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Performing desires: the dilemma of aspirations and educational attainment

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The authors critique the mechanistic notion of aspirations running through much research and policy-making on educational and vocational outcomes. They present a performative model, with individuals drawing on limited social resources to express aspirations within constrained contexts. This argument is illustrated by discussion of the findings of large-scale empirical investigation of the aspirations of 490 young people in three UK schools. Five themes from this analysis are presented and it is argued that these need to be explored in order to enrich and expand our understanding of young people's expression of aspirations.

Introduction

Aspirations have become a key educational policy driver in the UK and are seen as one of the critical levers for improving educational attainment and raising skills. Increasing aspirations is at the heart of educational policy, as shown by the recent *Higher standards, better schools for all* White Paper (Department of Education and Skills [DfES], 2005a), the *Education and skills* White Paper (DfES, 2005b) and *Youth matters*, the Green Paper on young people (DfES, 2005c). Educational success and the factors supporting that success are recognised as crucial contributions to social mobility for disadvantaged groups. This aspect of education policy also chimes with social inclusion policy and urban policy, where the stated aim of the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal is to ensure that 'no-one should be seriously disadvantaged by where they live' (Cabinet Office, 2001, p. 8). The emphasis on aspirations shows no signs of abating—in 2009 the UK government set out plans for public reform intending to lift the aspirations of 2.4 million children (Cabinet Office, 2009).

The assumption underlying the current policy emphasis is that aspirations are presently too low, particularly among children from disadvantaged backgrounds and neighbourhoods, and that raising them is key to high achievement in education and

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the labour market as well as upward social mobility. There is a need to be cautious here, however, as the drive to lift aspirations often contains a tendency to view aspirations as personal attributes that the individual can influence to some degree. *The Guardian* (Wintour & Stratton, 2008) has suggested that the children affected by aspirations policies are seen as lacking ambition and that this kind of view could easily lead to a deficit view of aspirations, holding young people 'responsible' for their putatively atrophied ambition.

In this paper we refute the possibility that aspirations are indicators of personal shortcomings in young people or families and suggest that it is necessary to understand and acknowledge the socially constructed aspects of aspirations more fully. We present the view that aspirations arise from, and are embedded within, social contexts where they have performative value. In other words, the aspirations expressed by young people reflect the expectations and constraints inherent within their setting, rather than a free choice of desired outcome, and are determined as much by a the needs of the moment as by a genuine expectation for the future. The discussion of this model is made concrete by examination of recent research examining the aspirations of 490 young people in three major UK cities. Contrary to the current policy discourse, we found that young people of both genders, from deprived and non-deprived neighbourhoods and from different ethnic groups all have high educational and occupational aspirations. This calls for careful consideration of what 'aspirations' tell us.

Situating aspirations in the policy climate

Given the number of recent publications referring to aspirations, it seems that the concept is everywhere (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; European Group for Integrated Social Research, 2001; Frome *et al.*, 2006), yet we would argue that as aspirations have started to turn up more frequently in the policy discourse there has been a reduction in the clarity of the idea. There is a notable lack of rigorous thought about what exactly aspirations are, where they come from, what affects them and whether they actually make a difference to educational and occupational outcomes. Perhaps most strikingly, there is little that shows raising aspirations directly raises achievement.

The concept of aspirations has a long history in educational, psychological, sociological and labour market research and aspirations are presented as putative shaping forces for educational, occupational and personal objectives:

> Occupational aspirations and expectations have a long-standing role in the sociology of work and education literatures as predictors of future educational activity (e.g. university attendance) and eventual occupational attainment and status. (Andres *et al.*, 1999, p. 262)

The aim of raising aspirations, in many cases, is to break a perceived link between low aspirations and the lack of educational achievement for students who live in poverty (DfES, 2005a, 2005b). The way aspirations are used in policy is based on three connected propositions. These are:

1. Low aspirations lead to low achievement (defined in a variety of ways).
2. Some people from poorer backgrounds have depressed aspirations, affecting their ultimate job prospects.
3. Raising aspirations will break this cycle and lead to improved social and economic outcomes for youth from deprived backgrounds.

These propositions seem reasonable, but can all too easily mask the complexities inherent to education and the array of social influences upon it. It ignores the inequalities that already influence educational outcomes (Coombs, 1994) and can lead to a view of aspirations as personal attributes under the individual's control. We can see this clearly in the Morrison *et al.* (2008) research brief for the DCSF, in which they claim that 'young people make choices that influence whether their potentialities are cultivated or remain untapped' (p. i). In this case, and in many of other policy documents, people are cast as free agents able to transcend their circumstances, with their occupational aims reflecting their personal qualities alone. While some of the research in the area does account for external influences on aspirations (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Morrison *et al.*, 2008), the focus of policy initiatives on raising aspirations for those young people who live in poverty is unclear regarding where the aspirations lodge and how they can be influenced.

