Exploring the aspirations of young people to work in the British film industry through comparative focus groups in London secondary schools

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Exploring the aspirations of young people to work in the British film industry through comparative focus groups in London secondary schools

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Abstract

This article explores the findings of research conducted with two focus groups of English high school students in 2018 that centred on the aspirations of young people to work in the British film industry. First identifying the conceptions of 'aspiration' articulated within British public and policy discourses associated with the film industry, this article goes on to explore some of the different factors shaping participants' knowledge and expectations of what a film industry career looks like. Using direct quotations from participants alongside contextual analysis, I explore how factors related to family, financial resources, ambition and school provision shape the knowledge and perceptions of film industry careers among British young people.

Keywords: aspirations, young people, film industry

Introduction

In 2017, at the point where the research for this article began, the British film industry was entering a period of slowing down after five years of rapid economic expansion (Youngs, 2020). Between 2017 and 2018, 395 new film production companies were founded, in addition to the 15,200 already existing (BFI, 2019: 3) and in 2017 the UK film industry contributed £6 billion to gross domestic product (GDP) with a turnover of £14.8 billion (BFI, 2019: 3). At this juncture the British film industry could be seen to be grappling with questions as to how it would maintain this level of expansion given considerable skills shortages across the sector in production, post-production, visual effects (VFX), business and certain specialized craft and technical roles (ScreenSkills, 2017). Simultaneously, there was and remains an emerging pattern of homogeneity in the British film industry workforce. In 2018, 70 per cent of film companies were concentrated in London and the wider south-east of England, and all sectors continue to experience what British industry skills body ScreenSkills (2017) called a 'pandemic lack of representation' across all minority groups, an expression that in 2020 now seems both ironic and prophetic. At the time of writing, the UK film industry is experiencing deep reverberations from COVID-19 and lockdown: cinemas are closed, festivals are postponed and productions are paused. While the full economic and cultural effects of the pandemic are yet to be determined (as are subsequent paths to recovery (Pulver, 2020)), the industry has not been idle during lockdown, with some festivals (including the British Film Institute's (BFI's) Flare) pivoting in order to deliver aspects of their programme online, while certain new releases have renegotiated dates or

moved to streaming services. At Glasgow Film Theatre – an independent cinema and charity – where I am Education Coordinator, we are continuing to explore new ways of engaging with young people and family-based audiences after lockdown. The nature of what it means to work in the British film industry is changing as a result of social distancing and the encouragement of remote working (BBC, 2020). As detailed later in this article, film industry work has traditionally been characterized by precarious working patterns and reliance on freelancing, promoting notions of an ideal 'creative worker' who is hardworking, resilient and responsible for their own successes. This pattern is set to become further entrenched by the effects of COVID-19 as all industries and workers are under pressure to adapt to a 'new normal', proving they are indispensable through demonstrating further flexibility and creativity (Pulver, 2020). The research for this paper set out to understand how young people experience these narratives around film industry careers and how their decision-making in this respect is informed. While it is outside the scope of my research to detail or predict what impact COVID-19 would have made on the young people in this study, I nonetheless contend that the research contained herewith remains a useful point from which to reflect on how young people begin to negotiate their film industry career aspirations.

Furthermore, in a society wherein 75 per cent of creative industry workers are qualified to degree level and the majority are white and middle class, it remains deeply problematic not only for film industry workforces but also for British society as a whole if these industries continue to be comprised to such a disproportionate extent in favour of academically educated, white, middle-class workers (ScreenSkills, 2017; O'Brien *et al.*, 2016: 117). As Oakley and O'Brien (2016: 419) have argued, cultural goods such as film have a key role in shaping who we are as a society and thus 'the question of who gets to make cultural products is a profoundly relevant one'. Ensuring the diversity, integrity and financial sustainability of the industry and its ability to represent the full diversity of British communities is thus a task that is dependent on attracting young people, especially women and those from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) and working-class backgrounds, to work in the sector to fill these gaps and produce culturally diverse and relevant products (ScreenSkills, 2017; O'Brien *et al.*, 2016: 129). Further, while policy initiatives from both government and cultural organizations aimed at improving workplace diversity do exist, these often take the shapes of 'interventions' to 'empower' the capacity of under-represented groups to succeed, rather than a transformative approach to removing social and economic barriers to entry into the workplace. As such, these initiatives tend to lack rigorous exploration and engagement with the sort of systemic inequalities that create barriers to these careers in the first place (Newsinger and Eikhof, 2020: 54).

