

ASPIRATIONS, ATTAINMENT AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN DISADVANTAGED AREAS

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INTRODUCTION

In the UK (and in England in particular) there is very high degree of policy interest in raising aspirations as a route out of poverty. As explained by Jim Murphy, currently a member of the Cabinet, this stems politically from the idea within the Labour Party that social progress can be made on the back of ‘progressive self interest’, that is ‘making the wider connection between personal aspiration and the continuing right of the state to enable collective solutions the meets those aspirations’ (Murphy, 2007, p.18).

While aspirations in these terms may be focussed on a number of spheres, for example housing, where government support for home ownership to meet people’s aspirations has been consistent, a great part of the focus on aspirations concerns aspirations for further and higher education and in relation to jobs. There is a strong assumption that raising aspirations will increase educational achievement among disadvantaged groups and therefore narrow economic inequalities and tackle poverty. In his speech accepting the leadership of the Labour Party (and therefore the post of Prime Minister) Gordon Brown maintained:

‘...I want for our young people the biggest expansion in educational opportunity our country has ever seen. And we will be truly world class in education only if we raise the aspirations of young people themselves, so we will launch a national campaign for thousands more to stay on at sixteen, to sign up to an apprenticeship, to study at university and college’ (Brown, 2007).

These ideas have found their way into policy. The idea that aspirations are currently too low, are a key to higher achievement and can be raised by public policy has been a theme in recent policy papers about children and young people. Attention to aspirations has increased since 2007, as shown for example in *The Children’s Plan* (DCSF, 2007) and in *Aiming High for Young People* (HM Treasury and DCSF, 2007).

The interest in this topic for students of ‘poverty neighbourhoods’ is that low aspirations have also been explicitly linked in government policy papers to disadvantaged areas. An important part of the policy context here is that, at least before the recession started to impact, the government believed that that the gaps between deprived and non- deprived areas in England was starting to narrow overall, but there were persistent pockets of worklessness in some neighbourhoods in some regions. This led to a refocusing of approaches to neighbourhood renewal. The report signalling this shift noted that

‘...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 place has now spread beyond the government department responsible for housing, planning and regeneration 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 in a Social Exclusion Taskforce (SET) ‘discussion paper’ (Cabinet Office, 2008). Initial work by SET led to a set of key hypotheses: that aspirations and attainment levels are lower in deprived communities; that there is a relationship between young people’s aspirations and their educational attainment; that ‘community level’ attitudes, aspirations and expectations can have a significant influence on young people’s aspirations and therefore attainment; that there are

potential interventions that can raise community aspirations and expectations, and that therefore a more strategic and better coordinated approach to raising aspirations in deprived communities would help to raise attainment.

The SET paper was followed by the UK Government's White Paper on social mobility (Cabinet Office, 2009), which identified a key role for communities in shaping young people's attitudes to education and employment. The premise of the White Paper is that:

'Growing up in a strong positive community encourages us to set our sights high and helps us to develop the resilience to overcome adversity and achieve our goals' (Cabinet Office, 2009, p.92).

In contrast:

'In some deprived communities stable populations and close knit networks combine with a sense of isolation from broader social and economic opportunities. This can limit young people's horizons and aspirations for the future' (pp.95-96).

The government also announced 'Inspiring Communities', a new 'challenge fund' programme to be operated in 15 areas in England, designed to extend the aspirations of young people and their families. The results of this competition are currently awaited.

In light of this emphasis on place and aspirations, this paper aims to consider whether a focus on 'community level aspirations' is likely to have value in seeking to alleviate inequalities. It has been developed from a contribution to an 'evidence review' on aspirations and educational attainment in deprived areas, commissioned by SET prior to the publication of the discussion paper (Lupton and Kintrea, 2008) and from SHAPE, a research project, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which is exploring the aspirations of secondary school children and how they are formed and change (Turok et al, 2009)

WHAT ARE ASPIRATIONS?