The focus on aspirations can lead to people being blamed for being poor and at the bottom of the social hierarchy on the grounds that this simply reflects their own aspirational deficits. In an extreme argument people living in poverty are responsible for not hoping for more for themselves—critical sociology of education suggests this view is implicit in much educational policy (St. Clair & Sandlin, 2004). This view ignores the bearing of social and individual factors upon aspirations and the role that aspirations have in reflecting educational and occupational outcomes as much as determining them.

The rather simplified and mechanistic view of aspirations driving some policy has attracted criticism. One review of the Aimhigher policy (Baxter *et al.*, 2007), which is an attempt to increase the participation of historically excluded groups in UK higher education, examines critiques of aspirations as a policy instrument. For these authors the most significant critique is that policies based on aspirations value middle-class ambitions and worldviews most highly and can imply that marginalised groups are lacking in some way. The authors refer to Bridges' (2005) argument that the perceived aspirational deficit reflects a traditional occupational hierarchy where intellectual jobs (attained by academic prowess) are most valued. Baxter *et al.* (2007) summarise these objections to aspiration-centred work by suggesting that it may be mistaken to focus upon what the student lacks, rather than upon the ways in which social structures provide opportunity to some while denying it to others. In other words, the problem may not be what people want, but rather what they are constrained or allowed to achieve. Outcomes may be far more strongly influenced by structures of opportunity than by aspiration or motivation.

Similarly, educational sociologists can be sceptical about the notion of aspirations because of their awareness that family and parental history, home culture and

community worldview can contribute to a deep alienation from education that individuals cannot simply choose to change. As one writer on home–school relationships in the USA puts it:

> The unequal distribution of economic, human, cultural, and social capital…constrain[s] parents' involvement options, inclinations, and relations with schools…African American and Latino parents are more likely than those of the dominant culture to have a skeptical, ambivalent, and potentially adversarial stance toward school programs that have historically failed their communities. (Auerbach, 2007, p. 252)

An oppositional stance towards schools, and a related resistance to the discourse of aspirations, could well not be a failure in the individuals concerned but an informed response to historical and cultural context. As disturbing as this may seem to some educators, supposedly low aspirations may be a strategic move on the part of the educated to avoid recapitulating negative outcomes.

The pressing concern, given the emphasis placed on aspirations, is to understand more fully what they represent, how they are shaped and what long-term effects this shaping is likely to have on educational and economic outcomes. Previous research on aspirations makes strong and convincing arguments that certain factors influence the aspirations identified by young people, but tends not to place aspirations within a long-term process of decision making and development. The balance of this article attempts to address the first of these questions in a responsible and empirically informed way.

A performative view of aspirations

In this discussion we adopt the view that aspirations cannot be seen as inert factors in educational progress and must instead be seen as inherently performative. Specifically, we see them as serving a specific purpose within a specific context. The idea of performativity is derived from Austen's (1962) work, which looked at the way language achieves social ends beyond communication. For Austen performative language was language that brought a situation into existence. The best known example is 'I now pronounce you man and wife', an utterance that brings a state of marriage into being. Our perspective on performativity is also informed by Giddens' (1993) notion of structuration and the vital contribution of both structure and agency to social formations. Aspirations can be viewed as constructions reflecting both the holder's structural placement and their agentic understanding: where they are and what they can do (Rainey & Borders, 1997). When young people are asked what they want to do when they are older (one of the most common approaches to capturing aspirations) their response reflects a framework of influences including their social position, their perceptions of the opportunities open to them and, very importantly, the fact that they are being asked what their aspirations are by a particular person in a particular setting. In essence we suggest that there are no 'true' aspirations, simply responses that young people find effective to utter in particular situations.

This does not imply that aspirations are trivial or insignificant. Given the high levels of emphasis on vocational ends in UK schools from an early age, the aspirations

expressed by students matter a great deal and have value and consequences attached to them. In one sense they represent the future self, or the answer to the stereotypical question of 'what do want to do when you grow up?' In another sense, however, aspirations can be used to deflect external expectations and represent what young people need to tell others about what they want to do when they grow up.

