Young People’s Aspirations in Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods: Evidence from three British Cities

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**Introduction**

This paper aims to better understand the relationship between young people’s aspirations towards education and jobs, in relationship to the context in which they are formed, particularly whether there are placed-based influences on young people’s aspirations.

It follows a paper given at ENHR 2009 which examined the broad same question on the basis of existing literature (Lupton and Kintrea, 2011). The current paper draws on surveys of and focus groups with young people at age 13 and age 15 in three secondary schools in London, Nottingham and Glasgow plus interviews with parents and teachers in order to seek answers to the following questions:

- Are aspirations of young people low towards education and jobs low in disadvantaged areas?
- To what extent do aspirations among young people in disadvantaged areas diminish during the teenage years due to local factors?
- To what extent are young people’s aspirations influenced by:
  - Their perceptions of the labour market in the wider city?
  - The social dynamics of the immediate neighbourhood?

‘Aspirations’ is used to capture the various desires and ambitions held by young people about their futures. These may be concrete or vague, but the essence is of a desire to achieve something high in the future with the implication that it will drive people’s actions in the present (Quaglia and Cobb, 1996).

Aspirations may centre on lifestyle or self fulfillment, or revolve around roles in the family or community (such as performing a caring or leadership function). The research and policy literature is mainly concerned with the educational and occupational goals of young people, linked to policy agendas about social mobility and increasing the pool of skills as a basis for economic growth. Do young people want to stay on at school or to go onto further education? Do they want to become mechanics, beauty therapists, footballers, doctors or business executives?

As we discuss below the way aspirations are usually used in policy is based on three connected propositions. These are:

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

Research tends to show that there is a relationship between aspirations and achievement, however. Goodman and Gregg (2010) analysed four large scale datasets to build a strong evidence base for the importance of aspirations at key stages of children’s lives. Children’s (and parents’) aspirations were powerfully related to outcomes. However, the study did point out that aspirations were generally high, and that the key to better outcomes might not be raising aspirations as much as ensuring that high aspirations were converted into reality.

In the current study, the research team was extremely cautious about following the three propositions listed above. They can all too easily lead to an individualistic model of aspirations that supports the idea that people can do better simply if they believe they can, and are motivated to try harder. The focus of this study is the formation of aspirations in certain places, and the research team accepts that, while aspirations may not be the only element in
terms of young people achieving high outcomes, without the desire for high outcomes it seems unlikely that they can be attained. In other words, aspirations may not be sufficient for success, but they are necessary.

Aspirations are viewed in the study as dynamic and responsive to feedback from peers, family and schools. Our basic position is that understanding the way aspirations contribute to a person’s movement through educational systems and labour markets requires going beyond the ‘snapshot’ approach. Previous research on aspirations makes strong 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. Aspirations develop over time, and will shift considerably throughout an individual’s life. This may represent changes in social circumstances or 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. Nonetheless, aspirations can be seen to be shaped by various forms of feedback to the individual, both through key relationships such as with their peer group and through opportunity structures such as the local labour market (Furlong and Biggart, 1999).

Another way to look at this is that expressing a particular aspiration evokes a reaction from others. The reaction could be, for example, derision, interest, approval or support. The reaction is likely to affect the aspiration that will be stated in the future. So if somebody says that they want to be an astronaut and are laughed at, next time they may say doctor or lawyer. So when thinking about aspirational outcomes it is important to think about the immediate outcomes that may affect the aspiration of the individual as well as the long term concrete vocational and educational implications of an aspiration.

The approach taken in this study is summarised in Figure 1. This model is intended to group potential influential factors into four domains, or groupings: individual family, place and school.

**Figure 1: A model of aspirations including a feedback loop**

In this research we focused mainly understanding more fully how the varying influences of different places manifest in aspirational pathways for young people between 13 and 15 years of age.

There are two types of aspirations that are considered in this research:

- **Ideal Aspirations** What the individual would do if there were no real world constraints.
- **Realistic Aspirations** What the individual expects to be able to do given the circumstances within which they live (these might alternatively be described as ‘expectations’)

The difference between ideal and realistic aspirations is an important one. Ideal aspirations can tell us a great deal about the general direction of a young person’s ambitions even if they may be, by definition, unrealistic. Realistic aspirations reflect perceived individual and structural constraints, though the two types tend to be highly correlated (Andres et al, 1999).
Ideal and realistic aspirations are applied to two areas:

**Education**  What the individual anticipates regarding their educational career.

**Jobs**  What the individual anticipates in relation to their position in the labour market when they leave full time education.

Educational and job aspirations are connected to some degree as particular jobs will require specific educational requirements to be realised.

**Policy Background**

The idea that aspirations underpin attainment, and therefore are relevant to policy aims to improve educational outcomes and skills, has become influential in recent public UK policy. Aspirations appeared in many Westminster policy documents under the Labour administration to 2010 (e.g. HM Treasury and Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2007; Cabinet Office, 2008; Cabinet Office, 2009) and the theme has been continued by the current coalition government (DoE, 2010; Cabinet Office, 2011; DWP and DoE, 2011). (The devolved administrations in the other parts of the UK that are responsible for education policy, appear to have put less emphasis on aspirations as an object of policy perhaps with the exception of Northern Ireland.

There are two main drivers of the UK government’s interest. The first is socio-economic inequality and social mobility. The UK is one of the most unequal of the highly developed countries (e.g. Hills et al 2010; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010) with relatively poor rates of social mobility. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds generally achieve far less at school than their better off peers, and the disadvantages that come from low educational achievement feed forward into people’s life chances as adults (e.g. Cassen and Kingdon 2007; Raffo et al 2007; see Hirsch, 2007).

