disillusionment. [Prince's Trust, Raphael-Reed et al, 2007].

11-14 is an important age range, when young people leave behind more idealistic aspirations and start to think realistically about their futures. [Gottfredson]. It is also an age at which young people are at risk of becoming disengaged at school.

Our qualitative work in three case study areas with local parents and young people aged 11-14 identified four key components in developing, and working towards, high aspirations:

Inspiration: young people want diverse sources of inspiration – through meeting new people, trying out new experiences and broadening their horizons

Information: young people and their parents want appropriate, timely and reliable advice and information to help them make informed choices and to ensure that they understand the steps needed to reach their goals.

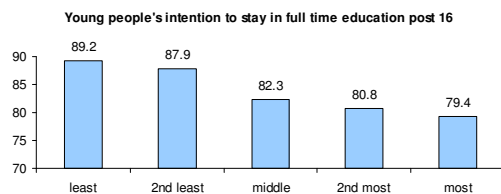
Self-esteem: young people need to feel confident they have the skills and aptitudes to achieve their goals and to develop resilience to cope with set-backs

Self-efficacy: young people need to believe that they can achieve their goals through working hard and to be confident that they have a fair chance of success.

Educational aspirations and expectations differ by gender, ethnicity, socio-economic group and area disadvantage

Nearly all parents have positive general aspirations for their children and several studies have shown that disadvantaged children do not have fundamentally different aspirations from their more advantaged peers [Turrock et al, McKendrick, Calder & Cope].

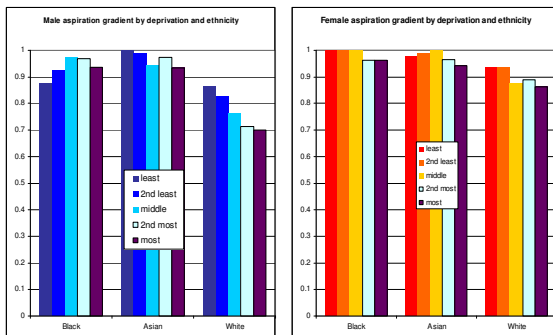
However, analysis specifically of young people's educational expectations (at age 14) using the LSYPE dataset reveals a clear gradient across the quintiles of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation.



Analysis of individual aspirations also shows that young people from ethnic minorities tend to have higher educational aspirations than their white peers. White boys have the lowest aspirations (Strand).

In our analysis of the LSYPE dataset, we found an association between educational expectations and IMD among white young people – with the relationship particularly strong for boys. Differences by IMD among non-white groups were not statistically significant

Young people's intention to stay on in full-time education post 16



These patterns prompted us to consider the roles that community and place play in the

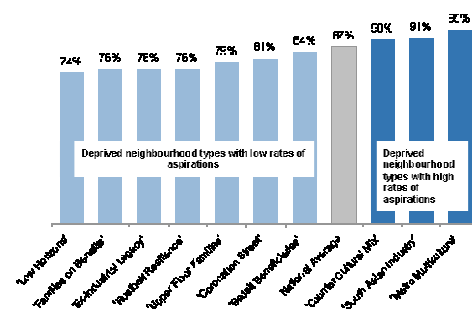
formation of aspirations. In particular, they suggested the value of an exploration of deprived neighbourhoods with differing levels of ethnic diversity. Our research therefore, examined the extent to which a range of compositional, structural and other factors may influence levels of aspirations between different deprived communities.

Not all deprived neighbourhoods are the same

Disadvantaged communities in the UK are very diverse in terms of social and demographic composition, economic structures and legacies; physical locations and connectivity; as well as less tangible features such as sense of 'identity'. Whilst there is a clear relationship between area-based measures of deprivation and educational aspirations at an aggregate level, we were interested to explore whether different types of poor neighbourhoods were more or less likely to foster high educational aspirations.

In order to explore this diversity, we merged MOSAIC¹ geo-demographic neighbourhood typologies with data from the LSYPE on young people's aspirations to stay on in full-time education post-16. The figure below shows the variation in levels of educational aspiration between the 12 most deprived MOSAIC neighbourhood typologies (ordered by IMD ranking). Although all of the neighbourhoods depicted are deprived, they vary widely in their levels of educational aspiration.