Aspirations also reflect the cognitive and social resources available to young people when they formulate their response. Wyn and White (2000) are cautious about expressed aspirations and contend that adolescents demonstrate far less individualism than has been suggested in previous research. What others have presumed to be agency and individualism in the life course is really just patterned behaviour reflecting the influence of social structures on young people's lives. Wyn and White argue that research needs to be much more sensitive to the ways young people actively reshape their lives in ways that both reflect and feedback into contemporary social arrangements.

The structural and situational aspects of aspirations should not obscure the agentic dimensions. Eccles and Wigfield (2002) have explicitly warned against over-rationalisation of aspirations and have turned their interest towards the dynamic nature of expectations and their embeddedness in specific task domains. The empirical evidence suggests that 'even during the very early elementary grades children appear to have distinct beliefs about how good they are albeit in different achievement domains' (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, p. 75). As they age, children become less positive in their achievement-related beliefs—they become more 'realistic'. In essence, children construct a worldview where they are aware of what they are good at and how much worth this ability has and, as they age, they accommodate this awareness into their aspirations.

The degree to which aspirations are seen as attainable by the individual is an important component in this process (Zimmerman, 2000). The importance of self-efficacy is reflected in the finding that confidence in one's own ability can override powerful external factors such as labour market or social class (Furlong & Biggart, 1999). This does not imply that it should be seen as the individual's fault if they do not overcome these factors, but underlines the importance of the individual's agency in decision-making within their life context.

Additionally, it is important to remember that aspirations are also strongly influenced by opportunities (Furlong & Cartmel 1997; Andres et al. 1999). This suggests that simply making people aware of more options may in itself lead to higher aspirations, but is limited in that the opportunities have to be realistic for that set of individuals in that specific context. High aspirations alone cannot deal with barriers associated with poverty, minority status, limited educational engagement and other life circumstances (Coombs, 1994). There is a reciprocal relationship between what people want and what they see as stopping them. Aspirations represent a compromise between the desired and the possible and different people may hold aspirations closer to pragmatic expectations or cling to escapist hopes. Adopting a performative view of aspiration construction helps to underline the dynamic and diverse nature of aspirations and perhaps goes some way to avoiding a one-dimensional perspective where 'higher' aspirations are always better and always realised.

It is profoundly challenging to think through the subtleties of aspirations because of the deep tension between structural and agentic aspects. Aspirations matter, but they do not necessarily transcend the social circumstances in which they are formed. Yet if they do not, education collapses into simple reproduction, which is neither desirable nor accurate. In our view, a dynamic, performative model of aspirations can help to address these tensions. Our basic argument is that understanding the way aspirations contribute to a person's movement through educational and vocational systems requires going beyond unidimensional snapshot approaches.

Figure 1 shows the model we apply to our analysis. It is a relatively simple model, but one that has significant consequences for conceiving aspirations. It shows aspirations as influenced by place, family, individual and school factors. Each of these is, of course, not a single factor but a cluster of influences, any of which may be the most influential at any given time. Family factors are likely to be very strong at certain points in the young person's life, but may well be eclipsed by the peer group or the school at other points. Within place, membership of a faith community might be highly influential for a long time but then be challenged by a growing realism about the actual opportunities in the local labour market.

As well as development over time, the model underlines the outcomes of aspirations. These outcomes can be considered at various time points. There is the immediate outcome of expressing an aspiration such as parental feedback or comments from friends. Mid-range outcomes include growing interest in school subjects or in a specific musical form. Then there is the long-term outcome, such as the job the individual finally gets. As these outcomes accumulate they feedback to the aspiration, creating a dynamic loop. Aspirations can be seen as shaped by a variety of forms of feedback, including through key relationships such as the peer group and family and through opportunity structures such as the local labour market (Furlong & Biggart, 1999).

Aspirations are far from static and will change considerably throughout an individual's life. This change may represent changes in social circumstances or changes in an individual's reactions to the same circumstances. There is some evidence that key individuals can have a strong influence on aspirations, but we do not know when this is the case and what other factors come into play. As aspirations are accepted more

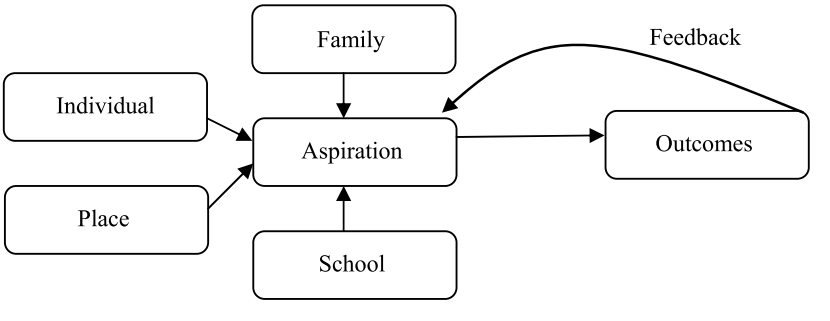


Figure 1. A dynamic model of aspirations

or less well and prove more or less useful, then they will change in form and content. The key insight of the performative model is that these changes will be responsive to the circumstances and the needs of the time and constructed from the diverse resources available to the individual.