Second, having a section of the population which is poorly educated and low skilled and whose latent talents languish unused is held to a potential barrier to the UK’s economic competiveness in a global, knowledge-based economy. Recent efforts by government to improve educational and occupational achievements have been strongly driven by a sense that the UK is in danger of slipping down international league tables (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009; Department of Education, 2010a).

In the policy literature is sometimes suggested that that there is a pool of frustrated high aspiration which policy should help to release, e.g.:

*This report makes recommendations on how the professions, the Government and others can unleash the pent-up aspiration that exists in the young people of our country. Social mobility is not something that can be given to people. It has to be won through their effort and endeavour (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009, p.8)*

However, there is an alternative perspective that generates more interest for students of ‘poverty neighbourhoods’: low aspirations have also been explicitly linked in policy to disadvantaged areas. A Labour government report from 2007 signalled:

‘...living in an area of concentrated worklessness can also reduce an individual’s chances, as areas with high worklessness lack social networks that connect to work and some areas suffer low connectivity to the labour market. Expectations and aspirations can be low amongst residents. Places can play different roles within wider functioning areas. Some deprived neighbourhoods may play significant social and economic roles in their communities and effective regeneration policy should take account of this’ (CLG, 2007, p.13)

The interest in aspirations and place spread then into the education ministry:
‘Children living in deprived communities face a cultural barrier which is in many ways a bigger barrier (to success) than material poverty. It is a cultural barrier of low aspirations and scepticism about education, the feeling that education is by and for other people, and likely to let one down’ (DCSF, 2008, p.2).

The theme that low aspirations in disadvantaged areas form barriers to social mobility gained further impetus. There emerged a set of key hypotheses:

- aspirations and attainment levels are lower in deprived communities
- there is a relationship between young people’s aspirations and their educational outcomes
- ‘community level’ attitudes, aspirations and expectations can have a significant influence on young people's aspirations and therefore outcomes
- there are potential interventions that can raise community aspirations and expectations
- Therefore a more strategic and better coordinated approach to raising aspirations in deprived communities would help to raise attainment. (Cabinet Office, 2008)

The Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition elected in 2010 has continued an interest in raising aspirations in deprived areas. Launching the Schools White Paper (Department of Education (DoE, 2010a) the Prime Minister’s and the Deputy Prime Minister’s joint foreword notes the differences in attainment between groups of young people and attributes a lack of aspiration as a key reason for this, specifically:

In far too many communities there is a deeply embedded culture of low aspiration that is strongly tied to long term unemployment. The Coalitions’ Work Programme and welfare reforms will help tackle these issues. But schools do have a crucial role to play (DoE, 2010, p.4)

In 2011 the coalition government published its strategy for social mobility (Cabinet Office, 2011) which shares with its predecessor a desire to raise aspirations, particularly among schoolchildren from disadvantaged backgrounds, as a route to educational and career success.

So there has been consistent policy support for the role of aspirations, particularly in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. However, it would be difficult to claim that policy making in this area sits on a secure foundation of evidence.

**Evidence on Aspirations and Neighbourhood**

The existing evidence on aspirations and place reviewed by Lupton and Kintrea (2011) leads to the conclusion that it is not possible to say whether aspirations are lower in lower in disadvantaged neighbourhoods nor that distinctive drivers in those neighbourhoods have significant effects on young people’s aspirations and, though them, their attainment. The mechanisms producing neighbourhood effects, especially in relation to the role of aspirations, are neither particularly well theorised nor well tested. However, neither can we say that aspirations are not lower in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and that there is no neighbourhood effects. The problem is that few studies have actually measured aspirations at the neighbourhood level. From other evidence it would appear that high aspirations are associated with higher social class and parental education. On this basis, it would not be surprising to find lower aspirations, in aggregate, in more disadvantaged neighbourhoods, even if this has not yet been demonstrated by survey evidence. It should be borne in mind, however, that disadvantaged communities in the UK are very diverse; they differ in their economic structure, location, transport and connectivity (Green and White, 2007), historical evolution and identity (Robertson et al, 2008) and current social and demographic mix.

A second conclusion is that it is wrong to start with the assumption that people in poor neighbourhoods lack aspiration. Some studies suggest that both parents and children in poorer neighbourhoods tend to express high
aspirations, at least when children are relatively young. Generalised high aspirations (for example, to do well in education) may simply be tempered by expectations that are in tune with people’s own experiences, appearing as a low aspiration to others. Moreover, what appears like a low aspiration may actually be evidence of low esteem, low self-efficacy, or low motivation, as well as low expectations?

Third there appears to be varied range of possible mechanisms operating at the local level that could impact on the formation and the sustenance of aspirations. In the theoretical canon of ‘poverty neighbourhoods’, aspirations (along with other beliefs and attitudes) are a classic product of collective socialisation, i.e. that the behaviours and attitudes of an individual are directly influenced by those of their neighbours. It is also usually held that the attitudes and resulting from collective socialisation in are systematically different in disadvantaged areas and that they inhibit life chances and so serve to further extend disadvantage. In these ideas aspirations are part of what stands between individuals and how they acquit themselves in the wider society and labour market. However, aspirations have rarely been problematical or investigated specifically. However, the literature suggest that there are a range of other local sources of influence including the quality and experiences of schooling, labour market constraints and employment practices, neighbourhood connectivity, environments and reputation, and the availability of information. The key point here is that some influences come under the umbrellas of ‘neighbourhood effects’, especially issues of social networks and peer processes (producing ‘community level aspirations’), but others are more about institutions and the broader economic context of the neighbourhood.

Methods and Data

Data was collected in a two-stage survey of students in three secondary schools. The schools were not themselves initially subjects of the research but a means of accessing a suitable cohort of young people. The main survey was supplemented by surveys of their parents and semi-structured interviews with staff in the schools and people in the local communities. The schools were used as a point of access to a cohort of young people living in broadly disadvantaged areas, set within the distinctively different labour markets of East London, Nottingham and Glasgow.