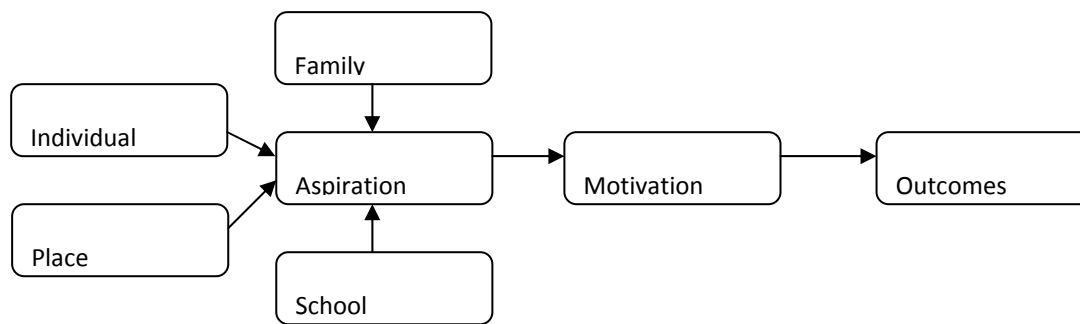
The term 'aspirations' is used to capture the various desires and ambitions held by young people about their futures. These may be concrete or vague, but the essence of the idea is of a desire to achieve something high in the future with the implication that it will drive people's actions in the present (Quaglia and Cobb, 1996). Therefore, it is argued, raising aspirations among young people in the UK will lead on to enhanced outcomes, in terms of educational achievement and labour market position.

The way aspirations are used in policy is based on three connected propositions. These are:

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

The basic argument about how aspirations lead on to educational and labour market outcomes is illustrated in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: A SIMPLE MODEL OF ASPIRATIONS



The literature shows that these propositions have some validity, although they tend to become less clearly supported moving from 1 to 3. Gutman and Akerman (2008), and other reviews, show that many studies associate young people’s aspirations with their educational and occupational outcomes. Some recent statistical studies include Khoo and Ainley (2005), who showed that young people’s intentions in the early years of secondary school to stay on at school predicted actual staying on behaviour in later years. Strand (2007), using the Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England, showed that aspirations to stay on in education boosted attainment scores significantly, even when taking into account family background and parent’s aspirations for their young people.

Aspirations appear not to be evenly distributed in society. Feinstein et al (2003) discuss various ways in which parent’s ‘cognitions’ (beliefs, attitudes, aspirations and expectations) may affect children’s development, concluding that ‘positive cognitions’ by parents are associated with higher educational achievement. Importantly for our purposes, they also suggest that there is a correlation between the parents’ educational level and having high aspirations for their children, although they note that identifying causal effects is difficult because of complex interactions between the beliefs and aspirations of parents and those of their children. Schoon and Parsons (2002), using the NCDS, conclude that parents’ social class is a strong predictor both of aspirations and outcomes in education, a conclusion which is also shared by De Cevita et al (2004) using Canadian data on mothers’ aspirations.

International studies show that young people’s own aspirations are also notably related to social class (Andres et al, 1999). They are also sometimes related to ethnicity, with some minority students positioned as having undeveloped aspirations. However, some authors hold that ‘low’ aspirations are themselves in part a product of the low expectations that teachers often have of minority students (e.g. Fine et al, 2004). There is also evidence internationally and from the UK that some minority groups have notably high aspirations. Abrams (2006) describes high aspirations among students of Chinese and Indian origin in London regardless of their backgrounds, which were often modest, living in working class areas and attending ordinary comprehensive schools. This is also supported by Francis and Archer (2005). Strand and Winston (2008) from survey work in five schools in an English inner city find the same, and identify White working class young people as the group with the lowest aspirations. Strand (2007) using the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) also reports that the factors which made the biggest impact on attainment differences between ethnic groups were pupils’ and parents’ aspirations, which provide some minority ethnic groups with a greater resilience against the impacts of poverty.

Some studies of children and families in poverty, however, do not support the idea that disadvantaged people have fundamentally different aspirations, but rather that their expectations, their sense of self-efficacy, their self esteem, confidence and motivation are affected by their circumstances, leading either to a genuine reduction in aspirations or to an unwillingness to express them. Turok et al (2009), in a study of 12- 13 year olds in three schools, find little or no difference in aspirations among children and their parents from different backgrounds and different neighbourhoods. In a similar vein, McKendrick et al (2007), from a survey among teenagers from a deprived estate concluded that they were engaged in their schools and community and were ambitious for their futures. Calder and Cope (2005) found aspirations among disadvantaged young people and a control group were similar but the former faced multiple barriers to reaching them and ‘underachieved’.

Baxter et al (2007) point out that that policies based on aspirations tend to value middle-class ambitions and world-views most highly, and therefore can imply that marginalised groups are lacking in some way. The authors refer to Bridges' (2005) argument that the perceived aspirational deficit reflects a traditional occupational hierarchy where intellectual jobs (attained by academic prowess) are most valued. Baxter et al (2007) suggest that it may be a mistake to focus upon what young people lack, rather than on the ways in which social structures provide opportunity to some while denying it to others. In other words, the problem of aspirations may not be what people want, but rather what they are constrained or allowed to achieve. Outcomes may be far more strongly influenced by structures of opportunity than by aspiration or motivation.