Since 2012, I have worked for a number of youth charities across Scotland on initiatives that seek to empower young people to pursue their ambitions in making informed career choices. Throughout this experience I have noticed a pattern whereby many of the creative young people I worked with, especially those from working-class or non-working households, were consistently dissuaded from pursuing creative careers. The decision not to pursue a creative career was often a slow-burning one, mediated by a number of internalized societal and familial discourses conspiring to undermine or adapt young people's aspirations. This would often occur before the young person had explored their options or had begun to articulate their aspirations beyond the broad headlines of 'actor', 'director' or 'designer'. Motivated by these experiences, I set out to research how young people rationalize their career aspirations to work in the UK film industry, what factors they consider when approaching such a career path, including their knowledge of film education options, and how this impacts their aspirations and goals.

Living in London at the time, I chose to focus my research on English education policy, particularly as this was and remains where much of the UK film sector is concentrated. For this study I interviewed two focus groups of young people aged 16 to 18 from two schools both within an hour's distance of London: in Munro Academy I worked with eight participants whereas at Douglas High School I worked with three. Pupils were encouraged to volunteer for the session and there was therefore disparity in uptake; it should be noted at this stage that Douglas High School only advertised the session to their Year 11 media class whereas Munro Academy did so to their entire sixth form. (Please note that for the purposes of this study all school names and names of participants have been anonymized.) I used the method of a focus group as I was interested in how young people interacted with the discourses around the film industry. In this respect, I felt the 'collective sense making' of a focus group could give me stronger data to analyse than one-to-one interviews (Nel *et al.*, 2013: 36). Two-thirds of the way into each focus group I organized a short career talk from Ross MacRae, technical lead of independent Scottish-based film company Blazing Griffin. I felt Ross's input would be useful for two reasons: first, Ross had real-world experience to share if participants asked questions about the film industry; and second, I hoped the interaction might prove useful, as by observing the questions asked of Ross I would be able to ascertain any gaps in the participants' knowledge and explore these further. Ross discussed topics such as how he began his career and the nature of working in the film industry (hours, freelance work and prominence of networking) and shared his opinion regarding the question of vocational versus academic entry routes to the film industry. While he stated he felt there were merits to both, Ross concluded that, in his opinion, it was more important when working in the film industry to have practical abilities useful to a set or production company as opposed to a theoretical understanding of film. While I was aware this was perhaps a somewhat partisan viewpoint within a diverse landscape of film education offers and options, I felt that Ross's presentation was nonetheless a useful intervention as it seemed to lead to stronger dialogue, allowing participants to further explore what a career in film could be.

In selecting this methodology I considered the impact Ross's and my own presence may have upon the group and their answers, given the performative elements of participating and running a focus group (Smithson, 2000: 116). I also considered the possibility that individual participants, especially as they are in a school setting, may wish to provide the 'correct' answer (ibid.). In addition, I acknowledge that young people may not always be forthcoming about their 'true' aspirations for reasons that may include not being comfortable in front of their peers, or feeling insecure about their choice or knowledge of the aspiration (Kintrea *et al.*, 2015: 668). I thus chose to follow Smithson's (2000: 116) advice in not analysing individual responses but rather observing the discursive themes and patterns present in the conversation, how groups reinforced each other's ideas or critiqued them, thus allowing room for greater analysis of how and what discourses were present in participants' conception of themselves and their aspirations. This also informed my decision to make participation voluntary as I wished to make participants as comfortable as possible when sharing their aspirations and perspectives.

Selecting two schools from different local authorities was necessary as I wanted to make a tentative exploration of the role of social class and geography when rationalizing career aspirations (Archer, 2014: 118; Kintrea *et al.*, 2015: 668; Oakley and O'Brien, 2016: 418; Reay, 2017: 65). I felt, however, that asking the participants to explicitly define their social class themselves in a group setting may have distracted the focus of the conversation, particularly as there was to be only one session.

I therefore selected participant schools based on the *Guardian*'s 'Poverty map of England', an interactive map ranking England's 326 local authorities based on data provided by credit ratings company Experian (*The Guardian*, 2012). At the time of the research, Munro Academy's local authority area ranked in the top 40 per cent of authorities at overall risk of poverty, in the top 3 per cent of authorities at risk of experiencing child poverty and in the top 20 per cent at risk of experiencing long-term unemployment. In comparison, Douglas High School ranked in the top 25 per cent of all local authorities at least risk of experiencing overall poverty, child poverty or long-term unemployment. There was thus a stark level of contrast between the two areas, especially as regards the risk of experiencing child poverty, given Munro Academy's status within the top 3 per cent at risk and Douglas High School being consistently in the top local authorities least at risk in all three categories. By adopting this approach, rather than attempting to allocate individual participants as being within a given class, I looked to assess the local environment of the schools to provide context to my research.