The study

The development of the performative model of aspirations took place at the same time as the authors were involved in conducting a large scale study of schoolchildren in three cities in the UK in order to understand their aspirations more fully. The presentation of the data here is not intended as a test of the performative model and neither is the model presented as the final word in analysing the data. However, it is interesting to use the perspective as an analytical tool for some recent empirical data and note what insights it may allow. This section describes the study, the next looks at the findings and the following section discusses them from the point of view of a performative approach.

The study, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, aimed to understand how aspirations are formed by the individual from the resources available in four domains: place (reflecting labour market and neighbourhood), school, family and individual. Our main research strategy was personal interviews with a large sample of pupils from three secondary schools situated in three cities in the UK. Interviews, with both quantitative and qualitative aspects, were conducted with 490 12- and 13-year-old students, as well as 159 parents and 25 teachers and community members in three

Table 1. Description of the research sites

	Filton School Glasgow n = 150(%)	Bridgeworth School Nottingham n = 137(%)	East City School London n = 203(%)
Gender			
Male	59	55	59
Female	41	45	41
Family background			
White British	81	93	3
Asian	8	1	64
Black	2	4	19
Chinese	1	–	–
Other	1	–	10
Mixed	7	2	3
Levels of deprivation			
Lowest quintile	60	75	93
Second lowest	9	23	6
Middle quintile	9	2	1
Second highest	9	2	1
Highest quintile	12	0	0

schools in deprived areas in three British cities (see Table 1). These cities provide an opportunity to examine how aspirations are formed in different economic, socio-demographic and neighbourhood circumstances, though all schools were chosen for their location in areas of disadvantage.

As much as possible we selected schools with a range of social classes and ethnic backgrounds represented. The selection of the schools was purposive rather than random. The schools were selected with the aid of the Index of Multiple Deprivation and knowledge of the geography of school catchment areas and with guidance from the local authority. This means that their catchment includes areas of disadvantage and that there are substantial numbers of children from disadvantaged households in all three schools.

The primary measure of poverty in this study is the Index of Multiple Deprivation (Communities and Local Government, 2007). This is an area-based measure that allows any household in the UK to be allocated a score for the measure of deprivation experienced in that area. This score is derived from a number of key indicators, each of which is allocated a specific weight in that score. Examples within the health domain are 'years of potential life lost' and 'comparative illness and disability ratio'. For Scotland we used the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, which uses the same approach to derive similar measures. Individual demographic data were collected from the young people and postcodes that were then coded based on the indices found in the English or Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation and these indices were used to help determine levels of deprivation of the participants in this study. Most of the young people were from the more deprived end of the index of multiple deprivation, meaning they were very likely to experience significant poverty and disadvantage.

The participants were young people in Year 8 (England) or S1 (Scotland) from each of the schools. The young people were aged 12 or 13 at the time of the surveys, which were carried out in school year 2007–2008. The number of participants per school varied based on the size of the year group, taking into account the potential for young people to move in and out of the catchment. East City School in London was identified as having a more transient pupil population and thus there were a greater number of young people interviewed at the school. Bridgeworth in Nottingham had a much smaller year-group size and a resultant smaller number of participants available to interview, as was the case at Filton school in Glasgow.

While educational aspirations can be categorised in a relatively straightforward way using intended school leaving age or intended qualifications, it is far more difficult to classify occupational aspirations. We had to map the occupational desires of young people across onto the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC: Office for National Statistics, 2008). This divides jobs into nine categories based on the types of work performed and level of skill required:

1. Managers and senior officials
2. Professional occupations
3. Associate professional and technical occupations

4. Administrative and secretarial occupations
5. Skilled trades occupations
6. Personal service occupations
7. Sales and customer service occupations
8. Process, plant and machine operatives
9. Elementary occupations

Within each category there are breakdowns referring to specific jobs, but at the level of the nine main groups the SOC is hierarchical—jobs seen as more skilled, better rewarded and more desirable are at the top end of the chart. So, aspiring to have an occupation in category SOC-2 is more ambitious than aspiring to category SOC-7. In labour-force analysis the nine categories are sometimes collapsed, in a very straightforward way, into three groupings: 1–3, 4–6 and 7–9. For most of our analysis we used the nine categories to order aspirations, though we also compared with the results of a three-category approach where it appeared it might offer a more useful insight.