Levels of educational aspiration within the 12 most deprived MOSAIC neighbourhood typologies (by IMD ranking).



¹ MOSAIC, an Experian dataset widely used in the public and commercial sector, classifies local areas into 61 ideal types using a range of commercial and socio-economic data

Three types of neighbourhood – all deprived urban areas with high proportions of ethnic minorities – have aspirations higher than the national average. The lowest educational aspirations are found in ex-industrial communities, often in the north of England.

Our qualitative work, which involved interviews with over 160 young people, parents, practitioners and local service providers, helped to unpick the characteristics of neighbourhoods in which young people appeared to have lower aspirations. It suggested that low aspirations are associated with low population mobility, ethnic and social homogeneity and a sense of economic decline.

We also merged the LYSPE data with Amion neighbourhood typologies² which help to distinguish areas in terms of their population dynamics. Here the lowest aspirations were found in so-called ‘isolate’ neighbourhoods. These communities are characterised by poor households whose members feel ‘trapped’ and are unable to break out of living in deprived areas.

Given these patterns we were interested to gain a better understanding of the processes through which aspirations are formed and of the specific contribution of community level factors within this.

The formation of aspirations

There are multiple influences on the formation of aspirations and it is helpful to recognise this as a dynamic process in which different interactions and experiences serve to moderate the goals which young people set for themselves.

Although an established body of evidence highlights the central importance of family in shaping young people’s aspirations [Strand], it is during the early teenage years that the influence of peers and wider society is thought to increase in importance [Asmussen et al].

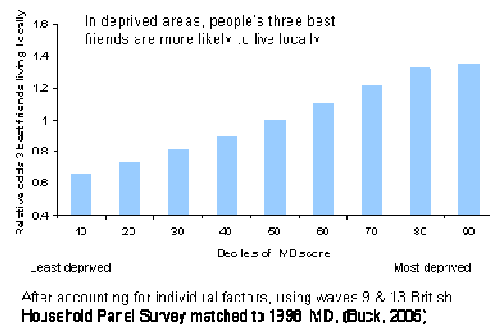
Theories about community level effects suggest three broad mechanisms which may

influence the formation of young people’s aspirations: social networks; institutional effects and peer influences.

The importance of social networks

Foremost among theories of social networks, social capital refers to the features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives (Putnam).

Deprived communities with low aspirations often have high concentrations of *bonding social capital* – characterised by strong ‘social glue’ among group members, such as close friends or family members. Social interactions can be frequent, but generally the geography of these interactions is more limited in scale (Buck, 2005). This is illustrated by BHPS data, showing that in deprived communities, people’s close friends are more likely to live locally.



Strong local networks are often a source of strength and support. However, they can also constrain individuals to familiar choices and locations. Bonding networks may predispose individuals to eschew experiences that might build other forms of social capital and precipitate change (Raphael-Reed et al, 2007).

Our in-depth qualitative work revealed low levels of *bridging social capital* in our case study communities, meaning that young people often lacked the advantage of a diverse network of contacts outside their immediate neighbourhoods and social circles. For those interested in supporting the formation of high expectations, this matters, because young people’s social networks influence their expectations.

² Explain Amion typologies

Young people in these areas are potentially missing out on valuable sources of inspiration, information and opportunity. Improving bridging social capital may help to broaden the range of influences on young people, raise their expectations and give them access to broader opportunities.

Institutional effects

Research has shown that both teachers' general expectations for their students' performance and their confidence in their own teaching efficacy predict students' school achievement. (Feinstein et al. 2004 This effect appears to occur via its impact on students' sense of competence (Eccles 1993). Positive teacher student relationships and a sense of belonging for children's development in school can help students to engage and persist on academic learning tasks and to develop positive achievement-related self perceptions and values (Eccles et al 1998). Schools have been shown to account for between 8 and 15% of differences in attainment (Lupton, 2006).

Peer influences

Several theories emphasise the importance of peers, arguing for example that young people's self concepts and interpretations of their own experiences are influenced by social comparison [Taifel and Turner 1986]; and that individuals will tend to act in a manner consistent with the norms of a behaviourally relevant group membership (such as a peer group). Within their peer groups, it is argued, young people experiment with, and develop their sense of self-identity, mirroring their friends' behaviours and attitudes, both positive and negative [Nurmi, 2004].