Using the notion of aspiration provided a useful lens through which to examine young people's perceptions of film industry careers, given the manner in which aspirations tend to be formed by a 'myriad' of influences: family, finance, ambition, school, media. As a result, aspirations can be seen to be acquired via different knowledges and discourses that individuals then interpret and prioritize. Archer (2014: 24) argues that while aspirations are useful for understanding the circumstances and actions of an individual, they also operate on an aggregate level and can thus explore patterns of aspirations that are divided by class, gender and ethnicity. However, it would also seem important that such enquiries be combined with an awareness that such aspirations are not stable and static, but rather can change over time and even be contradictory; meaning that, while useful indicators of future action, aspirations should not be approached as deterministic but rather as a tool for sociological exploration (Kintrea *et al.*, 2015: 666).

One of the first difficulties I encountered in my research was the relative lack of academic texts on the film industry and its workforce and even less on new entrants (Kelly and Champion, 2015: 166). This is a critical blind-spot across film education literature (although it is now beginning to be addressed by academics; see Mateer, 2019: 4 and Petrie, 2010: 31) and I was thus forced to broaden aspects of my enquiry to take into account writings on the 'creative industries', an umbrella term for the economic sector in which the film industry tends to be positioned (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2016). Expanding the frame proved useful, serving to highlight shared patterns of economic growth versus skills shortages and emerging social homogeneity. Similar to the reports from ScreenSkills (2017) and BFI (2019), the Creative Industries Federation (2016: 1) reported the sector as a whole as facing a 'talent crisis', struggling to successfully recruit skilled workers to keep up with expanding demand. Furthermore, one can also identify the same social homogeneity in the creative industries, with a deficit of working-class and BAME employees and a dominance of white, middle-class men in senior positions, considered by many to be the cause of stagnating innovation and growth (Create London, 2018: 11; Creative Industries Federation, 2016: 1).

While such reports seem to contradict any sense the creative industries are inherently meritocratic, narratives of meritocracy are nonetheless ubiquitous within discourses on film and creative workers (Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009: 418; Create London, 2018: 4). Littler (2013) defines meritocracy as the key ideological means through which neoliberal culture perpetuates itself. Here, 'the language of

meritocracy' promises that if an individual works hard and is talented enough they can 'rise to the top' of society (ibid.: 52). The rhetoric of meritocracy can be seen to be present in the film industry when creative workers are thus promised that 'anyone can make it if they work hard enough' (Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009: 418; Reay, 2017: 115). These narratives of self-determination and 'hard work' have arguably bolstered the creative industries' reliance on the casualization of work and short-term projects in using freelancers rather than permanently employed staff (Born, 2004: 181; Lee, 2011: 549). Consequently, workers in the creative industries must be prepared to encounter precarious working patterns, expect periods of unemployment and develop additional skills in areas such as 'networking', 'resilience' and 'adaptability' to succeed (Hennekam and Bennett, 2017: 70). The nature of this work creates a particular set of barriers for new entrants for they are dependent on low or non-paid internships and work experience as well as the networks to access these. This subsequently means entry to the film industry for marginalized young people is especially difficult if they possess neither the social or financial capital that could make this type of work sustainable (Kelly and Champion, 2015). In response to this there has been an emphasis on film education to provide 'skills-training' as well as the intellectual and creative exploration of film as an art form (Petrie, 2010: 32). Universities are thus increasingly required to emphasize 'employability' skills throughout their courses to empower their graduates to navigate these uncertain working patterns (Mateer, 2019: 4; Petrie, 2010: 32). As a result, film students are attending university courses in film and media in significant numbers, partly because they enable students to access networks and professional skills that mitigate the risk of 'going it on your own' without these additional resources (Noonan, 2015: 303).

A belief in these neoliberal discourses, and in meritocracy in particular, is also central to the success of education policies focused on 'aspirations'. Notions of 'aspiration' have served to shape the policies of successive UK education ministers including Damien Hinds 2018–19 and Nicky Morgan 2014–2016 (see Hinds and Department of Education, 2018; Morgan and Department of Education, 2015). Here education policies have increasingly been framed predominantly in individualized terms with a focus upon self-responsibility and meritocracy – similar principles to pertaining to work in the creative industries (Archer and Francis, 2007: 118; Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009: 418). Both Hinds and Morgan have argued it is not a poverty of opportunity that prevents young people from achieving their goals, but rather a poverty of aspiration, which can be 'raised' through education policy interventions (Hinds and Department of Education, 2018; Morgan and Department of Education, 2015; Archer and Francis, 2007: 118). A strong belief in meritocracy is crucial for the success of these policies, since if aspirations are to be 'raised' then young people must believe it is possible to succeed regardless of their economic or social background. It is this combination of the promise of success through hard work powered by an aspiration to succeed that is used in attempts to mobilize young people into becoming productive members of the economy (Littler, 2013: 52).