Findings

One of the central questions in the determination of aspirations is what a young person says they want to do for an occupation when they are older. There is a need for some caution, however, because young people can answer this question with their ideal or dream occupation rather than a realistic assessment. The flow of questions started by asking 'if you could do whatever you wanted, what kind of job would you like to do when you are older?' The young people where then asked what they liked about the idea of this job and what gave them the idea for this job. The next question was whether the young people thought they would be able to get this job. Whatever they answered to this question we next asked what they realistically *expected* to do when they were older. This second, realistic, occupation was also explored regarding where they got the idea from, what they liked about it and so on. Later in the interview there were several questions designed to identify how much the young people actually knew about what they would have to do to get the job they had identified. Overall, the questions were well triangulated regarding the differences between ideal and realistic occupations and how informed the respondents were about each.

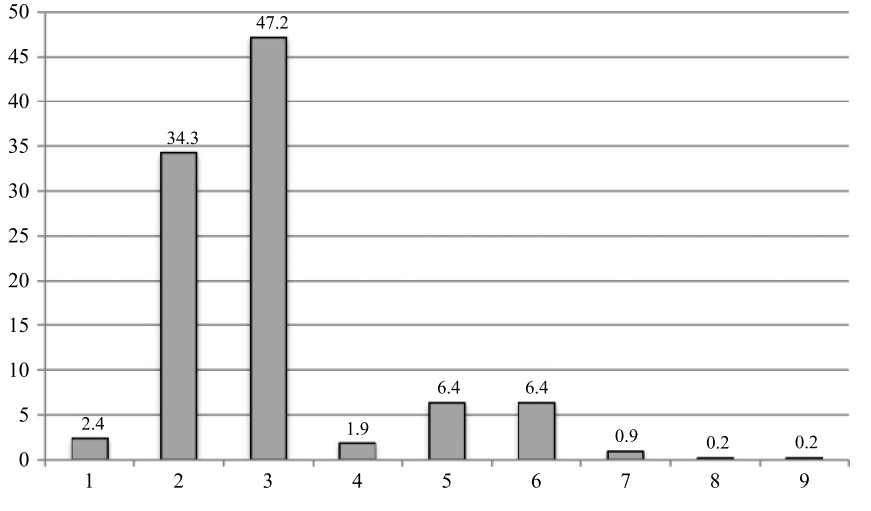
In this study, we referred to the answer to the first question (which all 490 interviewees could answer) as the 'ideal' occupation. The most frequently mentioned ideal vocations were associate professional and technical occupations (SOC-3). This category includes culture, media and sports occupations. Specifically, there were a large number of young people who wanted to be footballers, athletes or in arts-related occupations like an actor/actress, fashion designer or graphic designer. Some of the other occupations that young people spoke about with some frequency (approximately 10% of young people for each category) were health professionals, such as doctors, and business and public service professionals, such as lawyers and accountants. Additionally, 7% of young people desired to have occupations in science and

technology (crime scene investigators or scientist) and 6% of young people desired to work in the trades (joiner, plumber) (see Figure 2).

Part of our research was examining the actual occupations of people living in the areas surrounding the three schools. When the SOC is used to compare the distribution of occupations in the area with the pattern of jobs desired by the young people, the ideal jobs are significantly skewed towards jobs requiring more education and experience. In all three cases the aspirations of the young people interviewed were considerably more ambitious than the models of occupations they saw around them. There seems to be little evidence of deflated ambitions directly related to the labour force characteristics of the area.

In some ways, realistic aspirations attempt to capture some of the influences on occupational aspirations and the ways they are shaped by real world factors. Therefore, this question recognises the young persons' evaluation of their own ability and achievements. Even at the age of 12 or 13, young people are aware that not everybody can be a footballer. Of course, the responses to this question still reflect performative pressures so we do not claim they reflect a 'real' answer. But they do provide insights into how likely the attainment of the ideal is seen by the young people and what sort of fallback position they have identified.

