Article

ecsj

Education, Citizenship and
Social Justice
7(2) 129–143

DOI: 10.1177/1746197912440857
esj.sagepub.com
SAGE

‘My parents have stressed that since I was a kid’: Young minority ethnic British citizens and the phenomenon of aspirational capital

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Abstract

This article investigates retrospectively and prospectively the educational and career aspirations and experiences of young minority ethnic British citizens. It focuses on one aspect of a larger mixed methods study, that is, qualitative research involving in-depth interviews with a stratified sample of 20 young men and women of minority ethnic origins aged 14–24, and at different stages of education, employment and non-employment. It argues that social and cultural capitals play a significant role in enabling young minority ethnic citizens to succeed in education and careers and become valuable members of society. Furthermore, it introduces the notion of ‘aspirational capital’ as a crucial extension of, or substitute for, cultural and social capitals, depending on the familial background of the young people, and contends that it is a strong motivating force in improving the life chances of young minority ethnic British citizens.

Keywords

aspirational capital, ethnic minorities, young citizens, Britain, social capital, cultural capital

Introduction

Age determines income to an extent that varies according to educational capital and occupation, and occupation is itself partly determined by educational capital and also by gender and inherited cultural or social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). There is a great deal of polarity between young people who are well qualified and from privileged families and those who do not have qualifications and employment and are therefore disadvantaged and socially excluded. Citizens of the same country, thus, have different experiences of growing up due to a variety of factors. While class is one of them, ethnicity is another significant factor (Basit, 2009). This has implications for social justice.

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Although educational provision and career opportunities may be available to all young people, some are not able to benefit from them because of the disparity in young people's needs, abilities and aspirations and the lack of cultural and social capital. This article argues that social and cultural capital play a significant role in enabling young minority ethnic British citizens to succeed in education and careers and become valuable members of society. Further, it discusses the notions of emotional capital and ethnic capital, and introduces the concept of 'aspirational capital', which is a crucial extension of, or substitute for, cultural and social capital, depending on the familial background of the young people, and contends that it is a strong motivating force in improving the life chances of young minority ethnic Britons.

Hanifan (1916) invoked the notion of social capital to urge the importance of community involvement for successful schools. For him, social capital referred to:

> Those tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely goodwill, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit. (cited in Putnam, 2000: 19)

Coleman (1994) considers social capital mainly as a way of understanding the relationship between social inequality and educational achievement. He argues that social capital is the set of resources that are embedded in family relations and community organization and are beneficial for the cognitive and social development of young people. Bourdieu (1997) views social capital as the combination of actual and potential resources that are linked to having a stable network of relationships that provide its members with the support of collectively owned capital. Social capital, as discussed by Hanifan, Coleman and Bourdieu, is evident in the structure of many ethnic minority families and communities in the developed world. Previous research in the UK shows the high educational aspirations of ethnic minority young people and their parents and the tremendous support provided to young people by their families (Mirza, 1992; Basit, 1997; Archer, 2003; Abbas, 2004).

The literature makes a distinction between bonding (or exclusive) and bridging (or inclusive) social capital. The former, by choice or necessity, is inward looking and supports exclusive identities and group homogeneity, whereas the latter is outward looking and encompasses people across diverse social divisions. Bonding social capital leads to reciprocity and solidarity, providing support for disadvantaged family and community members, particularly in ethnic minority communities. Bridging capital, conversely, helps community members to access external assets (see Putnam, 2000, for a helpful discussion). In this article, I shall propose bonding social capital as a phenomenon among minority ethnic British families, and how this social capital is transmitted by families to the next generation in the form of aspirational capital.

Social capital is closely linked to cultural capital. Bourdieu (1997) uses the concept of cultural capital to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success to the distribution of cultural capital. According to him, cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the embodied state, that is, in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods; and in the institutionalized state, which confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee. He argues that to a varying extent, and depending on the period, society and social class, cultural capital can be acquired without any deliberate inculcation, and quite unconsciously. This means that young people from educated, middle class families acquire cultural capital from their parents in a reflexive manner through observing, and interacting with, the older generation, which ultimately enables them to succeed as adults.