At stage 1 the young people were interviewed in school year 2007 or 2008 when they were aged 12 or 13. For clarity, we refer to this group as 13 year olds. Our strategy was to interview as many as possible of the same young people at 15 as had been interviewed at stage 1. Stage 2 interviews were carried out in 2010 when they were typically aged between 14 and 16. This group will be referred to as 15 year olds. Overall, 490 young people were interviewed in the first stage and somewhat under 288 in the second, and slightly more males than females.

Interviews with young people lasted 20-30 minutes. The core of the interviews with young people at both stages was designed to establish their aspirations, both their ideal aspirations - what they ideally wanted to do in the future - and their realistic aspirations - what they expected to do. The interviews also sought information from the young people about their home areas, their leisure interests, their attitudes to school and learning, and their family backgrounds, including the support they got at home for their aspirations and with their school work. Especially at 15, young people were also asked open questions which probed their reasons for holding particular aspirations and expectations, and for changes that had occurred in their aspirations and expectations since they were 13.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 Participation by location</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Pupils in School (2007)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pupil Interviews (age 13)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pupil Interviews (age 15)</strong></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>288</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


The core survey of young people was supplemented by three other research exercises. At age 15 we ran three focus groups with young people in each school which were designed to explore, in particular, neighbourhood and school influences on aspirations. At both stages we carried out a telephone survey with parents of the young people who had been surveyed in school. The telephone interviews were designed to obtain a view from parents on the aspirations held by young people and parents attitudes to those aspirations, as well as to obtain reliable socio-economic and household data as context for the data obtained from young people. We also carried out a small number of semi-structured interviews at both stages with staff in the schools and with members of the community in which the schools stood. These interviews were designed to better understand the school and neighbourhoods as contexts for the shaping of young people’s aspirations.

There were more young men than young women in the study at both stages except for 15 year olds in Glasgow. Family background varied depending on the city and neighbourhood, and there have been some changes in composition over time. There was a greater diversity of family background in London than in Nottingham or Glasgow (Table 2).

Table 2 Characteristics of the Young People at Age 13 and Age 15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Stage 1: 13 year olds</th>
<th>Stage 2: 15 year olds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glasgow</td>
<td>59% Male</td>
<td>48% Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41% Female</td>
<td>52% Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nottingham</td>
<td>55% Male</td>
<td>55% Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>45% Female</td>
<td>45% Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>59% Male</td>
<td>57% Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41% Female</td>
<td>43% Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family Background</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glasgow</td>
<td>81% White British</td>
<td>85% White British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8% Asian</td>
<td>4% Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2% Black</td>
<td>1.5% Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1% Chinese</td>
<td>1.5% Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1% Other</td>
<td>8% Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7% Mixed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nottingham</td>
<td>93% White British</td>
<td>93% White British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1% Asian</td>
<td>5% Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4% Black</td>
<td>3% Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>3% White British</td>
<td>4% White British</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>64% Asian</td>
<td>72% Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19% Black</td>
<td>16% Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10% Other</td>
<td>8% Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3% Mixed</td>
<td>2% Mixed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data gathered took three forms. There was a considerable amount of direct quantitative data, such as on background characteristics and Likert scale responses to attitude questions. There was also indirect quantitative data, where open responses to questions such as “what would you like to do when you leave school?” were coded into numbers using frameworks such as the Standard Occupational Classification. Finally there was open-ended or
qualitative data that was not converted to categories, such as from focus groups and teacher interviews. Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS to assess the relative importance of different influences on aspirations and to generate robust multivariate statistical relationships between the key variables. In relation to findings about elements of change that occurred between the first and second rounds of interview, unless otherwise stated, the analysis used a matched data set that allowed direct comparisons between the same individuals at 13 and 15 years of age. While this reduced the sample size, it allowed specific instances of change at the individual level to be identified.

In this paper we draw out of the data the overall findings on aspirations and the relationships between aspirations and neighbourhood and place factors.

City and Neighbourhood Contexts
Cities with different labour market conditions and socio-demographic characteristics were chosen on the assumption that different kinds of labour markets might have an impact on aspirations. The choices made were Glasgow, Nottingham and East London (Newham). London is a city with great cultural and ethnic diversity, substantial educational and labour market disparities and localised concentrations of poverty, but a buoyant economy in recent years. Nottingham has moderate cultural and ethnic diversity, but continuing challenges of inequality, segregation and labour market adjustment despite recent economic improvements. Glasgow is a city with very extensive worklessness and associated deprivation, but with cultural and ethnic diversity confined to relatively small areas in the city. Recent economic improvements have not yet benefited poorer communities, which are mainly White. Educational attainment remains much lower than anywhere else in Scotland.

Table 3 shows data for the cities and the areas around the school, as well as an indicator of economic activity. It should be noted that the Glasgow school, as is the case with many Scottish schools, draws its students from a wide area of the city and very few live in the ward within which the school sits.

Table 3 Unemployment and Economic Activity rates in the case study areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Glasgow</th>
<th>Nottingham</th>
<th>Newham</th>
<th>Great Britain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment rates in area near school (ward level data)</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment rates in the city</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10% (Inner London)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Activity rates in area near the school</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Activity rate in the city</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>75% (Inner London)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Schools were not the direct focus of this research; they were initially used as a way to gain access to the young people in a given area. Schools were selected with the aid of the Index of Multiple Deprivation, knowledge of the geography of catchment areas and with guidance from the local authorities. In practice this means that their catchment includes areas of disadvantage and that there are substantial numbers of children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods in all three schools.
Most of the home addresses of the young people in the surveys were in disadvantaged areas, determined by the use of post codes mapped onto the Index of Multiple Deprivation in England and Scotland (Figure 2)\(^1\). The data is presented in deciles mapped onto the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) using the respondents’ home postcodes. The vast majority of our participants are in the most deprived 20% of the IMD.