When the young people were asked if they believed they could get their ideal job, 67% of young people stated that they believed they could. Relatively few (19%) did not know if they could get the ideal job and even fewer (9%) felt that they would not. The young people in this study were relatively confident and felt that their ideal aspirations were achievable. Nonetheless, 69% of young people were able to name an



Notes: 1 = managers and senior officials; 2 = professional occupations; 3 = associate professional and technical occupations; 4 = administrative and secretarial occupations; 5 = skilled trades occupations; 6 = personal service occupations; 7 = sales and customer service occupations; 8 = process plant and machine operatives occupations; 9 = elementary occupations

Figure 2. Young people's ideal occupations by Standard Occupational Classification (%)

alternative to their ideal job when asked what they expected to do when they were older given the constraints of the real world. It is interesting to note that 31% did not know or chose not to answer, perhaps suggesting that this group was particularly committed to the ideal aspiration or had not considered the possibility of not attaining it. These factors did not have any consistent gender or ethnic patterning. However, there was a finding of marginal significance in relation to socio-economic group suggesting that those from more deprived areas believed they would be less likely to get their ideal job.

The SOC categories for realistic aspirations were considerably different from ideal occupations. Around two thirds (67%) of responding young people expected to have managerial or professional jobs (SOC-1–3), lower than those young people who had these jobs as their ideal occupation (84%). A greater number of young people (26%) expected to have jobs in administrative, trades or personal service occupations (SOC-4–6), whereas only 15% of the young people had these as their ideal occupations. Young people expecting to have sales, processor and machine and elementary occupations (SOC-7–9) increased from 1% as ideal to 7% as realistic. Again, no gender, ethnic or social class patterns were apparent. Figure 3 shows these figures in graphical form.

In order to put the desires and expectations for this study into context, the ideal and realistic occupational expectations were compared to the overall breakdown of the UK workforce. We have followed the convention of collapsing the nine SOC categories into three major groups for the purposes of this analysis. In the UK, 41% of people actually work in managerial, professional and associate professional and

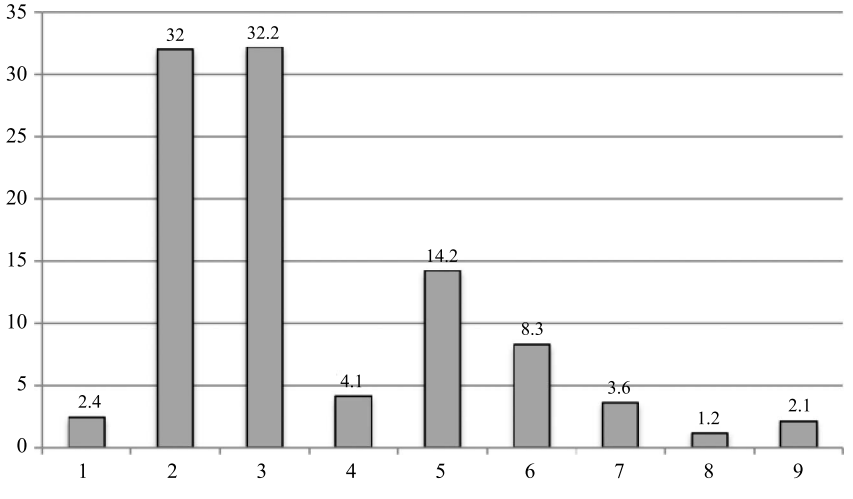


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Figure 3. Young people's realistic aspirations by Standard Occupational Classification (%)

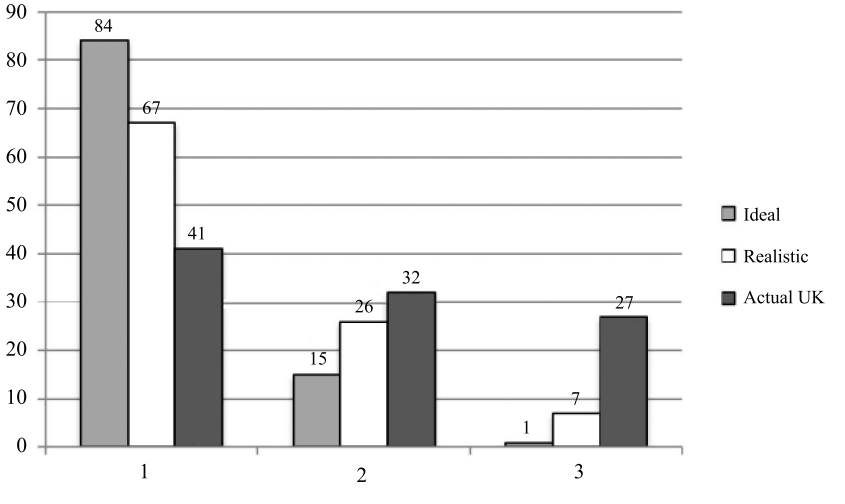
technical occupations (SOC-1–3), 32% in administrative, trade and personal service occupations (SOC-4–6) and 27% in sales, process and machine and the elementary occupations (SOC-7–9).