While similar in some ways, there are obvious differences between the theses of Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam in their conceptualization of the various forms of capital. The notions of both social and cultural capital have been critiqued and developed over the years. In particular, social capital has been thoroughly criticized (Raffo and Reeves, 2000; Leonard, 2004). More recently, Tramonte and Willms (2010) have extended the notion of cultural capital to distinguish between static and dynamic cultural capital. Drawing on data from 28 countries, they argue that dynamic cultural capital has strong effects on young people's schooling outcomes, whereas static cultural capital has a more modest impact.

Reay (2000) presents the idea of emotional capital to explain the positive and negative emotions that infuse mothers' activities regarding their involvement in their children's education. She notes the high levels of anxiety that embrace class and race, and examines the emotions of mothers of both working-class and middle-class backgrounds who do or do not experience academic-related anxiety on their children's behalf. She argues that the concept of emotional capital is helpful for disentangling some of the perplexing class and gender practices related to parental involvement in education. Modood (2004) proposes the notion of ethnic capital to explain the aspirations of minority ethnic parents for their children and the educational success of young people from underprivileged ethnic minority groups. While both emotional capital and ethnic capital are useful concepts, they only depict a partial analysis of parental aspirations regarding their children's success, as discussed below.

The world's developed countries seemingly have education mechanisms in place to ensure that all children have an equal chance of success. Nevertheless, disproportionate numbers of children who start from a position of disadvantage because of a lack of cultural and social capital fail to benefit from the education system and need additional support to achieve this aim. In the UK, successive governments have done little to take this ideal beyond the stage of rhetoric. This is despite setting up task forces and introducing major policy initiatives such as the Commission on Social Justice (1994) and, more recently, Every Child Matters (2003) and the subsequent Children Act (2004). Pring et al. (2009), in their review of the education and training of 14–19-year-olds, highlight the widening gap between the extremely rich and the extremely poor, and the relationship between poverty and educational aspirations and success. They contend that while the provision of good schooling, including an appropriate curriculum, well trained staff and adequate resources, can make a difference, educational reform must be complemented by more radical processes of social and economic transformation.

Methodology

The research reported in this article is part of a larger mixed methods study, which aimed to examine young citizens' transition to adulthood in a multicultural city in England. The sample comprised five groups of young people aged 14–24, at different stages of education, employment and non-employment. This included equal numbers of young men and women at the final stages of compulsory schooling in Years 10–11 of secondary school education (SE), in further education (FE), in higher education (HE), in employment (employed) and those who were not in education, employment or training (NEET). It was considered important to choose the sample from these groups because these are the crucial life stages for young people. It is during some of these phases that they make critical decisions about their education and careers, which ultimately affect their life chances; and other stages are the consequence of the education and training that they received earlier.

This article analyses the qualitative component of the research based on individual face to face in-depth interviews with 20 young minority ethnic citizens. These participants were chosen through stratified sampling from the questionnaire respondents in the earlier survey who had expressed their willingness to be interviewed. Interview participants included young British people of African Caribbean, Bangladeshi, Indian or Pakistani heritage, and included those from both middle-class and working-class backgrounds. I acknowledge the difficulty of determining an individual's class, and, in the absence of a more appropriate benchmark, the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) of occupations was used to ascertain the social class of the young people's parents, though admittedly, this is a simplistic way of dealing with a complex construct. Citations from interviews with the young people in the article are followed by their pseudonyms, gender, ethnic origin and phase of life, and their class is mentioned in the discussion as relevant.

Education and career as priorities

This article focuses on the themes of education and career, which were explored along with a number of other issues in the research. The young people were asked about their notions of education, and their reasons for continuing in, or withdrawing from, it. The majority of participants viewed education as a positive aspect in their lives. For example: 'Giving us knowledge and making us learn things; you've got your goals set out for you' (Shahida, female, Pakistani, SE); and 'Right now, because I'm a full time student, my main priority is education' (Rushmi, female, Indian, FE). Some felt apprehensive about the prospect of not getting further in education and training for a career:

> We have to try that extra bit harder … it depends on, like, what you want to be and what school you go to … I don't know if I'll ever get to be a nurse, because you have to go to university and people like me don't really go to university (Denise, female, African Caribbean, SE).