I now discuss the findings of my research with focus groups at Douglas High School and Munro Academy in London as separated under four headings: (1) perceptions of careers in the film industry; (2) the role of school and extra-curricular activities; (3) university versus non-academic routes into the industry; and finally (4) the mediating role of family. While I have chosen to separate these themes in the service of a coherent discussion, it should be noted that during the focus group sessions these themes intertwined, overlapped and at points even contradicted each other, both within the group and for individuals themselves.

Perceptions of careers in the film industry

I began each focus group with a broad enquiry asking the group what career they aspired to, for this allowed me to make a preliminary assessment of how considered, and how specific, these aspirations were. The three pupils interviewed from Douglas High School were all taking media studies as a subject and all aspired to attend university to study it further. They defined their aspirations only through doing film and media courses at university and did not name any specific job roles. The Munro Academy focus group consisted of eight participants, who all defined their aspirations through a broad variety of interests and hobbies, while naming more specific roles within the film industry (acting, filming, editing, stage directing and sound). Even though Munro Academy identified their aspirations more vocationally than educationally, however, they still referred to the broad headlines of 'actor', 'editing', 'music', rather than specific job roles. This was a key observation in my data analysis, that participants' aspirations had not fully matured into clear vocational pathways but remained broad concepts with a loose sense of direction (although there was – as mentioned – a degree of greater specificity for Douglas High School students, who each conceived of their aspirations through the route of higher education). There was also no discussion of the different kinds of film education that were available, the conversation sitting firmly between the choices of attending university or not attending university and 'creating their own opportunities'. I also observed a limited degree of knowledge regarding roles within the film industry beyond headline occupations such as director, editor or actor. While such conceptions where broad, however, all participants were passionate when speaking about their aspirations and their futures. Finally, from the discussion it was clear that the participants spoke of work in the film industry almost interchangeably with 'creative careers':

> It comes from like anything with like social media, you are creating something of your own and I think people do it anyway without recognising it so going up to someone and being like 'you are a media creator' they won't really get the concept of how they are, but like posting that photo you are in a way, they might not get the concept in a way but genuinely they are, like if you've made a film you've made a film, they've just done it on a smaller scale. (Amelia, Douglas High School)

> I think anyone to do with a production of a film so like castings, or [inaudible] or even authors 'cause they are creating something and you can go even further into like science and maths, 'cause they are creating something new if they come up with a theory or something, I guess everyone in a way is a creator in that way. (Amelia, Douglas High School)

Such thoughts reflect Galloway and Dunlop's (2007: 19) critique of public and policy discourses that tend to position any practice in which something is made as creative work, meaning that 'any industry is therefore a Creative Industry'. All participants, unless speaking about the specific roles of actor and director, found it difficult to distinguish between being a professional filmmaker or worker in the industry to other creative work including producing their own content. As demonstrated in the quotations, participants used these terms interchangeably and without distinction throughout the focus groups and all fell back on this generalizing discourse when their knowledge of the film industry fell short. This identified a clear gap in their knowledge about the particularities of careers within the film industry.

The discussion went on to consider what skills participants imagined they might need to pursue a career in the film industry:

> You have to be hardworking. Like you have to 'cause, especially because this is a hard career to get into you have to be willing to work hard for this career. (Malin, Munro Academy)

> I think sometimes it's all about [inaudible] finding opportunities but sometimes I think it's about creating opportunities for yourself, so for example, YouTube, I didn't know a single thing about YouTube when I started making videos and I started learning about different sort of equipment, taught myself about how to edit videos, taught myself about sound engineering and then that helped me with my music as well. Then sort of creating opportunity for myself, so if academics doesn't work out and my YouTube channel picks up I can go into that job as a sustainable career that I enjoy. (Krish, Munro Academy)

When both focus groups were asked about what skills they would need, 'hard work', 'resilience' and the ability to 'create your own opportunity' featured heavily.

Here there was a clear perception that being in the film industry meant taking responsibility for creating your own opportunities and independent decision-making. However, there was also a lack of knowledge of specific steps they could take to enter the film industry beyond either attending university or 'creating their own opportunity', and these were often positioned as mutually exclusive. 'Creating their own opportunity' fell into two categories of either making their own (often online) content or attending an extra-curricular activity outside school. Though there was some discussion on the value of apprenticeships (explored further later in this article), discussion on the benefits of work experience was limited and referenced only in passing. The discourses of meritocracy as outlined were clearly present in the aspirations of participants as there was an assumption that the film industry was, to an extent, meritocratic and that hard work would bring success. Furthermore, participants felt achieving a career in the film industry would give one a sense of pride as they would have 'got there on their own':

> I say it's quite hard but then you've gone on your own path to do that, it's been independent to do that and it's something you've done and you've not needed someone to baby step you through it, it's something you've achieved. (Amelia, Douglas High School)