Figure 2 shows that the Glasgow sample was the most diverse in terms of neighbourhood context and London the least diverse. London students lived in contexts of greater deprivation than Nottingham students, and Glasgow students were less deprived again\(^2\). The respondents in the three cities also had different distributions across the IMD deciles. While all the respondents in Nottingham and London lived in neighbourhoods which were in the most deprived half of the scale, in Glasgow respondents were quite widely dispersed across the IMD, including some who lived in the least deprived 10% of Scottish neighbourhoods.

**Figure 2  Deprivation in the sample by area (1 = High deprivation)**

![Graph showing deprivation levels in Glasgow, London, and Nottingham](image)

In London and Nottingham most of the young people lived in neighbourhoods immediately around the school and there was a strong sense that the schools were both embedded in their neighbourhoods. However, the Glasgow school’s pupils came from neighbourhoods over a wide area of the city, and occasionally beyond. Some came from peripheral council-built estates and others from deeply contrasting affluent inner suburbs, which were all part of the school’s official catchment area. Others came from the much more ethnically mixed inner city, as well as some from newly built suburbs, which were outside the official catchment. Therefore unlike the other schools, there was much less of a sense of these pupils being connected to a particular neighbourhood or area, and certainly no shared identity between the school and its neighbourhood.

**Aspirations in Disadvantaged Areas**

The survey does not permit direct comparison with other areas and schools, but the evidence points to both educational and occupational aspiration being very high in the case study areas. The educational aspirations of

\(^1\) The IMD for Scotland and England are not calculated on the same basis and that the Scottish IMD use here is more recent, so they are not exactly comparable.

\(^2\) ANOVA (\(F=53.128,\) d.f. 2, \(p<0.01\))
students are very strong. Table 4 shows the percentage at both 13 and 15 group who want to go to university. (By way of comparison, the participation rate in higher education among 17-30 year olds is 47% in England in 2009-10, with 72% of this group starting their participation 17, 18 or 19 (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011)). In Glasgow and Nottingham the percentage wanting to go to university dropped somewhat between 13 and 15 but stayed much the same in London.

**Table 4 Percent agreeing “I would like to go to university” by age and city**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>London</th>
<th>Nottingtom</th>
<th>Glasgow</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At 13 across the case studies a large majority of young people (86%) had thought about what they wanted to do when they were older. When asked if it was important that they got a job when they left school, 98% agreed or strongly agreed, and 87% agreed and strongly agreed that they often thought about what they would do when they leave school. There was no evidence that differences in socio-economic and other background factors influenced the way that young people thought about their future.

For many young people at 13, their concern went beyond awareness. Just under three quarters (73%) agreed or strongly agreed that they worried about leaving school with no qualifications, and 70% agreed or strongly agreed that they worried about not being able to get a job when they were older. For a group of young people just entering their teenage years, their concern about employment seems quite marked.

Almost all (96%) of 13 year olds could name a job they would want in an ideal world. Occupational aspirations were charted by using the Standard Occupational Classification.³ The ideal jobs were significantly skewed towards those requiring more education and experience. This was true across all three areas but there was a higher degree of interest in professional jobs in London. Forty two per cent in London suggested a professional or managerial occupation, with lawyer, doctor and accountant all featuring frequently. Forty seven per cent preferred an associate professional position, so altogether almost 90% aspired to a professional occupation of some kind.

At 15 overall, 36% cited a higher status ideal job at 15 than at 13. Another 31% demonstrated no change in job status, however, 33% cited a lower status job at 15 than 13. The ideal aspirations of the 15 year olds were once more strongly concentrated towards high status positions, with a significant numbers in SOC category 3. This category contains actors, athletes, musicians and other high profile occupations.

Figures 3 compares the aspirations at 13 and 15 olds to the GB occupational structure. The aspirations of young people- both ideal and realistic- were far above the norms of the current occupational structure of the UK, though there was a degree of change between 13 and 15. The proportion in the highest status category (managers, professionals and associated technical occupations) had dropped in respect of both ideal and realistic aspirations, and the same was true for the occupations at the lower reaches of the SOC scale. There had been some increase in the middle categories, particularly for realistic aspirations. This proportion had grown from 26% to 29.6%. But

³ The Standard Occupation Classification (SOC) is a common classification of occupational information for the UK. Jobs are classified according to the kind of work performed and their skill content. There are 9 major groups of jobs ranging from Managers and Senior Officials (SOC 1) to Elementary Occupations (SOC 9).
overall, the aspirations of 15 year olds have stayed high, indeed they are much higher than the current distributions of education and occupation outcomes in the UK.

**Figure 3. Ideal and Realistic occupations at 13 compared to current GB labour market**

Young people were also asked directly if they had changed their aspirations since the last time they were surveyed. If they could not remember they were prompted with their response from Stage 1. Altogether 75% indicated a change and it is instructive to examine the direction of change and some of the reasons provided.

There were four measures of aspirational change.

- **Ideal-Ideal** The change in ideal aspirations between 13 and 15
- **Realistic-Realistic** The change in realistic aspirations between 13 and 15
- **Ideal-Realistic 13** The change between ideal aspirations and realistic aspirations at age 13.
- **Ideal-Realistic 15** The change between ideal aspirations and realistic aspirations at age 15.

In terms of Ideal-Ideal, the average change between 13 and 15 was minus 0.06 using the SOC, or one sixteenth of an occupational category, downwards. So, overall, there has been very little average movement in ideal aspirations and what has occurred has been a very slight lowering of occupational aspirations.