Because of her working class background and her minority ethnic status, Denise clearly viewed herself as different from her middle-class contemporaries to the extent that she believed she lacked the capital and resultant social skills that enable young people to enrol at university. In some young people's lives, there was an absence of social justice as well as social and cultural capital. For example: 'I need some support, I need some guidance, like which way to go, how to get a job, because each time I go and give a CV they don't even reply back' (Ayub, male, Pakistani, NEET). Apparently, these young people had no one to advise them about educational matters and, further, did not have the confidence and wherewithal to seek guidance from informed personnel and other relevant sources. Also, attending a poorly resourced inner city school did not prepare them for higher education:

> When you get to university, you see the other cultures, the other people, and their academic ability was far better than ours … We were doing networking in computing, and those that had done it before in secondary school, were well advanced in things that we had no experience of whatsoever. But that might be [because of] the school we went to. (Anish, male, Indian, HE)

As is evident from the comments above, those who lack social and cultural capital, and fail to receive social justice because of schooling that hinders their progress and impedes their life chances, face multiple disadvantages. According to Thrupp and Lupton (2006), there are numerous social justice arguments for taking school contexts more seriously and for giving more recognition

to the importance of social injustices in reproducing educational inequalities, so that there is a fairer provision of advice, resources and support in schools in less favourable contexts. As Sen (2009: xii) points out, 'institutions cannot but play a significant instrumental role in the pursuit of justice'.

Some young people, who were from educated and professional backgrounds, were fortunate to have social and cultural capital inherent in the family tradition, which directed them effortlessly towards the trajectories of education and career:

> My family is quite an educated family, so there was no question of not going into further education … It was actually something that I wanted to do, probably because all my brothers and sisters had done it; and my parents, their brothers and sisters [too]. It's always been in my family to go on and study further. (Nusrat, female, Pakistani, HE)

Coleman (1994) argues that this kind of social capital, found among cohesive ethnic minority families, backed up by a community and capable of effectively regulating young people to succeed in education and careers, is rare. However, in the present study, some young people made informed choices with the help of their educated families who possessed knowledge and experience of education and careers and could readily advise the young people about the courses that they should undertake: 'Because of my family, I think I made an informed decision about where I want to be and what I want to do' (Chitra, female, Indian, HE); whereas others got parental advice and also looked at their own strengths: 'My parents did give me their opinion on what areas they thought I should go into. Then I combined that with my own strengths and weaknesses, and decided to go into the sciences' (Nusrat, female, Pakistani, HE). This shows that those who were brought up in a supportive environment, replete with cultural and social capital, had the confidence to choose the subjects that they were good at, which they enjoyed studying, and which led to a career. In congruence with the two young women quoted above, a young man raised in a similar milieu noted:

> I want to be a research chemist … [In] my first year in college, I did such a broad range of subjects, I did geography to computing; just to see what I wanted to do. Then I looked at my grades and saw what I was actually getting good at. Chemistry seemed to be the good thing. That's when I thought it could be fun. (Rashid, male, Pakistani, HE)

Rashid's ability to assess different options in an analytical way was linked to earlier decisions about the choice of his secondary school when his parents considered various schools for him, giving 'points' to each school and finally choosing to send him to the one which appeared most promising. As can be seen in the examples above, the study shows that such discussions about, and contemplation of, educational choices are not uncommon in ethnic minority families.

Familial support as capital

As manifested by the comments above, parental support was a significant motivator in young minority ethnic people's transition from compulsory schooling to further and higher education. Despite the fact that many of them came from working-class backgrounds, with parents who had little or no education, young people were supported by their families, even if it was in the form of verbal encouragement: 'My Dad's always like, do well, and stuff like that; my Mum's always like, are you revising, are you revising; and my Nana's like, you're late for school' (Denise, female, African Caribbean, SE); and, 'My Step-Dad – he wants me to get good GCSEs, and get a decent

job; he home tutors me' (Neville, male, African Caribbean, SE). As a result of such parental attitudes, these young people clearly recognized the significance of education:

> You would need an education to actually be someone – that's what I have been taught. Being from an ethnic [minority] background, I think education is very important because my parents have stressed that since I was a kid … My parents are lower working class and they don't want me to be that; they want me to be successful and achieve goals. (Imran, male, Pakistani, FE)