In a similar vein, Auerbach suggests:

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

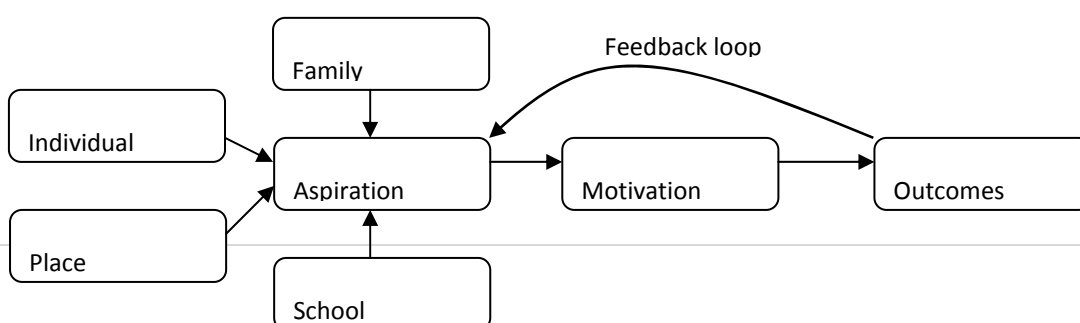
One of Auerbach's key points is that a lack of educational aspirations is not a failure of individuals, but may be an informed and rational response to historical and cultural context. Low aspirations, then, may be a strategic move to avoid repeating negative outcomes.

The kinds of factors that could cause downshifts in aspirations include negative cultural expectations about school and studying and familial expectations that young people will contribute financially through rent or housekeeping, which both encourage early school leaving (Evans 2006). There can be a tension between a desire for social mobility (finding oneself) and a desire for social support and working class identity which means that following through on one's aspirations comes to mean 'losing oneself' (Reay 2001). There is also the question of young people's experience in schools which for working class pupils can be increasingly negative (Horgan 2007; Bowman et al, 2000, Reay 2002). Increasing emphasis on testing, and on grouping by ability, can condition the aspirations and expectations of children from poor backgrounds who enter school at a disadvantage (e.g. Reay and Wiliam 1999).

Power's (2007) longitudinal study of poor families found that parents were often highly aspirational but that 'parenting hopes were far from realities'. They had difficulty in sustaining aspirations (and taking the necessary steps to see them through) due to often very difficult personal circumstances, including mental and other health problems, disrupted and conflictual relationships, and the day-to-day difficulties of living in challenging neighbourhoods. Ridge (2002) has argued that children growing up in poverty can exclude themselves 'from within', when they begin to realize that some paths are seen as inappropriate or unaffordable. This can manifest as low motivation or aspiration.

Aspirations, then, appear to be shaped by various forms of feedback to the individual, both through key relationships such as the peer group and through opportunity structures such as the local labour market (Furlong and Biggart, 1999). This means that understanding the way aspirations contribute to a person's movement through educational and vocational systems requires thinking about aspirations as dynamic and related to their context. Overall, social factors create a recursive loop that affects aspirations; as an aspiration is accepted more or less well, or as it proves more or less useful, then it will change and be redeployed. This implies that individuals cannot just choose to change their aspirations, but have to select aspirations that fit within a limited field of choices. This is summarised in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2: A MODEL OF ASPIRATIONS INCLUDING A FEEDBACK LOOP



It is also important to emphasise that the ‘outcomes’ in this model can take a number of different forms. They can be short-term, as when aspiration affects choice of subject in school, or long-term. They can be vocational, educational or, in some cases, social. It may be that a certain aspiration has social consequences (positive or negative) for an individual as their peer-group responds to it.

The suggestion that aspirations change in reaction to the reception of them leads to a distinction between idealistic aspirations, the individual’s preferred goal in an ideal world, and realistic aspirations, shaped by external factors and incorporating an evaluation of one’s own ability and achievements. It makes sense to ask what people hope to achieve, and what they expect to achieve, and to get different answers (Andres et al. 1999) and also that to expect that the gap between aspirations and expectations will be different for different groups (Furlong et al, 1996). And while aspirations may to some extent differ between individuals and between groups in systematic ways, it may be that the bigger differences between groups are likely to be in the gap that opens up between aspirations and expectations, against a background of the labour market, schools and the wider society.

APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY AND NEIGHBOURHOOD FACTORS IN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Before examining aspirations specifically, it makes sense to consider whether neighbourhood impacts on educational achievement. This is part of a larger question about the influence of neighbourhoods and communities on life chances, in particular whether disadvantaged neighbourhoods impose additional disadvantages on their already disadvantaged residents. As a general question this has been the subject of a lively international research enquiry that is not fully resolved (Blasius et al, 2007), although the idea that neighbourhoods influence social outcomes has a strong appeal among policy makers in several European countries and Australia, as well as the UK, keen to promote ‘mixed communities’ or neighbourhood diversification policies.

There has been a large number of empirical studies that have focused on outcomes for individuals such as income, labour market participation, occupation, sexual activity, fertility, health, criminality and children’s development as well as education. A range of approaches have been used including longitudinal cohort studies, quasi-experimental approaches, cross sectional studies and qualitative research. Providing good evidence about neighbourhood influences on social outcomes, though, is a formidable challenge and the adequacy of the evidence itself has been the subject of a great deal of debate. What is more, because the research effort has been international, much of the evidence is sourced from outside the UK and may not be fully relevant. The origin of neighbourhood effects research was in the USA. However the differences in poverty levels, social conditions, crime, and neighbourhood amenities between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged areas are still much more extreme in the USA than the UK. This means that US research cannot automatically be read off as applicable to the UK and some authors have suggested that neighbourhood effects are negligible in European settings because of the impacts of social welfare provision. The UK, though, is often regarded as member of a group of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ countries where inequalities are relatively wide and the housing system more segregated (Kemeny, 1995) and where there is a distinctive set of poor neighbourhoods and a residualised social housing system that constrains a greater proportion of poor households to live among other like themselves (Hills, 2007). So far, conclusions lean towards the view that ‘neighbourhood effects’ are real and have an influence on life chances, but that the distinctive influence of neighbourhood and community is not as important as other influences, particularly social background. For example, the best predictor of someone’s occupation is the occupations of their parents, and not where they grew up, although where they grew up makes some difference.

Considering educational attainment as an outcome, higher socio-economic groups enjoy considerable advantages in navigating the education system through a combination of knowledge, resources, strategies and networks (Raffo et al,

2007). What is more, life chances are also shaped by individual attributes, some of which have wider structural significance in society, including gender and ethnicity. So we can say that the influences that come from living in one place rather than another are tangible, but it is vital not to exaggerate their importance.

Nor is it by any means agreed among researchers which processes of 'neighbourhood effects' are the most important, on whom do they impact most strongly, and at which stages in the life course. While some empirical literature is unspecific on how place might impact on educational outcomes and simply reports the presence (or not) of statistical associations between education and place, there are perhaps three sets of theories about neighbourhood effects:

1. COMMUNITIES AND COLLECTIVE SOCIALISATION

Central to many theories of neighbourhood effects is the idea that the behaviours and attitudes of an individual are directly influenced by those of their neighbours, and that those behaviours and attitudes are directly influential on the individual's attainments in education and the labour market. It is also usually held that the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours which result from collective socialisation in disadvantaged areas are systematically different to those in more affluent areas and that they inhibit educational attainment and so serve to further extend disadvantage. Most ideas about how neighbourhood effects work start with a view that negative impacts on individuals are most likely where there is a concentration of poverty, but some stress the negative impact on disadvantaged groups who are intensively marginalized when living in close proximity with affluent groups.

Aspirations play a central role in these kinds of theories. Along with other types of behaviours and attitudes they are held to be instrumental, standing between individuals and how they acquit themselves in the wider economy and society. However, aspirations are rarely problematised or investigated specifically.

There are myriad versions of the collective socialisation theory (see Andersson et al, 2007; Galster, 2007) which attribute a key role, among others, to role models and peers, 'epidemic' effects after a certain threshold of a critical subset of the population has been reached, selective socialisation processes, and social networks and information ('strong ties' and 'weak ties'), among others. In this sense the term 'community-level' aspirations is used as a proxy for social network/peer effects. However, there are other processes by which community/neighbourhood factors can influence attainment. We refer to these as environmental/external and institutional/schools.