This is reflective of the discourses of individualization throughout aspiration policy that suggest it is the young person themselves who is responsible for their success, regardless of any social advantages or disadvantages they may have experienced (Roberts, 2011: 26). Coupled with this, both focus groups emphasized resilience as a key skill needed to succeed. Resilience was linked to an understanding that work in the film industry could be precarious and that entrants must be prepared to cope with this (Born, 2004: 197). Discussion of resilience featured more heavily for Munro Academy than Douglas High School:

> If you're a performer you don't always get the work, like it's not a systematic, it's really pressuring and it makes you, I don't know, frustrated that you don't have any work, maybe you have a movie like one year and it's three or four years for the next movie. You have to have a strong mentality to keep on going. (Anisha, Munro Academy)

> I feel like one important thing you must have is patience, because not everything you strive for will come around first time, you have to have the mentality that sort of that whatever you go through, if you have a lot of patience it will allow you to like adapt and learn new things and new challenges that you've never faced before but now you've faced because you've gone through what you've gone through. (Lucia, Munro Academy)

Here participants predicted a working environment where success, though not guaranteed, must come from the hard work and resilience of the individual in overcoming obstacles, like Anisha's example of being rejected as a performer. There was an understanding that knock-backs may come at various points in their career and that success may be a process. For Douglas High School, however, all three participants acknowledged that while entering the film industry would be hard, things would become easier once you were 'in':

> From what people have said getting in the film media industry is one of the hardest to get into, so going to Uni you might not come out and get a job at the top, you might have to come out and still work your way from the bottom, but I would say, from what I can tell is its [sic] hard to find a way in but once you get a way in I guess it's like fair play, work it up. (Amelia, Douglas High School)

For Amelia, resilience would be needed to gain entry to the film industry, but she was confident that once having done so there would be steady success. This was contrasted by Belen from Munro Academy who used the example of Jordan Peele to acknowledge there might be numerous knock-backs in the pursuit of a goal:

> From a young age, I always wanted to work on a film set I don't know why. Because like there are loads of directors I look up to like, Jordan Peele who worked on the movie *Get Out*. I feel like he's my inspiration because like he's just worked hard, cause he screenwrited and directed the movie, it took him like 20 times to do the screenwriting but he persevered and tried and I feel like that's some sort of inspiration and I just look up to him so much and that's where my source of inspiration comes about. (Belen, Munro Academy)

Belen's reference to the combination of hard work, resilience and talent she believes led to Peele's success reflects the contention made by Banks and Hesmondhalgh (2009: 418) and Reay (2017: 115) that it is the 'unlikely' success story that provides young people with the belief they can achieve their dreams whatever the odds. Participants expected employment in the film industry to be precarious, and though they rationalized this differently all believed hard work would guarantee future successes; even if they faced initial setbacks, they thought these could be overcome by being resilient. This reflects the analysis of Banks and Hesmondhalgh (2009: 418) and Reay (2017: 115) that pervasive neoliberal discourses are powerful in persuading young people of the existence of meritocracy; that those who are talented and work hard will prevail, even if the odds are stacked against them.

However, there was little in-depth discussion about how participants could gain these skills and what routes would be available to them. Even when discussing their higher education or post-school ambitions none of the participants had considered the different pedagogies of film education available, none had explored

any formal vocational routes and there was little discussion of this until after Ross's careers talk:

> I think that the skills are the most important thing and how hard working you are, rather than what [qualifications] you have. (Emma, Douglas High School)

Again, neither group of participants identified formal qualifications as being a necessity to enter the film industry, even when they aspired to attend university, reflecting the dominant belief that hard work was the key to success. There was also little to no consideration of what they might need or gain from a formal film education. This seemed to demonstrate a lack of knowledge as opposed to a dismissal from consideration, and further enquiry would be required to ascertain how information on different film education options would impact the participants' assessment of film industry careers.

Finally, though not necessarily a skill, I asked participants what else they might need to achieve their aspirations. For Munro Academy, finance was a concern when assessing the risks of a film industry career:

> My dad always said to me 'oh don't make a career, make it as a hobby, don't take a career in music' you won't, um, not as in you won't do well but you won't have like a secure career in music. So yeah but, I still do it as a hobby. (Krish, Munro Academy)

> And also like having a creative career, it can be expensive so like money can be a barrier too. (Mattan, Munro Academy)

These two comments from the Munro Academy group – among other casual references – acknowledged there was likely to be an expense associated with a creative career specifically (Born, 2004: 181; Lee, 2011: 555). In comparison, finance was not discussed as a barrier in Douglas High School. Even after Ross's talk, which involved an account of his periods of unemployment – leading me to ask the Douglas group what barriers Ross had encountered in his experience – there was still no discussion of this issue. Instead the group discussed a potential lack of resources such as cars, filmmaking equipment and software. When I challenged both groups on how they would overcome these barriers, they reverted to the established narratives that it would be through hard work and dedication. From this I was able to already tentatively identify a disparity in how the two groups evaluated the risk of their career aspirations, which – for Munro Academy – was strongly associated with navigating financial risk and resources (Beck, 1992: 53).