Figure 4 shows ideal and realistic aspirations mapped against the current UK pattern of employment. It seems to indicate quite clearly that the proportion of young people hoping for work—both ideally and realistically—in the top three SOC categories is far higher than the current workforce can support.

Participants were largely confident that they could achieve their chosen occupations, with 69% of young people stating that they believed they could attain their realistic aspirations. Furthermore, the young people were quite aware of the kinds of educational requirements needed to attain their desired educational aspirations, so it seemed that their choice of realistic aspirations recognised their self-perceived ability to complete the prerequisites.

It seems that the young people in this study had strong vocational aspirations, though there was a tendency for clustering of ideal occupations around certain categories, such as professional footballers. In order to address the issue of particular glamorous jobs skewing the data, analysis was conducted after taking out the most difficult to achieve aspirations (such as actors and footballers) to see if it would significantly affect the comparison between desired employment and the UK labour market, and it did not. These young Britons, even at the age of 12 and 13, were thinking about the future and aiming high, both realistically and ideally.

An important aspect of our study was asking the young people why they held the aspirations they did. The young people spoke about a variety of influences on their occupational choices, including media influences, comments from their teachers or a



Notes: 1 = managers, professionals and associate technical occupations; 2 = administrative, skilled trades and personal service occupations; 3 = sales, process and machine and elementary occupations

Figure 4. Young people's ideal and realistic occupations compared to UK breakdown of occupations by Standard Occupational Classification (%)

class that they had been taking. These factors explained the number of young people wanting to be crime scene investigators or actors. Two factors were predominantly mentioned. The first was family, friends or relatives who were employed in the named occupation or who told them that it would a good occupation to strive for. The second was some activity they were already involved with that was related to the occupation (for example working with computers or playing with animals). The majority of young people were able to identify some kind of influence on their occupational choices.

These findings about the influences on occupational choices were consistent across the three different cities and across ethnic, gender and social class differences, leading to the question of why the young people were expressing similar explanations of how they came to their occupational decisions. One of the possible explanations for the lack of differentiation is that 11- and 12-year-olds may be too young to show differentiation as they are unaware of the constraints and uneven social prospects they face as a result of this social position. Additionally, the policy push and increased emphasis on discussing aspirations may in turn affect young people's expression of their aspirations. The performative model of aspirations provides a potentially useful way to consider these possibilities.

Understanding the performance of aspirations

The picture that emerges from these data is not a picture of low aspirations. The young people in this survey seem to take work and education seriously. They are concerned about getting a job and can express high aspirations. Rather than being a barrier, their current aspirations are higher than the UK labour market can fulfil. Taking a performative approach to aspirations can provide some explanation of these results, given that the previous literature would lead us to expect strong structuring and differentiation of aspirations, and allows a more nuanced picture of aspirational choice and maintenance to be developed. This emerges in five themes: the validity of the aspirations expressed, the influence of policy, the resources available to young people, the operation of feedback and the possibility of alienation.

The first theme arises from the possibility that the aspirations expressed may not represent what people want in any profound or meaningful way, especially in terms of the hierarchical nature ascribed to them on an occupational scale. For example, the complex of gender issues around aspirations is not well accommodated by a strongly masculine model of achievement. The narrowness of aspirations as represented in the existing literature appears to reflect an assumption that everybody should want very similar educational and vocational careers. This may be far from the case. This assumption is reinforced by the tendency not to include the perspectives of young people in the research, as '(t)here is a perhaps surprising absence of the voices and opinions of young people themselves…in the work of social scientists' (McDowell, 2000, p. 391). We followed previous research by conducting formal interviews with the young people and asking outright what they wanted to do—could the results have been different if peer interviews or other bottom-up methods had been used?

At the same time aspirations are not fictional. They derive from something and may well be genuinely held by the young people interviewed. The clearest way to conceptualise this may well be a loose coupling between the individual's ideas and the aspiration expressed. The nature and direction of that coupling will be mediated by the performative demands of the situation.

One of those performative demands is created by the policy context of the last few years, which has tended to emphasise the importance of high aspirations. It is possible that schools, in responding to these policies, have taught young people to express acceptably ambitious vocational outcomes. This could explain the two thirds of young people who have a backup plan—it may be that these more realistic options are closer to the expectations that the young people hold for themselves. Nonetheless, they have learned the lesson that acceptable ambitions, whatever the individual's class or educational background, are all to do with the prophylactic aspiration to professionality. This may strongly influence what people say when they are asked what they want to be.