With respect to Ideal-Realistic the average change at age 13 was minus 0.49, meaning that, in other words realistic aspirations were on average, half a category lower than ideal aspirations. The same is apparent at 15, with a minus 0.34 lowering. While some reduction is perhaps to be expected at both ages, it is interesting that the average gap between ideal and realistic aspirations are closer at 15 than 13.

The striking finding at this level, however, concerned Realistic-Realistic changes. Between 13 and 15, on average for the matched group, realistic aspirations rose 0.15 categories. While this was a very small amount, it did mean that for the group of young people as a whole, their realistic expectations of occupational outcome held up during this two year period, when our initial expectation was that they would diminish.
For a number of those who at 13 had cited aspirations for glamorous occupations such as professional sports, film stars, models etc. there often was some recognition at 15 that it was unlikely they would achieve these goals, using phrases such as ‘too difficult’, ‘very competitive’, ‘more realistic’; ‘Talking with Mum - realised it was not going to lead to job - but still enjoy it; chance of success.... not good’. Indeed the drop on SOC category 3 is substantially driven by a group of young people recognising that ‘professional footballer’ is not likely to be a career that is open to them.

In addition, there were some who had not changed but rather refined their ideas. An aspiring lawyer had been influenced by films, work experience and family contacts: ‘Legally Blonde - dad’s friend has his own wee practice and watching law programmes; while for another, work experience provided by the school was important: ‘it’s just more fun, during the work experience I found it became more interesting; learnt more about it and spoke to a real social worker’.

And for others it was a process of maturity, greater knowledge and understanding of what was out there and how to go about achieving their goals: ‘as I got older, got advice from teacher; got ideas for realistic job; I matured and ideas have moved on; because I think I’ve got more chance of getting an apprenticeship – my PSE teacher suggested apprenticeship as an idea’.

Aspirations and Neighbourhood
On the key issue of whether young people were influenced in their aspirations by their geographical context it was important to establish their relationship with the neighbourhoods they live in.

Neighbourhood exposure and mobility
We asked young people where they spent time with their friends in the week prior to the survey. Only nine young people said that they had not spent any time with friends and all but 23 (9%) had met with their friends at least 2 days per week, with almost a quarter meeting every day.

Overall, given the possibility to give more than one location where they ‘hung out’, 75% of young people said that they spent time with their friends outdoors in the local area. Further, 60% said they spent time at the houses of friends and about 15% mentioned spending time at local venues such as at a club or sports centre.

The local area was the most popular choice for meeting up with friends in Nottingham and London, with the Glasgow school somewhat behind; probably because of the more dispersed pattern of residence. In addition, young males in London were less likely than other groups to hang out in other areas in the city. This may reflect the territoriality and associated threats of violence mentioned in some focus groups.

Overall, it can be concluded that the young people in all three locations had a very high degree of exposure to their local peers and to their local neighbourhoods generally. Most of them spent a lot of time with friends in the local area, often outdoors. However, perhaps contrary to expectations, this did not appear to mean that young people were confined to their local neighbourhoods. Only nine young people had not left their neighbourhood in the last two weeks.

Sixty five percent of males and 78% of females said they had travelled out of their area more than three times in the past fortnight, not counting going to school. However, in Glasgow they were significantly more mobile than elsewhere, again perhaps reflecting the much more extensive range of neighbourhoods they lived in, and there were no young people who had not travelled out of their area at all. Ninety five per cent of the Glasgow group had travelled out of their area twice or more in the fortnight before the interview compared to 83% in Nottingham and 75% in London. Participants in one of the focus groups in Glasgow (mainly White young people identified by school staff as being among the more able students) reported they met up at a local shopping/entertainment street or in the city centre and used buses to get around.
At the London school, when asked about travelling outside the area, young people tended to mention immediately adjoining areas. Clearly some of them sometimes went into central London, but this came across as being relatively uncommon:

Researcher: ‘And do you go up into, like, London itself?’

‘Yeah, we go up to London, yeah, yeah.’

Researcher: ‘So when was the last time you were in central London?’

‘The last time I want was on new Year’s Eve’

Researcher: ‘So about 3 months ago. What about yourself?’

‘Last week… I went shopping in Oxford Street’

‘I once went to London, like a few months ago, with my school …’

A consistent theme in the interviews with adults in London was that the neighbourhood was a negative influence on aspirations, mainly because of its lack of diversity combined with inward looking behaviour:

‘A significant number of the school body live in a situation of isolation’ (Community representative, male).

‘They don’t mix. They eat, breathe and live in this area. They mix in the area with people with similar characteristics’ (Support staff member, male)

The data seems to suggest that young people in the London school are relatively less mobile than in the other two areas, especially Glasgow.

**Views of the neighbourhood**

In general, young people’s views of the area they lived in were generally positive. Over 85 percent in each of the areas thought that where they lived was ‘good’ or very good’ with Nottingham slightly behind the others. The best things about the local area that were most often mentioned were the presence of friends and family and, even though they perhaps did not use them, amenities like parks, shops, libraries, youth clubs and sports centres.

Community spirit and various dimensions of social mixing or harmony were also mentioned as good things in London. On the negative side, there were some concerns, particularly in Glasgow and London, about gangs and (often unspecified) ‘trouble’, which were frequently mentioned as the worst things about their area (although often these negative points were qualified by reference to specific places and times).

A slightly smaller proportion thought that their home area was safe for young people. Across all three areas, there was less confidence that people who lived in other parts of their cities thought that the home area had a good reputation, especially in Nottingham and to a lesser extent London, but positive assessments were still made by more than half the sample. There was a significant relationship between ‘safety’ and ‘reputation’, those who said the area had a good reputation also tended to feel safe.