Croll (2004) highlights the importance of families which provide not only identity and security to young people, but also influence educational outcomes. He contends that in addition to the higher socio-economic status of the family, parental activities such as communication, mentoring and monitoring of homework lead to favourable educational outcomes for the young people. Irrespective of their social class, many young people in the present study had been brought up in a loving, caring and supportive environment that had given them agency to excel in education: 'I've been completely fulfilled in every respect. I've never been hurt as such, by anything, ever. I feel quite protected and so I'm really free, and totally able to do what I want to do' (Chitra, female, Indian, HE). Even parents who had little education themselves motivated their children to attain educational credentials:

> My Mum's told me her mistakes. She goes, 'I left school, I didn't do anything, I got married, had children'. She tells me the value of education. And she goes, 'I'm not forcing you; I'm just letting you know, this is what's available to you.' (Shahida, female, Pakistani, SE)

Despite her own lack of education and a career, Shahida's mother did not want her daughter to overlook the opportunities available to her. This illustrates that cultural and social capital are not necessarily the prerogative of young people from privileged backgrounds only. These can be exemplified as 'aspirational capital', whereby parents from working-class backgrounds demonstrate high educational and career aspirations for their children in the same way that educated and middle-class families in possession of cultural and social capital do. Thus aspirational capital can exist in families and transmitted to young people regardless of their social class. Croll (2004) argues that while parents' deployment of resources on their children's behalf is contingent on their socio-economic situation, they are not necessarily influenced by them, as such supportive processes are apparent in families with very different socio-economic status.

The extended family, too, had a role in persuading the young people to attain academic qualifications leading to better occupational options, as one young woman disclosed: 'My aunts and uncles, they have got their children who are all high class, like opticians and stuff, and they are expecting me to do as well as them. I might not even get that far. I want to do physiotherapy if I get to university' (Rushmi, female, Indian, FE). Like Rushmi, another young person got persistent and unsolicited advice from the extended family networks:

> Mainly by family members like uncles, because they want you to go and get a good job, go into business; even if you tell them no, you don't want to go into business; even if you've got other ideas … but [they say], 'you have to go to college, you have to do A levels', when I was thinking of actually doing an electrician's [course]. (Zahid, male, Pakistani, SE)

It was not clear whether these young people were following their instincts and interests or they were choosing 'realistic' options. In his research, Croll (2008) found that more young people aspire to well rewarded careers than the likely availability of such occupations. So, perhaps some

young people in the present study were aware of the competition and contemplated educational options and career trajectories in which they were more likely to succeed, and which led to a comfortable life.

In pursuit of social mobility

As can be seen from the comments above, the extended family exerted pressure on the young people to choose better educational and career options, even though sometimes it was perceived by the young people as coercion and interference. These young people either did not have sufficient faith in their ability to aim for higher level options, or chose safe options which would lead to a job. However, relatives, as well as the parents, seemed to play a vital role in motivating the young people to strive for social mobility. Because of such encouragement and the working-class status of their parents, some young citizens believed their future lives would be better than their parents', whom they hoped to support; 'My parents used to work in factories … Hopefully I'll become successful and take care of my parents' (Imran, male, Pakistani, FE). And: 'My Dad wasn't educated. I've gone through an education system. My future earnings will be better … I'll be able to provide for my family a lot more as well' (Faraz, male, Pakistani, employed).

They envisaged a life free of the kinds of struggles that their parents had to undergo to educate them and, significantly, they intended to care for their parents in their old age:

> They have struggled really hard to, you know, get enough money and stuff to get me and my brother through education, so I don't want any struggle … I think I'll probably have a better paid job … a better life, and provide for them as well when they're old (Rushmi, female, Indian, FE).

As can be seen in the examples above, social mobility would not only secure the future of the young people, but also enable them to care for their family. Henderson et al. (2007) point to competing versions of adulthood, whereby young people seek independence, autonomy and pleasure; but also relationships, interdependence and care. Nevertheless, for some young people in the NEET group, social mobility appeared to be a distant prospect because of negative experiences in education and unrealized potential: 'Dropped out of GCSEs; I went to college, but I dropped out of that. When I left after GCSEs and all that, I just messed about to be honest … I should have stayed in education; I could have got a better job' (Ayub, male, Pakistani, NEET). Even those who eventually gained employment lamented the wasted opportunity: 'At school I was never there and my mind was never there, and when I left school I didn't really leave with good results … so that sort of pushed me back a bit' (Rahul, male, Indian, employed).