School-based education versus extra-curricular activities

The topic of school presented one of the starker differences between the two focus groups, likely reflecting the different policies as regards creative subjects within the two institutions. At Munro Academy priority was placed upon taking STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects at A level and the group participants said the school did not offer A-level music or drama, both of which were available at Douglas High School:

> Most of us are interested creative subjects, and we're all in science it's surprised me but the school has been pushing it on to us. Music it would like work better, rather than going to university. Maybe others like

> parents, don't really see that creative jobs are really serious. (Mattan, Munro Academy)

> Yeah, they're STEM where drama or media is like the bystander, or it's perceived as a bystander. (Lucia, Munro Academy)

This was a key barrier for participants in Munro Academy, who were thus effectively prevented from taking creative subjects within school due to their omission from the curriculum, and they subsequently believed, understandably I would argue, that their creative needs were not being met. At Douglas High School, however, all three participants were confident their creative needs were being met and that the school was supportive of their aspirations:

> Well up here we have like art clubs, like things that you can go up to the art room whenever, so it's really given just as much thought as academic subjects, so it's not like 'oh if you're going to a creative' it is like really, really balanced which I don't think it used to be like, taking art or media a lot of people initially thought 'oh you're just going to like watch films' when there is probably a lot more work than just a maths lesson sitting doing equations, to like making a film. (Amelia, Douglas High School)

The comparison between Munro Academy and Douglas High School is a stark contrast in the different kinds of knowledges being cultivated in each school. One possible explanation is Reay's (2017) analysis that schools in middle-class areas are more likely to promote creative activities as a way of attracting the parents of prospective students. Reay argues that independent secondary school academies in low-income areas are comparatively less likely to invest in creative subjects and instead have a focus on traditional academic subjects (Reay, 2017: 64). However, while they could not pursue their aspirations academically, Munro Academy participants engaged in a much broader range of extra-curricular activities compared to Douglas High School – none of whom took part in any. This data reflected Reay's (2017: 63) analysis that, for young people in low socioeconomic geographical areas and schools where creative subjects were not present, 'out of school learning was both more rewarding and relevant than school place learning'. My initial observation was that this seemed the case for Munro Academy, where each student engaged with creative learning in their spare time and seemed to speak more passionately when discussing these activities as opposed to the academic subjects they took in school. However, on reflection it was not clear whether participants took part in extra-curricular activities because they preferred it to school, or if such out-of-school activities became necessary due to being unable to take creative subjects in school. This was exemplified by Lucia who had achieved an A in GSCE drama and was clearly proud of this achievement, but was unable to continue this to A level. She believed attending extra-curricular activities came from a necessity to fulfil her creative aspirations given that such opportunities were not provided at school:

> I took classes [outside school] to like get better, or focus on that subject. it helps you develop your skills, but it doesn't actually help you get to into the next level. That's what I think, so like a dancing class, I went to a dancing class for like a year and I didn't get anywhere with it. It was just like something to do outside school, I don't feel like the people within the groups outside school are like – not serious – but they don't aspire to get anything above that, they just focus on what's happening now but they need to focus on getting to the next level. Cause like in school, like maths there's so much things to make you get to the next level. The teachers

are more supportive of it. What's it called again? Like maths, English and science, they're like the main things. (Lucia, Munro Academy)

Here Lucia discusses that she had to attend extra-curricular classes outside school to develop her creative interests, but that these classes did not have the same academic structures as school and therefore her progression was inhibited. This discussion hints at the disparity between extra-curricular education and formal education, and while it is beyond the remit of this study to reach a conclusion on this divide it had a clear impact on the different kinds of knowledges young people are developing depending on the resources available to them.

'Going' versus 'not going' to university

As mentioned, both groups were preoccupied with the distinction of 'going' versus 'not going' to university. The discussion was characterized by two points: first, both groups spoke about attending university and 'creating their own opportunities' as separate pathways with little discussion as to how they could intersect; second, even when discussing university, all participants referred to broad subject headlines such as 'film' and 'media' rather than specific courses or pedagogies of learning. Neither group discussed attending college to pursue their aspirations and the only discussion about vocational routes into industry occurred after Ross's career talk and was limited to apprenticeships. Also, when 'creating their own opportunities' was discussed there was limited reflection on what this would look like in practice beyond creating their own digital content for YouTube. Again, neither group had knowledge of specific film education opportunities, though throughout their discussion there were tentative hints of the theory/practice divide in their responses. Both groups positioned vocational routes or developing their own independent film practices as being devoid of theory whereas university was positioned as being almost exclusively theory based and lacking practice (Mateer, 2019: 4). Participants had little knowledge of recent policies emphasizing a skills-based focus within universities and their ideas were rooted in similar assumptions and prejudices that Mateer (2019: 5) has described as underlying film education provision.

