

# Centre for Research on the the Wider Benefits of Learning Research Report

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## Determinants of aspirations

Leslie Morrison Gutman, Rodie Akerman



**Centre for Research on the  
Wider Benefits of Learning**

WBL is a research centre at the Institute of Education

# **DETERMINANTS OF ASPIRATIONS**

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction/Background

*“The greater failure is not the child who doesn't reach the stars, but the child who has no stars that they feel they are reaching for.”* Gordon Brown (2007)

Current government policy, as set out in the Children's Plan and elsewhere, is concerned with ensuring that young people have high aspirations, not just educationally but in the wider sense, participating in positive and cultural activities that develop their talents, and becoming active citizens.

Young people make choices that influence whether their potentialities are cultivated or remain untapped. These choices are, in turn, partly influenced by their parents, the opportunities available to them, and their own aspirations – to gain qualifications, to get a job, to have a career and to have a family. Yet, understanding what determines aspirations is not a straightforward task: they change throughout childhood and beyond, shaped by the characteristics of young people and their families, peers, schools, and neighbourhoods as well as wider forces such as the labour market and historical context. And it is well-known that aspirations vary for different sections of the population both in terms of parents' educational and occupational goals for their children and the ambitions of the young people themselves. In this report, we review the current research literature across a range of disciplines to set out these differences and consider how educational and career aspirations in particular are formed and developed in response to different environments and circumstances. We also examine the extent to which aspirations are related to eventual outcomes and discuss the implications for current policies and practices.

## Key Findings/Implications

Even using a relatively narrow focus of educational and career aspirations, existing evidence shows that aspirations may mean different things to different people. They are also not fixed, but adapt and change in the light of new experiences, choices and information.

### *Who has high aspirations?*

Girls, young people from minority ethnic groups and from higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to hold higher aspirations than their counterparts. Parents from these groups also tend to have higher aspirations for their children. Conversely, socially disadvantaged groups such as teenage parents tend to have low aspirations for themselves and for their children.

### *When and how are aspirations formed?*

Aspirations begin to be shaped early in a child's life, but are modified by experience and the environment. Aspirations tend to decline as children mature, in response to their growing understanding of the world and what is possible, and to constraints imposed by previous choices and achievements. This decline is particularly marked for those facing multiple barriers.

*What are the barriers and facilitators for high aspirations?*

Practical and attitudinal barriers to the formation of high aspirations are evident. Financial constraints may limit some groups' access to opportunities and enabling resources such as computers and private tuition. Equally, some individuals are limited by earlier achievement and choices such as leaving school or becoming a parent at a young age. But attitudes are also important. Young people who believe they have the ability to achieve and who attribute their success to hard work, rather than luck, or fate tend to have higher aspirations than their peers.

*Do high aspirations lead to better outcomes?*

In general, those who have, or whose parents have, high aspirations have better outcomes, even when taking into account individual and family factors, but this is not a universal effect. There are some groups for whom high aspirations do not lead to higher achievement. In particular, there is a gap between educational aspirations and academic achievement for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and from some minority ethnic groups and a gap between occupational aspirations and career achievement for females.

*When and how can the development of high aspirations be supported?*

The early years of a child's life are a key time in the formation and development of aspirations. During this time, parents may need support to overcome both attitudinal and practical barriers to high aspirations. Schools can play a part in maintaining and realising ambitions, and the support they provide becomes more important when family resources are limited. Later, young people need easy access to advice and guidance and the involvement of professionals or volunteers – for example in a mentoring role – when necessary. Involvement in positive activities may also provide important socialising experiences that encourage high aspirations.

## **Methodology**

This report is the result of a general review covering an extensive literature across a range of disciplines - psychology, education, and sociology. The focus of the material was principally longitudinal quantitative studies, although a small amount of qualitative material was included.

The breadth of the material available has meant it has not been possible to include full consideration of all dimensions here – peer effects and teacher expectations for example are largely excluded - and even in existing research, many questions remain unanswered. It is true, too, that aspirations are formed against a changing social context – for instance the changing economic position of women and the rise of new media - so the determinants of aspirations and their relative importance may change over time. However, we hope that this report acts as a useful summary of the current state of knowledge about aspirations, and a springboard for further investigation.

## **Evidence from the Research Literature**

*Who has high and who has low aspirations?*

There is a strong relationship between the aspiration of parents for their children and those of the children themselves. This is reflected in the patterns of those who have high and low aspirations.

*Income and Socio-economic Status:* Parents with fewer financial resources tend to hold lower aspirations for their children, and young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds tend to have lower aspirations than their more advantaged peers (Schoon, 2006).