In general, despite the official deprivation of many of the areas the young people lived in and the weakness of the surrounding labour markets, around three quarters in Glasgow and Nottingham thought adults in the area were ‘doing well in life’, with the London figure behind at just under 70%. In Glasgow correspondingly fewer of the respondents believed that young people in the area expected to do well in life, but in the other areas more respondents thought that young people expected to do well compared with the figure for adults. The biggest gap between adults’ perceived position and young people’s perceived expectations (13%) was in London.
There were differences between the areas in the proportions who said they wanted ‘to stay around here when I’m older’, even though there were broadly similar proportions who provided a positive assessment of their home areas. While only in London was there a majority of young people who wanted to stay in the area, there was a substantial gap between the proportions who wanted to stay in Glasgow and London compared to Nottingham, where only 30% expressed a desire to stay.

There was a significant relationship (for boys only) between neighbourhood reputation and desire to move: those who thought the area had a bad reputation were more likely to want to leave, while those who thought it had a good reputation were more likely to want to stay. In general job aspirations or social mobility in general were cited as reasons for wanting to leave. A desire to leave was associated with slightly higher job aspirations and expectations and with a higher number of intended GCSEs or Standard Grades. Asked to elaborate why they wanted to leave, young people tended to cite a general desire to get on, or to follow careers that were not available locally, or sometimes a desire to live in a better area. For example:

‘I just want to see how living in another area would be like – get a better education, go to university.’ (London)

‘I want to see other places and see if there is anything better.’ (Glasgow)

In Nottingham, there was more of a sense in some of the interviews that the reasons for wanting to leave were more about ‘push’ factors, such as the overall reputation of the neighbourhood. A typical comment was:

‘I don’t really like it around here. I want to move above and beyond to a nice place’ (Nottingham)

With respect to employment a constant theme was the lack of locally available jobs. In one of the London focus groups a young woman explained:

‘There are not really many jobs. There are jobs in (name of local neighbourhood) but stuff like hair cutting, nails, yeah, there’s not really major business jobs. Obviously you’re looking at stuff like central London, that’s where all the top business stuff is…’

In Glasgow the question 'would you ever move away?' brought the answer:

‘Yeah... Because I’m thinking of doing like a degree in engineering...I don’t think like organizations or that in Glasgow, so you need to move abroad somewhere’

There was similar story in Nottingham, in this conversation:

‘In (name of neighbourhood), there’s nothing. Like if you work in a shop like Greggs... that’s all there is. Or work in a pub’

‘There’s not even any jobs in town (i.e. the city centre). Like all shop assistants and waiters’.

‘And when you want to do something good with your life, then you have to travel... ‘

And again in another focus group in Nottingham:

Researcher: ‘...do you know what kind of jobs there are around here?’

‘...you don’t get that much chance to get a job ‘cos there’s not many of them around now, if you get a job you’re lucky...’

Those who wanted to stay in their areas tended to mention friends and family and a general familiarly with the area (and those who wanted to move often qualified it with a recognition that their family and friends were nearby), for example:
And showing some mixed feelings:

'It's a dangerous place but I've been there for, like, I think more than eight years and I've really gotten used to it... like I have a lot of friends here' (London)

The data, then, suggested a tension between wanting to move for work, or for self-improvement, and wanting to stay close to friends and family.

Neighbourhood deprivation and aspirations
So many young people then have a high exposure to their neighbourhoods and many of those neighbourhoods show high levels of deprivation. However, at age 13 overall, there were no significant correlations between ideal and realistic job aspirations and neighbourhood deprivation. At 15 the data set contained a wider range of variables that might be used to explore the relationship between deprivation and aspirations such as housing tenure and car ownership. However again also there was no significant relationship overall between neighbourhood deprivation and job aspirations.

In Glasgow, however, there was a negative correlation between aspirations and IMD (p = -.289, p<0.05) suggesting that those from more deprived backgrounds tended to aspire to lower status jobs. When controlling for gender, the correlation for boys is stronger while for girls it is not significant. A correlation also exists between IMD and GCSE/Std. Grade (p=.260, p<0.05) indicating that the greater the level of deprivation, the lower the planned number of GCSE/Std. Grade exams the student is intending to take. However, when controlling for gender this correlation again becomes non significant. We can conclude that boy’s aspirations in Glasgow appear to be negatively impacted by living in a poor area, while girls’ are not.

In London, when gender is controlled for, there is a significant correlation between IMD and the number of GCSEs/Std. Grades anticipated; that is that girls who live in the more deprived neighbourhoods intend to take a higher number of exams, although it is hard to imagine the reason for this. In Nottingham there was no correlation between aspirations or expectations and IMD.

So overall, the research does not show a close relationship between neighbourhood deprivation and aspirations.

Aspirations and Place
However, differences between the three cities emerge strongly. There was a clue to this in terms of the aspiration to attend university, above, however it is also apparent in other aspects of educational aspirations. At 15 London students were considerably more likely to expect to get a university qualification, at 76%, compared to Glasgow at 58% and Nottingham at 44%. This was reinforced by the students’ expected school leaving age, which was consistent with expected qualifications. The number of school exams (GCSEs in England and and Standard Grades in Scotland) that students were intending to take was highest in London (7.4), with Glasgow next (6.9) and Nottingham the lowest\(^4\) (5.4).