When asked how they would pursue their career aspirations each group had a different focus. When I entered Munro Academy, the group were taking part in a lecture on how to maximize their UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) applications for university. Despite having come straight from this lecture to the focus group only one participant explicitly referred to going to university. However, when asked about their aspirations, all three participants from Douglas High School defined these explicitly in terms of what university course they would attend (in each case, citing media courses):

> Well we went to the UCAS event in Brunell [sic] the other day and I think there were like 200 Uni's but only one person there to talk about apprenticeships so it definitely put the proportions of a lot of people are expected to go to Uni, especially now, but the grades, the course I was looking at they're like A and B so the grades are a lot higher but there's not like a plan B if you don't want to go to Uni, you've got to find it, it's not given to you on a plate like Uni is. (Amelia, Douglas High School)

> I feel like schools don't talk a lot about the other options, like apprenticeships and things, it's just very focussed on University, they talk about it like it's the secure option rather than going straight into work. (William, Douglas High School)

These quotes reflect the expectations most schools in the UK place on attending university and the impact of this upon the respective knowledges of pupils. For these participants university was the route they seemed to have the most knowledge and experience of, therefore making it a more secure option (Archer and Yamashita, 2003: 54; Laughland-Booy *et al.*, 2014: 596). Douglas High School participants said there was also pressure to attend university from their parents and though this was also present in the Munro conversation, it was more prevalent for the former.

It was on the point of university attendance that Ross's intervention seemed to have the biggest impact on the discussion. During his presentation, Ross told participants that, in his opinion, the most important ingredients for success were understanding how a film company worked and learning technical skills. His emphasis was there is no 'correct' route into the film industry but that aspiring film workers must stay conscious of developing their practical skills no matter what path they take. This seemed to resonate particularly strongly with Douglas High School participants who, after Ross's presentation, discussed a greater need to ensure they had activities other than their degree to demonstrate their ability to work in the field as they did not partake in any extra-curricular activities:

> That's why I think maybe apprenticeships may be more useful than University cause it sort of gets you in the job, sort of go on from there instead of finishing University and not getting anything, with this you have a job I guess. (William, Douglas High School)

However, even after Ross's intervention and the discussion of apprenticeships, all participants still showed a deep attachment to attending university. All felt their families would not be supportive if they chose not to and while they saw the value in apprenticeships they were still positioned as somehow being 'less than' university. This reflects Reay's (2017: 64) and Roberts' (2011: 21) analysis that apprenticeships are discursively positioned as a less academic, less middle-class pursuit that do not possess the same level of social capital provided by a university degree. It also perhaps illustrates the manner in which university is presented as an option that mitigates risk as it is the route students are most informed about and given the most support to pursue (Beck, 1992: 35). From this discussion it was clear that for Douglas High School participants attending university was an aspiration in and of itself, and it sat alongside aspiring to work in the film industry rather than a means to achieving this.

The role of family and identity in shaping aspirations

In both focus groups participants consistently referred the conversation back to their families and it was clear that family approval and support of their aspirations was highly valued. Aside from the experience of Anisha at Munro Academy (whose family actively discouraged her aspirations to be an actress), all other participants fell into two broader groups: family actively supporting creative career aspirations and family passively supporting. Lucia's family actively supported her creative career aspirations and therefore enrolled her in several extra-curricular activities to support these:

> My family were very like pushy towards me like doing stuff outside of school and then I joined the theatre group, I think when I was about 10 and I carried it on into I got to secondary school and then I performed in the London Palladium about three times and other theatres. And it really inspired me to like go out of my way and entertain other people. (Lucia, Munro Academy)

This was similar to David's experience; his mother signed him to a modelling agency, which then inspired him to have a short internship at a print advertising media company. Though modelling is not a film-based career it reflects how parents can engage in 'cultivating' their child's career aspirations through providing opportunities to learn new skills that increase their 'employability' and expose them to the working world (Archer *et al.*, 2014: 894; Vincent and Ball, 2007: 1069). Only 2 out of the 11 participants had this kind of experience, however. This created a stark difference, for these two participants seemed to have a clearer understanding of how they would navigate a workplace than others in the groups. The theme of family was referred to throughout the entire conversation of the focus groups, and their role was clear. Family approval was something all participants sought and felt would be crucial to their success, and all participants said they would find it difficult to pursue a career of which their family was not supportive.