Career as a route to upward mobility

An important component of aspirational capital is the desire for upward social mobility, which was not only manifest in the comments of working-class families, but also in the remarks of those from educated, middle-class backgrounds, indicating their desire for the young people to continue in the family tradition of successful careers and not be downwardly mobile. A career seemed to be a natural progression from education as far as the young people were concerned. None of them appeared to have idealistic notions of education or a wish to attain education for its own sake. Most of them, who were in the final stages of education or in employment, had clearly envisioned the type of career that they wanted to have and how to progress through it. With the encouragement of their parents, some hoped to go into high-flying careers:

> In fashion, probably owning my own boutique; I would like to see myself living in Milan and living the high life and having my designs on the catwalks … From the start, my dad said to me, '[if] you want to do fashion, then just go for it' … [My parents] want me to be happy and do what I want to do. (Bushra, female, Pakistani, FE)

Others, though currently working in a specific field, contemplated going into a different area such as the voluntary sector, to pursue what they envisaged as a fulfilling career:

> Voluntary work and getting, maybe, a job within Barnados; and actually working with a lot of young people; doing a lot of one-to-one work; a bit of mentoring; a job basically where, you know, it's kind of a reward for me, and it's satisfying for me, as well as whoever I'm helping. (Kavita, female, Indian, employed)

As can be seen in the examples above, young minority ethnic citizens do not necessarily choose a career for monetary gain only, nor do they unthinkingly choose lucrative careers, but make informed choices based on their interests and abilities or a desire to improve other people's lives, as well as their own. The young people were acutely aware of the fact that the contemporary world that they lived in was unlike what their parents had experienced. Consequently, most believed their future life would be different from their parents' in one way or another: 'New technology has been coming in and stuff like that. I've been experienced in more new things which [my parents] haven't been doing when they were younger' (Neville, male, African Caribbean, SE). Even those who were currently unemployed felt they had the benefit of education and the prospect of a career which ultimately meant having better life chances than their ancestors:

> My parents and my grandparents have not had the choice of whether they want to study further or not, so they are either unemployed or have got basic jobs … I have been given the privilege to study further and to make something of my life. (Shireen, female, Bangladeshi, NEET)

This kind of attitude was evidently a consequence of aspirational capital, which prevented the young people from becoming downhearted and enabled them to continue to hope and dream of a life which included education and a career. The young people were sanguine about their future even if they were currently in the NEET group. They expressed optimism about their personal and professional lives when they were asked where they saw themselves in 10 years' time: 'In court being a lawyer; that's where I see myself' (Neville, male, African Caribbean, SE); 'Get married by then; some kind of qualification … go up the ladder and get a better job with good pay, a company car, a good pension scheme, a couple of holidays' (Adil, male, Pakistani, NEET); 'Working, probably in the education field, hopefully married, comfortable financially' (Nusrat, female, Pakistani, HE); 'I hope I have my own hairdressing salon, even if it's something small' (Rahul, male, Indian, employed). Thus, regardless of their current social class and phase of life, all young people clearly sought social mobility through educational and occupational means.

Modood (2004) discusses familial capital in relation to the education of minority ethnic groups. He views the idea of class as life chances and links the definition of a class system not just to a hierarchy of classes, but the prospect of mobility between classes (see also, Abbas, 2004). Further, Henderson et al. (2007) contend that while social class is an important determinant of life chances, class is related to cultural as well as economic factors, and a person's class can change over the course of life. Evidently, this is what the young people in the present study hope to achieve through education and careers, and aspirational capital appears to provide the motivation to attain this goal.

(For further discussion of capital, education and minority ethnic young people, see, Basit, 2012, and Modood, 2012.)