Further difference emerges between Glasgow, London and Nottingham when occupations aspirations are examined. In Nottingham at age 13 the third SOC category was dominant (Figure 4). This includes both a range of common jobs and several of the most glamorous occupations such as singer, actor and footballer. Over a fifth of respondents believed they would attain skilled trade occupations, a fifth professional occupations and around one in seven saw themselves realistically in personal service occupations. At the age of 15 the situation was generally very similar. The

\(^4\) F=10.914, significant at p<0.01
proportion interested in category 3, associate professional and technical occupations had dropped very slightly, as had professional occupations and skilled trades. Personal services had increased by 4.1%, the biggest single change. The Nottingham distribution is the also one which is closest to the distribution of jobs in the local labour market. While the proportion of young people aspiring to high status jobs on the left hand side of the figure exceeds the proportion of jobs in the labour market and the number aspiring to the three lower status occupational groups on the right hand side is less than the proportion of such jobs in the market, there is in general a much closer match. However it is the tendency for notable percentages in Nottingham to aim for skilled trades (boys exclusively) and personal services (girls overwhelmingly) that sets Nottingham apart.

**Figure 4. Occupational aspirations by SOC at age 13 and 15 in Nottingham (%)**

In Glasgow the distribution at 13 was somewhat different (Figure 5). Here more than a quarter of young people identified aspirations for a professional job, and another equally large proportion named associate professional and technical occupations. Trades were named by another quarter of young people. The bottom three categories, which were named by few people in Nottingham, are mentioned by nobody in Glasgow. In Glasgow 6.9% aspired to be managers and senior officials, mentioned by nobody in Nottingham.

At the age of 15 the most striking change in Glasgow is the increase in the proportion of young people aspiring to professional jobs, now up to 40%. The proportion aspiring to personal services was very stable, but the number for skilled trades dropped from 24 to 19%. The changes in proportions interested in skilled trades and the professions respectively are very substantial indeed, especially bearing in mind that the period of the study was only two and a half years. So whereas in Nottingham the story was one of stability, in Glasgow the narrative appeared to be one of the increasing professionalisation of aspirations, largely at the cost of interest in skilled trades, but also some spreading out to a arrange which included the most routine jobs. In a city where skilled jobs have retracted with industrial change and white collar jobs have increased, this shift up market could be said to be rational. Overall, it is
only in the professional and intermediate professional categories that realistic aspirations in Glasgow exceed that proportion of such jobs in the city and GB labour markets.

**Figure 5. Occupational aspirations by SOC at age 13 and 15 in Glasgow (%)**

![Bar chart showing occupational aspirations by SOC at age 13 and 15 in Glasgow.]

London is different again (Figure 6). Here the emphasis at 13 was on professional occupations and associate and technical occupations. Whereas in Nottingham and Glasgow categories 2 and 3 were named by around 55% of young people, in London the proportion was 73.5%. Overall, the young people in London demonstrate a far clearer tendency to aspire to the top end of the occupational hierarchy. Between the ages of 13 and 15 the aspirations among the young people in London generally moved upwards. The overall proportion in the top third of the range increased only slightly (to 76%) but the top two categories expanded substantially. The overall picture in London was of a highly aspirational group of young people at 13 who became even more aspirational at 15. The London distribution at 15 is well out of line with the labour market in the immediate area in East London. Here there are no young people aspiring to elementary plant and machinery jobs even though they make up 25% of the job market. There are no girls aspiring to work in sales or skilled trades (20% of the market) and no boys wanting to work in personal services. On the other hand the proportion who wants to have professional jobs exceeds the local supply of such jobs by a factor of 4.6.
Looking at overall quantitative change up and down the occupational hierarchy in each location again shows distinctive patterns of change (Table 5). In Glasgow ideal aspirations came down by a small amount between 13 and 15, and in Nottingham they came down somewhat more. But in London the ideal to ideal indicator actually went up during the same period. The Nottingham cohort demonstrated the widest gap between ideal and realistic aspirations, although there were signs of it narrowing over time. In Glasgow, the gap had actually widened between the two survey rounds and, given the drop in ideal aspirations, this suggests there had been a significant average lowering of aspirations. In London, the gap at 15 was less than half of the gap at 13, but the ideal aspiration had gone up. Overall this suggests that the realistic aspirations held by the young people in London at 15 were as high as the ideal aspirations of the same people at 13.

The most concrete of the measures was the comparison between realistic aspirations at 13 and 15. Here there was a striking pattern. In Glasgow realistic aspirations had fallen slightly on average, and in Nottingham they had remained, on average, exactly the same. But in London, realistic aspirations had raised 0.4 categories, indicating a very substantial rise.

Table 5. Mean aspirational changes (SOC) by measure and location (n)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Glasgow</th>
<th>Nottingham</th>
<th>London</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideal-Ideal</td>
<td>-0.15 (62)</td>
<td>-0.31 (99)</td>
<td>0.24 (104)</td>
<td>-0.06 (265)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal-Realistic at 13</td>
<td>-0.14 (29)</td>
<td>-0.63 (79)</td>
<td>-0.48 (85)</td>
<td>-0.49 (193)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal-Realistic at 15</td>
<td>-0.30 (54)</td>
<td>-0.48 (92)</td>
<td>-0.23 (94)</td>
<td>-0.34 (240)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realistic-Realistic</td>
<td>-0.21 (24)</td>
<td>0.00 (71)</td>
<td>0.40 (71)</td>
<td>0.15 (172)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

This study set out to better understand the relationship between young people’s aspirations in relation to education and jobs, and the context in which they are formed. Most of the key findings seem surprising in light of where this study started. At that point our thoughts were that the study was likely to show that young people’s aspirations in the mainly deprived areas in which we planned to set the research would be quite low, or if they were not low, would be ‘unrealistic’. There would be a poverty of aspirations and it was expected that we would find some systematic relationships between young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds and living in more disadvantaged neighbourhoods and low aspirations. Such findings would be consistent with previous studies about aspirations, and our contribution would be to better delineate how such low aspirations were formed, especially by understanding how aspirations adjusted downwards according to experience and circumstances during the teenage years.