2. ENVIRONMENTAL/EXTERNAL

The hypothesis is that the physical environment of the neighbourhood, its housing or other external factors impose direct disadvantages, or they encourage certain types of social behaviour and interaction that in turn affect residents' attitudes, including their aspirations. A key issue here is accessibility to local jobs, the extent of spatial mismatch between residential location and job location (e.g. Houston, 2005). Local services may just be worse in poor areas (Hastings et al, 2006) and therefore a source of disadvantage and exposure to environmental hazards may have knock-on effects to health and behavior. A sense of place attachment, and hence the development of identity and a sense of security, may be negatively influenced by poor neighbourhoods and depressing environments (Garner and Raudenbush, 1991).

Neighbourhood narratives of decline or local reputations for violence, crime or worklessness can permeate everyday life as young people struggle for recognition and to develop self-confidence and self-esteem (Howarth, 2002; Thomson 2002). More tangibly, small and inadequate dwellings may encourage young people to associate on the streets and expose them to negative peer effects (Garner and Raudenbush, 1991; Kintrea et al, 2008). The level of home ownership in an area may affect the forms of social capital which exist there through differences in residential mobility, financial security and social status (Bramley and Karley, 2005).

3. INSTITUTIONAL/SCHOOLS

Neighbourhoods contain within them a set of private-, public- and voluntary-sector resources and institutions. In the present discussion, about educational and occupational aspirations, schools are a key local institution, although others such as libraries, learning services, community centres and youth services may also have some importance. Where school systems are tied to places through catchment areas there are strong associations between the social characteristics of neighbourhoods and those of children in schools. Schools therefore provide another site for social networking, and co-learning, which may or may not be beneficial. Evidence on peer effects within schools is mixed, partly because of difficulties of data and methodology, but it tends to suggest that peers do matter for educational outcomes and for motivation (Thrupp et al., 2002; Kindermann, 2007), indicating the desirability of interventions to ensure mixed school intakes and opportunities for learning with different kinds of people within school.

Schools are also likely to be influential in other ways. It is now well established that schools in disadvantaged areas in England are less likely to be well-rated in inspections (OFSTED 2000). DCSF has a number of programmes to address school quality in poor areas. High levels of poverty exert downward pressure on school quality (Lupton, 2005); and teaching often works 'with the grain' of middle class children (Lupton, 2004), while many activities such as discipline and parental liaison are more challenging and time-consuming, diverting time and energy from teaching and learning (Gewirtz, 1998). There may also be a higher staff turnover in more disadvantaged schools. Staff may stereotype children's abilities and interests (e.g. Bauder, 2001).

Unless sufficient resources are distributed to schools in disadvantaged areas, and effective models of school organisation are found to cope with these additional demands, or admissions systems are changed to encourage greater social mix, school may turn out to be a less enjoyable and stimulating environment for children in predominantly low income areas. Several studies suggest that children in disadvantaged areas often have negative experiences of school, including not being able to get the help needed to succeed, being shouted at by teachers, or being distracted by other pupils (Horgan, 2007, Bowman et al, 2000). Poor schools combined with a negative experience of school in turn impacts on the neighbourhood in terms of how well prepared local young people are for further and higher education, training and jobs.

Schools also effect neighbourhood composition in a dynamic sense. 'Good schools' attract the more affluent households with children who can exercise choice of schools via the housing market, paying a house price premium (Cheshire and Sheppard, 2004). Neighbourhood characteristics and school characteristics are therefore interdependent (Taylor and Gorard, 2001; Tibbitt et al, 2007). This is particularly the case where there are wide variations in the perceived quality of schools, and where demand for schooling is high. Parents who can exercise choices will cluster within the catchment areas of 'magnet schools', leaving the schools with poorer reputations to those unable to choose their location (Butler and Robson 2003; Hamnett et al, 2007).

COMMUNITY/NEIGHBOURHOOD LEVEL INFLUENCES ON EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Individual and household characteristics are strongly influential on the educational attainment of young people; children from poorer backgrounds have lower attainment overall, in the UK and internationally (DCSF, 2009). This effect is apparent in young children and is accentuated as they go through school. Children in the UK from lower socio-economic groups who initially perform well in cognitive tests at a young age are even overtaken by those from higher socio-economic groups as early as when they start primary school (Feinstein, 2003). What is also clear is that there is an association between living in areas of deprivation and lower educational attainment, however there is still relatively little evidence on the effects of community/neighbourhood on educational attainment, especially in the UK. DCSF recently published an extensive review of Deprivation and Education (DCSF, 2009) but warned that, using its own area coded data that it was not possible to distinguish any effects of direct deprivation experienced by families from impacts of age or community deprivation. Overall, what evidence there is tends to suggest that there is a neighbourhood effect on attainment, over and above the effect of individual and household characteristics, but that this is relatively small.