The discrepancy in career guidance

Previous research shows that minority ethnic young people are dissatisfied with the career guidance that they receive at school (Mirza, 1992; Basit, 1997). Many young people in the present study, too, were critical of the career advice that they were given at school. Consequently, they made enquiries about career routes themselves or were advised by friends and family: 'I've had to research it myself. There needs to be more emphasis on where you can get information from' (Rushmi, female, Indian, FE). While some found particular sources of advice helpful, they believed information and advice were not readily available, as noted by a young woman of dual heritage, who identified herself as ethnic minority:

> Not enough people know where to get information from … I don't think there was enough done about careers when I was at school … I've sort of been doing it by myself … [I used to] go on the internet (Vanessa, female, dual-heritage African Caribbean/White, employed)

While some young people were able to explore educational and career options, others showed diffidence regarding their quest for career guidance:

> When I was at college choosing universities, I didn't even want to go. And I don't think I had enough information; I don't think I was well informed of university; not from the system anyway. I didn't feel like I could approach teachers … I didn't feel confident in my own questions. I didn't know what to ask; I didn't know where to look. I was completely ignorant of what I was supposed to do. (Chitra, female, Indian, HE)

Conversely, a few young people found the career advice at their school and college helpful: 'You do get some good advice. Like, if it's not clear, you can always go back and ask, and they'll explain it again, and they'll give you leaflets. They'll tell you, like, you go on this website. It's very helpful' (Zahid, male, Pakistani, SE). Some were fortunate enough to have multiple sources of guidance:

> At college, I've got a very nice mentor. He gives me all kinds of advice; helped me apply to one of my universities. I can get advice from him about anything. I've got him, I've got my colleagues, my friends, the college careers library … I've got quite a lot of sources and they are quite good really. (Imran, male, Pakistani, FE)

Thus, career advice varied depending on the educational institution attended, and also on how proactive the young people had been in seeking advice. Lack of career advice from institutional sources meant that the young people had to rely on guidance from their families which was a significant feature of aspirational capital. To many, their parents and other family members offered the most useful advice:

> My Dad was a really big help. When it came to, like, careers advice, I used to go to my dad for that. Talking to him, I understood it more what I wanted to do. Whereas, when I went to some careers people, they used to just tell me to do something which had nothing to do with what I wanted to do. (Bushra, female, Pakistani, FE)

Although some young people received helpful advice regarding future careers, it appeared that the career guidance given to others was prejudiced and based on preconceived ideas about the young person's background and future aspirations.

Prejudice as an impediment to career prospects

Sen (2009) argues that prejudices are usually based on some kind of reasoning, albeit weak, arbitrary, crude, primitive and defective, to support some dogma which may be racist, sexist and so forth. As regards the experience of selection for a job, some young people in the present study felt they had faced prejudice in mainly White settings, though, ostensibly, they seemed to ignore this attitude: 'I heard about the job and I had the interview. I think in that institution, they discriminated; they wanted the same coloured people … I was better qualified than the others, had skills and stuff, but still they got hired' (Rushmi, female, Indian, FE). Despite the succour of aspirational capital, such perceptions of facing prejudice and discrimination can be detrimental, and can discourage minority ethnic young people from seeking a career in specific occupational milieus. Another young person in the study had a similar experience:

> I eventually hope to be working for a good, reputable company … within a managerial position … Medical sales or IT sales. But I do feel that it's gonna be difficult for me to get into that environment … It's discrimination, I think. (Faraz, male, Pakistani, employed)

Faraz's perceptions were based on prior experience of applying for a post in such a milieu:

> In an interview environment, the person basically didn't really look at me; he was reading … You could say, he was interviewing me, asking the questions, but he never gave me his attention, never looked at me … he had a kind of magazine, and he'd be flicking through it … It was one of my first interviews and I didn't know how to react or respond. (Faraz, male, Pakistani, employed)

Faraz tried to understand the reasons for such nonchalant behaviour:

> I don't think having a beard helps as well. One of the things someone told me was, 'oh you need to shave your beard.' It was a recruitment company. They said, 'in a sales environment, most people want a clean-shaven person' … I'd say my beard's quite neat, and when I do dress up, it is neater … It's part of my religion.

Faraz's comments indicate that he is aware of the discriminatory practices of some employers and, further, that some of these practices may be based on visible symbols of religion. This shows that despite being born, raised and educated in a multicultural country, ethnic minorities may still be viewed as strange, different, and threatening, and not fitting in with the majority image of what a citizen should look like. Consequently, they can be treated as aliens. However, Osler (2009) argues that diversity neither implies a lack of solidarity nor a threat to national identity. Banks (2008) notes that an ideal exists in multicultural countries in which ethnic minorities can maintain significant aspects of their heritage and become full citizens of their country. Yet, he contends, there is a big gap between the ideals of these multicultural nations and the experiences of their minority ethnic groups, who face discrimination in both school and the wider society. This ideal emphasizes the differences rather than the similarities between various ethnic groups, and may lead to differential opportunities. Modood (2007) maintains that multicultural equality cannot be realized while distribution of opportunities is restricted by difference. He calls for the recognition of a national

identity in which negative difference is challenged and supplanted by positive difference to attain social justice.