Finally, participants also discussed their experiences of specific barriers and opportunities in regard to intersectional aspects of identity such as gender, cultural background and ethnicity. However, these were only discussed at Munro Academy:

> I think the best thing everyone said is the support, in countries like India, especially if you're a girl, they won't agree that you want to be an actress, family would be so against it, they would be like you're not going to be an actress, in here you might have some support, but in there it's so against it. (Anisha, Munro Academy)

> Sometimes I feel like, even though this wouldn't affect me, I feel like sometimes depending on your gender you're expected to do different things if you understand. For example, like, I think my brother is in like year 9 and he wants to take performing arts but he's scared to take it because of what my dad would say and I think that's really bad cause if he wants to take it he should. (Malin, Munro Academy)

This point from Malin, a female student, was one of the few times in the discussion when gender was mentioned and it hints at the ways in which different careers are attributed different notions of masculinity and femininity (Kintrea *et al.*, 2015: 668). Anisha in particular identified a culturally gendered barrier to fulfilling her aspirations and Malin feared that the femininity associated with performing arts meant her brother was barred from pursuing them, though this would not apply to her. Also, both Malin and Anisha intimated that it was aspects of gender assumptions that meant their families would not support certain aspirations, rather than feeling gender would be a barrier in the workplace. Participants expressed no perceptions or predictions of facing gender inequality within the film industry itself, which seemed reflective of their ingrained belief of the industry as a meritocratic space that would not take account of such things (Eikhof *et al.*, 2018: 847).

Conclusion

It must be acknowledged that the participants in my research were able and confident to participate, and as such were not representative of the full classroom. However, this seems appropriate for the data given my aim of exploring the perspectives of young people who were beginning to form their aspirations to work in the film industry and were passionate about doing so. All students believed to varying degrees that meritocracy was inherent in the film industry, and that, if they worked hard enough

(either through university or their own creative platforms), they would have the ability to succeed. It was clear that the narrative of a meritocratic industry, where resilience and talent would be rewarded by 'fun' satisfying work, was pervasive and deeply present in the response from participants.

From this study I was able to conclude that, for all my participants, despite their stated interest in working in the film industry, there was a lack of specificity around different film education offers and job roles, and that their aspirations – though passionate – remained vague. In this respect, it is one of the conclusions of this study that better-quality information on film education opportunities would arguably empower young people to make more informed decisions. Further research would be useful in assessing the success of film education institutions, as well as the industry itself, in making opportunities known to young people at these early stages of making decisions about their careers.

The research conducted with both focus groups clearly indicates that university is frequently considered to be a risk-mitigating pathway to a career that is promoted both by school and family over other educational and vocational routes. For Douglas High School participants especially, attending university was an aspiration in itself and, even if participants wished to follow an alternative path, they admitted they would find this difficult to do due to societal and family pressure. Financial factors seemed not to be a concern for participants at Douglas High School and they felt their creative educational needs were being met successfully by their school. Even though their aspirations had not yet fully evolved to specify particular job roles or areas, all three participants were confident they would be able to overcome any initial barriers to pursue their ambitions. Contrastingly there was a more complex discussion of student aspiration at Munro Academy (although one should note that there were more participants in this group, thus serving in itself to create a broader conversation across a number of topics). As none of these participants felt satisfied by their school's provision of creative subjects, each turned to extra-curricular activities or hobbies to explore their passions. In addition, not all participants at Munro Academy had familial support for their careers, and the ones who didn't felt their ambitions would be more hobby-based or 'things to turn to later' once they had established a more 'secure' career. As a result, while Munro Academy participants all believed the film industry was meritocratic, their sense of this seemed more tempered than at Douglas High School. Participants had already experienced barriers in the pursuit of their aspirations and therefore seemed more likely to predict further obstructions and to take this into account when strategizing their career options.

The students participating in the focus groups at both Munro Academy and Douglas High School were forthcoming with their views and opinions. This allowed me to get a clear sense that among all participants there was an observable discourse and belief in the promise of meritocracy, especially when it was associated with the film industry. However, the experiences of the participants differed, depending on both their school and family backgrounds. The respective knowledge(s) produced by each school, especially when assigning academic value to creative subjects, was somewhat stark in contrast. Further research would be useful here in attempting to interrogate the long-term effects of such different contexts, but for now it seems clear that school and family factors had distinct effects on how participants articulated their aspirations and how they intended to pursue them.

Ultimately, it is the conclusion of this article that if the British film industry and educational institutions are to successfully support the next generation of film industry workers then more work is required to articulate and promote the

opportunities and pathways at school stage, to subsequently provide the young with the knowledge and confidence to make informed career decisions that support their aspirations.

Notes on the contributor

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