YOUNG CHILDREN

There is evidence of neighbourhood effects on very young children. McCulloch and Joshi (2000), using UK data, show neighbourhood (ward) effects on test scores for children aged four to five but not older children. In the USA Brooks-Gunn et al (1993) found neighbourhood effects on development outcomes at age three. These findings are interesting because children of this age will have had little exposure to formal education, nor had much exposure to the neighbourhood. This suggests that effects are working indirectly through parents and raises the question about at whom interventions should be targeted. It also means that neighbourhood effects at older ages may be under-estimated if we are looking for effects over and above the baseline of early years attainment.

OLDER CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

For older children and young people, there is also some evidence of neighbourhood effects. There is quantitative evidence from the US and Australia of neighbourhood effects on school drop-out rates (Brooks-Gunn et al. 1993; Rosenbaum 1995; Overman 2002). Rosenbaum also found neighbourhood effects on college participation rates.

For the UK, Gibbons (2002) using data from the NCDS (1958 UK birth cohort) found neighbourhood effects on 'A-level' attainment. Children from the top ten percent most educationally advantaged neighbourhoods were between five and seven percentage points more likely to get 'A-levels' than children with similar family backgrounds living in neighbourhoods ranked in the bottom ten per cent. These effects did not operate purely through the quality and mix of local secondary schools. Garner and Raudenbush (1991), using Scottish data from the 1980s, found neighbourhood effects on achievement at age 16, with a change in neighbourhood deprivation from the 90th to the 10th percentile being associated with a change in attainment equivalent to about two 'O' grade passes, after controlling for variations in schooling. Using Australian data Jensen and Seltzer (2000) found that mean incomes, unemployment, educational attainment and the percentage employed in professional occupations in a neighbourhood had statistical associations with on young people's decisions to stay on in education.

Galster et al (2007) using US income data matched with census tracts also examined neighbourhood poverty and its impacts on education (the likelihood of graduating from high school and graduating from college). They found that the likelihood of graduating from high school was reduced by 14 percentage points (15% of the mean) and that of graduating from college was reduced by 10 percentage points (70% of the mean), controlling for other factors. They conclude also that neighbourhood poverty was a stronger influence than several other contextual factors, if not stronger than parents' incomes and educational achievements.

Bell (2003) used GCSE results from the early 2000s, and found an association between neighbourhood poverty levels and GCSE outcomes, conditioning on prior attainment at Key Stage 3, and including data from OFSTED on teaching quality. This study did not include individual and family variables, so cannot be used in the same way to demonstrate additional neighbourhood effects. Its main finding is a strong relationship between neighbourhood poverty and teacher quality: the poorer the area the worse the teaching, so part of the apparent neighbourhood effect was accounted for by a school effect, i.e. teaching quality.

Sanbonmatsu et al (2006) in a paper summarizing aspects of the MTO experiment in the USA found no influence from moving from poor to less poor neighbourhoods on educational outcomes including reading and maths scores, behaviour, school engagement and school problems, either among children who were pre-schoolers at the time of the move, or among older children. This contrasts with earlier results from the same set of studies such as Orr et al (2003) which found mild influences. The authors provide various explanations for their null results including technical issues about sampling, that neighbourhood moves were only accompanied by modest improvements in the schools that were attended, that many of the destination neighbourhoods were only marginally less poor than the origin neighbourhoods and none were truly affluent, and that moving schools proved disruptive to children's education. However, in noting that the MTO experiments do show positive gains in other areas, such as health and criminalisation, they conclude that

interventions based purely on neighbourhoods are not going to solve the problems of children growing up in poverty. Another study which has concluded there are no neighbourhood effects on education is Kaupinnen (2004) for Finland.

It is difficult to draw clear conclusions from this data as it is gathered using different techniques, different data sets, different time horizons and reaching different views about both the magnitude to neighbourhood effects and whether that are direct or indirect, operating through schools. Nor is it clear how neighbourhood effects on education outcome operate; we are here in a world of associations, not causes. However, we are inclined to the view, along with most others who have reviewed the field (e.g. Beauvais and Jenson, 2003) that disadvantaged neighbourhoods are problematic for children and young people's educational achievements.