In fact, we have found that aspirations among young people in the three locations for the research are very high. The aspirations that young people have for education are generally to stay on in school education, take a clutch of exams and go to university, in far greater proportions than the number who are ever likely to attend, especially from these schools. The aspirations which young people have for jobs is generally to get professional and managerial jobs, again in proportions far greater than actually exist in the labour market, especially in the local authority areas on their doorsteps. The evidence is a challenge to the picture that has often been drawn by politicians and policy makers of a problem of low aspirations among young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds which serves to hold them back from higher education and the better jobs in the labour market.

What is more young people’s aspiration have not diminished over the period of the research. Aspirations were high at age 13 and they remain high at age 15. The desire to go to university has increased, not decreased. As for job aspirations at the individual level, young people’s aspiration have often shifted, but across the sample this has happened in both directions; some have raised their aspirations and others have lower them with the overall picture at age 15 being the same as at 13. And nor are the aspirations they hold obviously unrealistic. Certainly at 13 many young people had ideal occupations which were drawn from sport, TV shows show business and celebrity. Some young people hang onto these as ideal jobs, but most recognise at approximately 15, that they are not so likely to achieve them. Instead, their aspirations are often for jobs in the same or even a higher rung on the occupational ladder. Indeed having ideal jobs in sport or entertainment and realising they were unlikely destinations often led young people to focus on more ‘realistic’ cognate destinations.

Explaining why aspirations- ideal and realistic - are and remain so high has been something of a challenge. Overall, the most important working hypotheses that informed the study was that poverty of family circumstances and of the home neighbourhood, would act as a brake on young people’s aspirations. However, family background (not explored in this paper) shows little if any relationship with aspirations. What is more, the vast majority of young people enjoyed family circumstances that supported their school learning and they mostly had adults at home who were interested in what they would do in the future. This might not have been expected in broadly working class households living in some of the country’s poorest areas. However, ironically, it also turned out that there was no consistent relationship between the support that young people got at home and their aspirations anyway, so those that had no support at home had equally aspirations as those that did not.

Findings of earlier studies which showed that aspirations were associated with possibilities in the local labour market were not closely supported by the study either, except perhaps in a residual way in Nottingham. It might have been expected that living amid relatively depressed labour markets would generate a degree of fatalism among young people. However, while often recognising that the jobs that were in plentiful supply locally were low paid and unappealing, this did not appear to suggest to many young people that it was not worth aspiring to get a good job. In fact the opposite may be true for many; they were encouraged to aspire to higher education and a good job as a defence against the local labour market.
Neither did neighbourhood deprivation have much explanatory power, or even much associative relationship with aspirations. Except for boys in Glasgow, there appeared to be no relationship between the deprivation of the area of the young peoples’ home address. Overall, young people were satisfied with their areas as places to live and saw them as places from where they could do well, even if there was a desire by the majority to leave their home neighbourhood behind in order to pursue education or a career.

Although aspirations are high, there are not equally high across the three areas. Places with shared experience of deprivation can be quite different in their social make up and the way that this plays out in the life experiences of residents. What is notable in London and Nottingham is the extent to which the domains of factors seem to be broadly consistent. By this we mean that place factors, family factors and school factors seem to ‘push’ in generally the same direction, either towards or away from high aspirations.

In London, in an ethnically rich community with high levels of recent migration we found the highest aspirations, and they increased between 13 and 15 years of age. Two of the distinctive phenomena (not discussed in this paper) found here were high levels of confidence around maths in girls and job aspirations which were highly professional, again led by girls. Almost half of the young people in London could name a specific job aspiration held for them by others, and most accepted those aspirations.

In Nottingham, looking at a White working class community with low levels of non-White representation offered a chance to consider whether young people still grew up in the 2000s with the expectation that they would attain traditional working class jobs. The aspirations of the young people were lower than the other cities at 13 and remained low at 15, with increasing numbers of people interested in traditional roles divided by gender into trades and care occupations. There was little evidence of families pushing their children into particular occupational forms and a sense that both children and parents did not fully understand what it took to succeed in today’s job market. This consistent with recent studies of educational disadvantage which show that ‘poor White boys’ perform worse in school than minority ethnic boys who are equally disadvantaged.

In Glasgow, we selected an area with a mixed composition. The comprehensive school draws pupils from some of the poorest parts of Scotland as well as more affluent areas. This results in aspirations being formed in a far less homogeneous milieu than the other case studies. Here we found that among the young people there were a variety of different ways of forming aspirations. On the one hand there were the directed approaches so common in London, with significant support for ambition, on the other there was the supportive but untargeted approach of Nottingham. There was some evidence in Glasgow that less economically advantaged young people were less supported in their aspirations. However, there were also suggestions that over time the aspirations of the students started to move from extremes towards a common level, albeit one which was slightly lower at 15 than at 13.

The different patterns of aspiration formation mean that there is no single challenge facing aspirational development. In places like Glasgow the challenge is making sure that young people experiencing falling aspirations are identified and that supports are put in place. This might be quite difficult to achieve in a comprehensive school setting with young people of widely varying background and different trajectories.

In traditional working class communities like Nottingham there is also a need to deal with the most immediate effects of low aspirations - low exam expectations. Key informants told the researchers of examples of young people who got strong exam results but maintained an aspiration more suited to a lower performance. Parental engagement may prove to be another challenge.

In aspirational London, the challenge is almost the opposite, managing the high level of expectations. In London the school plays a very active role in supporting high aspirations, and to a degree in forming them as well. Parents are highly involved here and tend to have specific aims for their children. The question is the degree to which these aspirations are realistic, and whether it is harmful in any way to have so many young people with aspirations that are
unlikely to be fulfilled by the labour market. However the impact of this is outside the bounds of the study: disappointed aspirations are likely to be felt only after the young people have completed their GCSEs and moved on from the school.

References