Discussion

This article is based on the perceptions of a small number of young citizens. While they are all of a minority ethnic heritage, and share common experiences in important ways, they are by no means a homogeneous group as there are significant class, ethnic and gender differences between them. The study therefore makes no claims of generalizability. Nevertheless, it is evident that education and career are viewed as vital and valuable by all young people in the present study. Further, a diverse range of career choices is mentioned, such as working in the voluntary sector, teaching and fashion, and looking forward to contributing to the economy. This is poignant in light of the current climate in which so many young people who succeed in education end up in low level jobs rather than starting a career commensurate with their qualifications. Also, their faith in meritocracy is touching, as some have no concept of discrimination in the labour market.

Social and cultural capital are significant assets that give agency to young people to seek social justice. Societal mechanisms do not extend sufficiently to embrace those who are born into disadvantage, with the result that many continue to lead lives of hardship, unless individuals and families make a concerted effort to escape the quagmire of perpetual disadvantage over generations. It is clear that regardless of their own nonexistent education in some cases, ethnic minority parents in the study are closely involved with their children's education and career decisions, by having regular discussions with them and offering advice to the best of their knowledge.

The idea of emotional capital extended by Reay (2000) is useful. However, this only concentrates on the emotional investments that mothers make in their children's future and portrays fathers as distant and uncaring due to their absence from the discussion. Moreover, it does not take into account the support provided by fathers and the pride they feel in their daughters' achievements, as noted in the literature on ethnic minority families (Basit, 1997; Ahmed, 2001; Ijaz and Abbas, 2010), and as we have seen above in the young citizens' comments about the encouragement and advice provided by their fathers as well as mothers. Similarly, the notion of ethnic capital proposed by Modood (2004) is helpful, but only focuses on the aspirations of ethnic minority parents from disadvantaged backgrounds, and does not encompass the aspirations of educated middle class minority ethnic parents, as we have observed above. The present research allows us to extend these concepts further to incorporate the support and aspirations of fathers as well as mothers, and middle-class as well as working-class families. I suggest that this illustrates the phenomenon of 'aspirational capital', which, on the one hand, is a crucial extension of cultural and social capital in families where it already exists; on the other hand, this aspirational capital is a substitute for cultural and social capital in families where it does not exist. Thus aspirational capital is transmitted from older generations to the younger generations and operates as a strong motivating force striving to improve the life chances of young minority ethnic British citizens.

Educated and middle-class families naturally wish to perpetuate the status quo. Because of the aspirational capital inherent in such families, they provide mechanisms to enhance the educational opportunities available to their children through grammar school entry or enrolment in independent schools, discussions, help with homework, private tuition, books, personal computers, cultural visits to museums and art galleries, holidays and so forth. However, working-class parents have middle-class aspirations too (Basit, 1997), and aspire to careers for their children in the same way as research on middle-class parents illustrates (Devine, 2004). The aspirational capital in working-class families manifests itself in the form of verbal support, encouragement and by directing the

young people to seek advice from older siblings, teachers and educated members of the extended family and community. Archer and Francis (2007) view ethnic minority families' ambition to social mobility as a form of capital in itself that is constructed, employed and deployed by the families, with talk within families about children's aspirations and future plans as an everyday activity that aims for social mobility.

Conclusion

I conclude that aspirational capital is a more fluid concept that we can work with, as it allows us to explain the support and aspirations of parents regardless of their gender, social class and ethnic origin. Aspirational capital is an amalgam of positive thoughts, feelings, values, beliefs and actions that parents hold or undertake on behalf of their children. Because of the aspirational capital acquired through family relationships, young minority ethnic citizens perceive education and career as the routes to upward social mobility. Aspirational capital aims to facilitate their transition from childhood to youth and adulthood and to becoming useful members of society. As noted above, young citizens who acquire aspirational capital from their parents are more likely to succeed in education. Schools and education authorities should therefore forge closer partnerships with parents to understand this remarkable asset that motivates their young people so that such young citizens can be supported accordingly. The aspiration of raising achievement can be more readily realized if parents are involved in schools and engaged in the learning of their children.