ASPIRATIONS IN DEPRIVED COMMUNITIES

Very few studies centre on the role of place in aspirations. At the city or regional level, areas which have undergone industrial restructuring have seen traditional paths to work blocked (Morris, 1995; McDowell, 2000) and the emergence of 'poor work' (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Studies of barriers to employment in deprived areas taken together suggest that there are compositional effects arising from the characteristics of the people who are concentrated in such areas, which influenced the extent and variability of joblessness (Sanderson, 2006). Many of the people who live in disadvantaged areas are there because they face personal difficulties and health problems. It is relatively easy to implicate micro-social process within the household as an element of these compositional effects (Gordon, 1996) and to recognize the phenomenon of 'discouraged workers' (Van Ham et al, 2001) in depressed labour markets, and to suppose that aspirations are also depressed (and are in turn influential in outcomes).

There is some evidence for this. Bowman et al (2000) found that experiences of arbitrary and discriminatory employment practices operating within the local labour market in a disadvantaged area could disillusion people about the links between educational qualifications and employment chances. Turok et al (2009) find a small correlation between those young people who thought they would be able to get the job that they wanted and the Index of Multiple Deprivation, suggesting those in the more deprived areas were less certain of their occupational destinations. The young people in Turok et al's (2009) study who worried about getting jobs also tended to be from the more disadvantaged areas, and it was also clear that the more deprived the area that young people lived in the less they enjoyed studying.

One of the few studies which has tried to associate aspirations with local labour markets is that of Furlong and his colleagues (Biggart and Furlong, 1996; Furlong et al, 1996; Furlong and Biggart, 1999). They investigated young people's aspirations in schools in four towns in Scotland and concluded that local employment contexts had relatively little impact. Rather the most important factor in aspiration was how confident they were in their own futures. However, boys (rather than girls) from working class backgrounds attending schools in areas with depressed labour markets tended to a greater extent to exhibit depressed aspirations.

A number of studies, including most recently Green and White (2007), have remarked on the relatively small geographical horizons of young people who live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and thus their lack of exposure to wider opportunities, and it is fairly well established that opportunities for young people to go outside their neighbourhood, or to have exposure to other worlds, for example through mentoring, are valuable. Social network theorists (e.g. Wilson 1987) also suggest that the visibility of a range of different role models within a neighbourhood (achieved by mixing communities) could be influential, although in practice, the evidence suggests that people from different social classes and tenures tend to occupy different social worlds and rarely come into contact (Atkinson and Kintrea 2000; Allen et al. 2005) so the strength of these potential effects is doubtful.

It is difficult to make complete sense of the sometimes competing conclusions of these studies. There is a complicated dynamic process going on that is not about people having or lacking aspirations, or certainly not just about that. The

literature suggests aspirations are subject to processes of adjustment and trade-offs over time, underlain by cultural conditioning and people's self identities.

Against this background of uncertainty the Cabinet Office and the Social Mobility White Paper make a case for neighbourhood interventions in pursuit of higher aspirations. The case that the Cabinet Office (2008) makes is based mainly on data taken from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), a large survey targeted at 14 year olds, which is then coded according to the level of deprivation of the neighbourhood containing the respondent's address, and the type of area according to the Mosaic classification¹. The survey includes the question: *'When you're 16 and have finished Year 11 at school what do you want to do next... stay on in full time education, either at the school you are at now or somewhere else, or leave full time education, or leave ft education but return later?'* A further question asks *'How likely do you think it is that you will ever apply to go to university to do a degree? Would you say it's... very likely, fairly likely, not very likely, not at all likely?'* (ESDS, 2008).

On the basis of data from these questions, the Cabinet Office reports that propensity to want to stay on at school is around 92% in the least deprived quintile of areas but falls to 83% in the most deprived quintile. Those who say they are likely to apply to university vary from 71% in the least deprived quintile to 52% in the most deprived quintile. The type of deprived area with the lowest aspirations is called 'Low Horizons', which is found in large cities in the north of England, whereas the deprived areas where the desire to stay on at school is highest is a type called 'South Asian Industry' (it seems that Mosaic got to the conclusion before the Cabinet Office) (Cabinet Office, 2008, p.16). The report goes on further to associate lower staying on desires with neighbourhoods that are relatively isolated from population flows, and where there is a high degree of entrapment of the poor households. Overall, the neighbourhood where aspirations are said to be lowest are white, council-built neighbourhoods in former industrial areas, where there are strong family networks but which are which are inward looking and stigmatised. Among deprived neighbourhoods, aspirations are higher among those dominated by Asian groups.

CONCLUSIONS

We conclude by reflecting on what this evidence tells us in relation to the hypotheses that community level attitudes, aspirations and expectations have a significant influence on young people's aspirations and therefore attainment.