Our analysis of the LSYPE data set showed that young people's educational aspirations are highly correlated with those of their peers. Two thirds of 14 year olds intending to leave school at 16 say their friends intend to do the same (LSYPE, 2004). Our quantitative analysis showed that peer interactions and a mother's social networks both affect young people's educational aspirations or expectation to stay on in education (LSYPE).

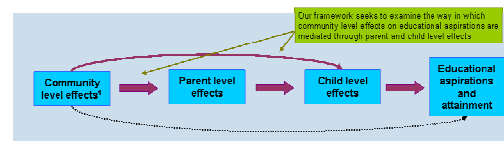
Parents' attitudes are also informed by those around them. For example women considering whether to breastfeed their baby may be influenced, positively or negatively, by the experiences of friends and family (Dyson et al, NICE, 2005). Young people's aspirations are being indirectly influenced by their environment from before birth.

Mediated neighbourhood effects?

Overall quantitative evidence tends to suggest that there is a neighbourhood effect on attainment, over and above the effect of individual and household characteristics, but that this is relatively small (Lupton & Kintrea).

However, previous research has not tended to focus on the *indirect* influences of community level effects. In particular, it has not captured the way in which community level processes may be mediated through parent and individual level processes to influence children's educational aspirations and attainment.

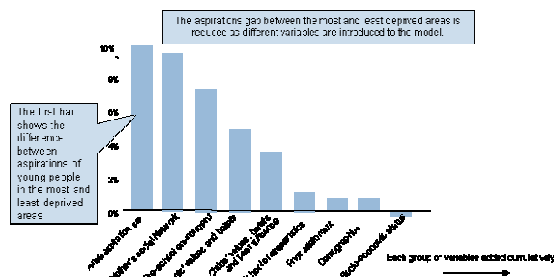
Previous research has identified neighbourhood effects on test scores for children aged 4-5 (McCulloch & Joshi, 2000) and in the US neighbourhood effects have been identified on developmental outcomes at age 3 (Brooks-Gunn et al, 1993). These findings are interesting because children at this age had little exposure to education and neighbourhoods, raising the question as to whether neighbourhood effects are working *indirectly* through parents.



Analysis of the ALSPAC dataset sought to explain the gap between the educational aspirations of young people aged 14 in the most and least deprived areas [Coyne & Washbrook, forthcoming]. We found that the strongest factors predicting children's aspirations were: the value they attach to school; their ability beliefs and prior attainment; mother's aspirations for their

child to go to university; and a family's socio-economic status.

There was a strong association between children who talked to their friends about GCSE choices and young people who have high aspirations. We investigated whether the places where young people lived were influencing their aspirations. In this analysis no direct 'neighbourhood effect' on aspirations was identified. However, it did suggest that the effect of community level factors may be indirect, occurring via their association with children's pre-school environment, parents' and children's values and beliefs, as well as the characteristics of the schools.



Neighbourhood-based intervention

A range of government departments and voluntary and community sector providers are funding initiatives that help support the formation of aspirations. Our national mapping exercise highlighted interventions spanning education, regeneration, criminal justice, leisure, health and welfare fields – though in many cases goals around aspirations were implicit in the service design and stated objectives. We categorised these initiatives into 5 broadly defined approaches:

- Human capabilities (e.g. Gifted and Talented programme)
- Physical and economic regeneration (e.g. Building Schools for the Future)
- Incentives/removal of financial barriers (e.g. Educational Maintenance Allowance)
- Empowerment (e.g. Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders)
- Information and Inspiration (e.g. the Reach programme)

In total we reviewed over 80 interventions and this mapping exercise highlighted a number of potential gaps and areas for development, including:

- Availability of Interventions targeted at 11-14s
- Availability of interventions working with the 'average' ability range (not just the most challenging, or most talented pupils)
- Availability of wide range of positive role models
- Opportunities for disadvantaged young people to take up 'horizon-broadening' experiences
- Limited engagement of businesses

It was clear from the mapping exercise that there was significant investment across different policy agendas and a multitude of different approaches to influencing attitudes, values and expectations relevant to aspirations and attainment. However, our work highlighted a lack of coordination between these different initiatives and a lack of alignment of individual projects with other complementary work.