Nevertheless, research also shows that education policies and practitioners variously treat the unique forms of capital and the ensuing motivation and aspirations of minority ethnic children and their parents as problematic: as unrealistically high (Basit, 1997); too low and lacking motivation (Crozier, 2000); or too high but narrow (Archer and Francis, 2007). These studies illustrate that minority ethnic families' aspirations for upward social mobility are viewed as a flawed model by policymakers and practitioners and intervention of education policies and practices is seen as necessary in order to enable young people to make appropriately lower, higher or broader choices. These kinds of hypotheses fail to recognize the efforts, struggles and sacrifices involved in upward mobility by those who start from a position of disadvantage because of their minority ethnic and/or working-class status. Nor do they take into account structural factors impeding parental and young people's aspirations, such as attending a poorly resourced school because of the catchment area, assigned to lower streams in school because of ethnicity; lacking the experience necessary to complete academic tasks because of class and culture; and treated differently in job interviews because of religious symbols (see also Shah et al., 2010).

Putnam (2000) cites Henderson and Berla (1994) who reviewed a large number of studies that demonstrate that when parents are involved with their children's education, children do better in school and the schools they attend are better. Furthermore, when schools work with families, children succeed not just in school, but throughout life. This indicates that schools have a powerful role to play in improving the life chances of young people and can have a determining, and sometimes detrimental, effect on pupils. Bernstein (1977) argues that irrespective of the family, the school is an independent force in the pupils' definition of their roles, and can lead to the pupils' alienation, detachment or commitment. He notes that the school's rituals, ceremonies, authority relations, stratification, procedures for learning, rewards and punishments, and its image of conduct, character and manner, can modify or change the pupils' role, and make it different from the way it has been shaped by the family. Again, this illustrates the importance of home and school collaboration to ensure that they are working towards the same goals to achieve social justice for all young people for the wider benefit of society. In addition to parental support, Osler (2010) argues that young

people need adults such as teachers, policy makers and researchers who can work with them in a harmonious relationship to transform schools into places where all children's right to a good education is a political reality.

Lauder et al. (2006) highlight the significance of education for social mobility. Some young Britons in the present study who are at the periphery of society because of their NEET status wish to return to education, indicating that the status of being NEET need not be permanent. They believe their current situation is due to underachievement in education which has subsequently contributed to lack of career prospects. It is difficult to surmise whether these young people were underachievers or were 'mis-educated' (Tomlinson, 2008), and to determine why some young citizens' potential is unrealized (Kao, 2004), without further research. Although all young people may be offered the same educational opportunities, these do not necessarily comply with the wider principles of social justice. If we want social justice to be all-encompassing, then we need to ensure that young citizens are presented with educational opportunities and career prospects which match their ability and inclination.

While educational qualifications and professional remuneration are closely linked (Bourdieu, 1991), not all young people want to pursue educational options which do not directly lead to an occupation. Even if young people have similar physical, social and psychological attributes, and have the same background, they may differ in abilities and aspirations with regard to education and careers. While choice is real, it is also heavily constrained for many people (Croll, 2008), and aspirations do not necessarily translate into jobs for young people (Archer and Francis, 2007). Merely getting a degree is not enough unless it is followed by a suitable job, and equality of outcome is the only form of social justice which Bhatti's (2003) English research participants recognize. Similarly, youth transitions for Scottish undergraduates are emotional as well as instrumental affairs, whereby judgements are made about the economic benefits of higher education (Christie, 2009), and first-generation working class Canadian students demonstrate high and risky investments in education leading to utilitarian and vocational orientations toward university (Lehmann, 2009). Indeed, the present research illustrates that most young people's perception of adulthood comprises educational credentials and employment as necessary components. I suggest that aspirational capital is an invaluable asset which enables young people to make informed educational and career choices which ultimately improve their life chances and make them worthy citizens. Significantly, as previous research also indicates (Croll, 2004; Henderson et al., 2007) aspirational capital exists in all kinds of families and transcends gender, ethnicity and class.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Leicestershire Centre for Integrated Living for funding the research project on which this paper is based. I am also thankful to other members of the project team, Iris Lightfoote and Chino Cabon, for their support during the course of the project.

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