It is clear from this review that something is happening at the neighbourhood level that effects educational attainment. There is evidence of neighbourhood effects from many different data sources, time periods and locations which adds up convincingly. Place does seem to matter, albeit less than individual, family or household factors.

Whether or not this is a function of lower aspirations is not clear. We can firmly conclude from the available evidence neither that aspirations are lower in disadvantaged neighbourhoods nor that community-level aspirations have significant effects on young people's aspirations or attainment. The latter point is particularly hard to establish. The mechanisms producing neighbourhood effects are not well theorised in relation to the role of aspirations, nor well tested. What is more, in a discussion about educational achievement, it is pertinent that at least some of the neighbourhood effects are in fact accountable for by school effects, i.e. the disadvantages which come from attending a particular school.

There is certainly some evidence of low aspirations in low income neighbourhoods, but the evidence base is not very strong. Partly this is because 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 and on this basis, it would not be surprising to find lower aspirations, in aggregate, in more disadvantaged neighbourhoods. We also need to bear in mind that ethnicity is an important factor which intervenes in the relationships between

¹ Mosaic is a classification of UK neighbourhoods into 61 ideal types based on socio-economic and marketing data.

income, class, parental education and aspirations. Aggregate aspirations appear to be quite different in disadvantaged communities of different ethnic composition.

Other studies, though, suggest that both parents and children in poorer neighbourhoods tend to hold high aspirations, at least when children are relatively young. This contrasting evidence is partly accounted for by the problem of defining and identifying ‘aspirations’ from different viewpoints. Professionals may- and often do- complain that there are “low aspirations” – evidenced by young people expecting to work in local retail stores, for example. At the same time community members may actually express high but generalised aspirations, for their children do better than them, or to do well in education, for example. These kinds of aspirations may simply be tempered by expectations that are in tune with their 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.

Consistent with this, what does emerge from the evidence is a varied set of mechanisms operating at the local level that impact on the formation and, importantly, on the sustenance of aspirations. These include quality and experiences of schooling, labour market constraints and employment practices, neighbourhood connectivity, environments and reputation, the availability of information, and household financial constraints. Thus, aspirations may well be lower in disadvantaged communities and there certainly is evidence that living in poverty and in an area of limited opportunity can impact in a variety of ways on the formation and maintenance of aspirations.

Given these multiple influences on aspirations, an exclusive emphasis on social networks and peer processes (producing ‘community level aspirations’) would be misplaced, and also that tackling aspirations directly as an object of policy would likely prove to be difficult. Given historical and contemporary conditions, aspirations may be hard to raise and even harder to sustain. Rather than focusing on whether or not there are aspirations in the community and trying to raise them, a more fruitful approach might be to focus on the forces by which aspirations are reduced.

The evidence suggests that any interventions need to be progressed on a number of fronts simultaneously and probably interactively. For example, tackling ‘community-level aspirations’ is unlikely to be successful on a wide scale unless the local schools, environment, labour market and reputation are also improved, as it is that provides the background and the feedback loops within which aspirations are formed. Achieving greater equality in the conditions within and composition of neighbourhoods, schools and classes is fundamental. However, interventions to address community aspirations could support and be supported by interventions which tackle institutions or environments. In other words, they could work in tandem. Thus where a school has been successfully ‘turned around’, or where there is evidence of investment in a community (re-building homes or a school or the arrival of a new large-scale employer for example), this may provide a hook for work in the community that aims to build a different and more positive set of narratives and aspirations and to support the development of extended ties.

Similarly, programmes that address individual aspirations, Aimhigher for example, may also need to be tailored to local contexts and be bolstered by ongoing support, mentoring and guidance, to enable participants to negotiate hurdles like the expectation of a financial contribution to their family, or a lack of confidence in entering unknown territory. Thus, interventions to initiate higher aspirations must also address motivation, esteem, efficacy and the genuine constraints that affect these, in the relevant community context. Since aspirations are held by different people within a community, there may be also mileage in linking programmes aimed at different constituencies, such that the parents of young people participating in Aimhigher or local school-based programmes are also involved and supported on an ongoing basis. A strategic and better coordinated approach to raising aspirations in deprived communities would probably help to raise attainment.

Overall the evidence reviewed here tends to the conclusion that the focus of any policy innovation around aspirations might be best placed on dismantling the barriers to high aspirations that people living in poor neighbourhoods often experience. It seems unlikely that a focus on raising aspirations in a generic sense across a whole community, in the hope that they will thrive and impact on life chances could be a success.

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