To ensure that provision is 'more than the sum of its parts', our analysis suggests that services need to be guided by an overarching theory of change and make their shared goals more explicit. Indeed, interventions need to be better aligned and tailored to the specific characteristics and circumstances of their particular communities.

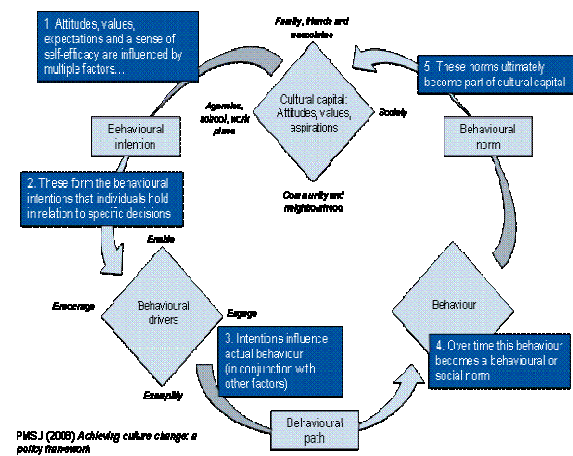
Cultural capital framework

A cultural capital framework can offer a helpful model to understand the process by which attitudes, aspirations and values can influence behaviours and outcomes (PMSU, 2008). It can also provide a useful model around which to align local initiatives.

Attitudes, values, aspirations and sense of self-efficacy – our cultural capital - are developed by our interaction with the immediate environment around us (our parents, peers and role models, neighbours, schooling and workplace) and the wider society-wide influences acting upon us (such

as the economy, technology, media and development of new ideas and innovations).

The extent to which cultural capital influences behaviour, and hence outcomes, depends on the strength of the relationships between attitudes and the desired outcome. Our review found strong links between aspirations and attainment, indicating that the cultural capital model may offer a useful model for behavioural change.



Discussion

This paper has sought to highlight a number of key findings for policy makers concerned about closing the educational attainment gap.

Aspirations matter:

Young people's aspirations and those of their parents influence their educational attainment and later life outcomes. 11-14 is a key age range when young people move from idealistic to more realistic ambitions. Providing information and inspiration during these key years would appear to be important in helping young people to set ambitious, achievable aspirations and to persevere towards their goals.

Community context matters: We know that young people in certain types of neighbourhoods are less likely to develop ambitious educational aspirations. These neighbourhoods tend to have high levels of

deprivation. However deprived communities are not all the same: young people in some very deprived communities have high aspirations.

Certain community characteristics such as close-knit social networks, a sense of isolation from broader opportunities and a history of economic decline appear to be associated with low aspirations. Low levels of bridging social capital can restrict young people's horizons and access to opportunities. These findings underscore the importance of building a detailed picture of individual communities, recognising that not all disadvantaged areas are the same and that one-size-fits-all policy prescriptions are likely to achieve limited success.

Inspiring Communities: Our qualitative work suggests that there is significant untapped potential in many deprived communities. Significant investment is flowing into many deprived communities, but is not always effectively coordinated and tailored to circumstances at the neighbourhood level.

Following the findings from this study, the Government announced in *the New Opportunities White Paper* that it will invest £10m in 15 'Inspiring Communities'.

The aim is for 15 neighbourhood partnerships to deliver and test locally designed programmes of activities which inspire young people and support them to work towards realistic, ambitious goals and to improve their educational attainment. In doing so, new and existing work with young people, their parents and the wider community should be brought together with the aims of:

- Broadening young people's horizons
- Providing advice and inspiration to young people
- Raising parents' own aspirations and self-confidence, so that they can support their children to take up opportunities and to make positive, informed choices; and
- Developing strong social networks in and beyond communities, raising community pride in young people and drawing out the talents of the community to support young people

Local campaigns will be led by a dynamic local leader who will have access to specialist social marketing and financial advice. The Government will commission a rigorous independent evaluation of the Inspiring Communities programme to provide lessons both about the process of partnership formation and campaign development and also to measure the short and medium term impacts on young people and their communities.

If successful, not only would this programme provide new tools to address gaps in attainment, it might also provide a new template for community-based partnership working.

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