The performative model can provide an interesting insight into the lack of differentiation of aspirations. Put simply, it is possible that young people express similar aspirations because they are acting within a similar context. At the stage they were interviewed, the young people were relatively new to secondary school and had not yet made selections of courses or exams in the run up to GCSEs, A-levels and Highers. In effect, they were in an undifferentiated period of schooling where the universality of primary schooling still held sway and the reality of transitions to post-compulsory education and employment had not yet become clear. In this situation, they are likely to have similar resources available to them and will therefore tend to perform similar aspirations. It may well be that as the differentiation inherent to later secondary school starts to become more relevant to these young people then their aspirations will also begin to differentiate.

When we turn our attention to the resources used by these young people to create aspirations there is a sense of immediacy to them. They arise from the young person's direct context and inevitably reflect social context extremely strongly. They are ambitious, yet also safe in many ways. They are narrowly vocational—we were struck by the extent to which young people named a job rather than 'what they wanted to be' in a broader sense. Individuals found it surprisingly easy to link the expressed aspiration to the resources used to construct it in a linear way.

It is important to recognise that the notion of loose coupling is helpful here, too. The same environmental resources may be used in different ways by different people in constructing their aspirations, confounding clear mapping of social context to aspirations. For one individual, for example, the school drama club could be an essential support for their aspiration to work in the theatre, while it is completely irrelevant to another. It is likely that there is some interaction between factors, so that family resources can change the way school resources are viewed, but it seems that there will also be a number of personal characteristics such as taste and self-image involved.

A further theme is the complexity of the feedback loops operating. The relationship between individual and school, for example, is not one way. If the individual receives

praise from the school in a particular area, they are likely to approach this area more positively and this, in turn, is likely to elicit more praise. Taking into account the comments above on self-efficacy, it is quite possible for an individual to do well at maths, get a good mark, come to believe it is a strength, aspire to become an engineer, work hard at maths and get a good mark in a self-reinforcing cycle. Again, the process of aspiration formation must be seen as dynamic and interactive.

Our final theme is the possibility that aspirations are strongly shaped by the young people's experience of alienation. A credible way to view them, given their distance from attainability, is as protective camouflage draped over severely alienated lives. It could well be that to some of these young people it does not matter what they express as aspirations because it is all fundamentally out of reach. Put crudely, working-class kids and middle-class kids can name the same aspirations and gain the approval that provides, but with very different consequences. Middle-class people get to be lawyers; very few working-class people do. However, both may gain advantages by naming an aspiration to be a lawyer.

Overall, when the vocational outcomes available to young people living in disadvantaged communities and the relatively low degree of social mobility available to them are taken into account it seems that there is something more subtle than a straight expression of expectations at the heart of aspirations. The five themes we have identified here are not meant to undermine the notion of aspirations, but to push towards some of the complexities of the term and its application. Aspirations cannot be seen simply as straightforward mechanistic outcomes towards which young people orient themselves.

Conclusion

We believe that moving towards a performative view of aspirations could have some important implications for future policy work. It moves the emphasis away from deficit thinking towards a resource-based model, with the concomitant assumption that people are doing the best they can with what is available to them. This is a more humane view than the current bootstrapism found in quite a lot of literature on aspirations. The idea that aspirations can serve more than one purpose, and are constructed by individuals to serve those purposes, seems to add considerable depth to the concept. Unfortunately, it also makes using aspirations as a solid leverage point for policy highly problematic. Aspirations will potentially move in the face of policy initiatives, but outcomes may not.

In this study there was little evidence of any poverty of aspirations considering the number of young people that aspired to higher-status jobs. The high aspirations expressed by study participants raise some fascinating questions, especially when it is acknowledged that social factors strongly influence educational and vocational outcomes. It seems that the three propositions regarding the key role of aspirations listed earlier are not reflected in our data.

Our analysis of the results suggests that policy efforts to raise aspirations in school may have had some success. However, this success may well be limited to changing

the context in which aspirations are uttered and therefore the performative rules. Children may have learned from vocationally-driven curriculum that it is important to be able to state an employment aspiration (as the children almost universally could) and preferably a high status and economically rewarding one. What remains far more problematic is affecting the material and cultural factors that affect actual outcomes rather than the outcomes aspired to.

One element of the conventional wisdom about disadvantage is its perpetuation by the relative isolation of poor neighbourhoods and the development of inward looking and unambitious norms, with education not highly valued. This study challenges that assumption and asks us to look beyond individuals for the mechanisms of disadvantage. The dilemma of this analysis is that increasing outcomes for disadvantaged groups does require the expression of strong aspirations, but it is difficult to know whether those expressions are purely performative or whether they will underpin the possibility of future success.

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