*Ethnicity:* Parents from most minority ethnic groups generally hold higher aspirations for their children than White British parents, while young people from these groups similarly have higher aspirations than their White British peers (Strand, 2007). This is particularly true for immigrant families who have endured hardships in moving country for a better life. However, children and parents from Roma/Gypsy Traveller groups may hold lower aspirations in regards to mainstream education.

*Gender:* Girls consistently have higher aspirations than do boys (Schoon, Martin and Ross 2007) and concern has been noted recently about the low aspirations of males from working-class backgrounds. Parents also tend to have higher aspirations for their daughters than their sons, although this is a reversal of the situation in previous generations and there are also differences according to ethnicity. More traditional families who want their daughters to marry young are likely to hinder educational and occupational aspirations. This is a particular issue in Pakistani and Bangladeshi families.

*Age:* In general, children's aspirations decline as they mature, in part shaped by a growing understanding of the world and what is possible, in part constrained or directed by previous choices and achievements, and in response to an academic environment which becomes increasingly competitive as they move through school. However, for some this decline is particularly marked, while others retain relatively high ambitions. We consider some of these more developmental aspects of aspirations in more detail below.

#### *Developing Aspiration: Barriers, Choices and Opportunities*

We can see that who you are, socio-demographically speaking, affects your ambitions. However, who you are in terms of attitudes and beliefs also has important effects.

Belief in one's own capabilities is an important part of aspirational development for both parents and children (Bandura, 1997). Parents who hold higher aspirations for their children tend to be those who believe they have the ability to help their children and also to be more involved in their children's schooling. Similarly children who are more gifted academically and believe they can achieve success tend to have higher aspirations. Parental aspirations too are raised for those children who do well in school compared with those who are low-achievers. There are probably a number of mutual dependencies here, with children's innate abilities, their parents' and their own beliefs in those abilities, and their academic and occupational ambitions reinforcing one another throughout the school years. However, there is concern about the aspirations of underprivileged children, particularly those gifted and talented: socio-economic barriers may hinder aspiration formation for these children because of lack of mentors, opportunities, and resources.

It is not just a belief in one's ability to succeed which informs aspirations, but beliefs about the causes of success: whether it is attributed to hard work and one's own endeavours, or largely to chance. Young people who believe they have the ability to achieve and who attribute their success to hard work rather than luck or fate have higher aspirations than their peers. Such characteristics are also likely to encourage

perseverance and persistence: if one succeeds because of effort, one can succeed again and, if one fails because of lack of effort, one can try harder. Increased effort leads to increased likelihood of success and the process can become self-reinforcing.

Thus attitudes and beliefs can act as a spur or as an obstacle to ambition. However, there are also practical issues which inform aspirations. Young people's opportunities are often limited by the pathways that they have already taken, such as leaving education and becoming a parent (The Prince's Trust, 2004). Teenage mothers, in particular, may struggle with multiple problems associated with early parenthood including social exclusion, socio-economic difficulties, poor physical and psychological health, and poor employment prospects (Hallam and Creech, 2007). These difficulties impede the aspirations they hold for both themselves and their children.

Over time, as young people become more aware of the obstacles they face, they may lower their aspirations to meet their expectations, particularly when facing multiple barriers to success. A UK study of disadvantaged young people, for example, noted that while 14 to 17-year-olds were optimistic about getting good, well-paid jobs, their aspirations dissipated as they faced the realities of low-paid, low-skilled jobs in their later teenage years. By the time these disadvantaged young people were 18 to 21 years old, their prospects of reaching their aspirations seemed remote because of lack of qualifications and other perceived barriers (The Prince's Trust, 2004).

#### *Do high aspirations lead to better outcomes?*

There is evidence to suggest that, in general, parental aspirations predict children's achievement, even after taking into account family background. For instance, Gregg, Macmillan, and Washbrook (in progress) found that maternal aspirations for children aged 9 were the single most important parental value or behavioural element in children's key stage 2 scores, taking into account the effects of family background and previous attainment. Similarly the aspirations of children and young people themselves are linked with better educational and occupational outcomes. The Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth, for example, demonstrates that intentions to leave or complete school formed early in secondary schooling significantly related to actual later educational participation (Khoo and Ainley, 2005). It is therefore difficult to make definitive statements about causality.

Those studies which consider aspirations, taking into account previous attainment, tend to find that the effects of aspirations, while still apparent, are small. But, it should be noted that aspirations and achievement are likely to have a mutually reinforcing effect, so the previous attainment itself may have been informed by earlier aspirations.

However, for some groups high aspirations do not lead to high achievement and there is an **aspiration-attainment gap**.

#### *The Aspiration-Attainment Gap*

We have noted the higher aspirations of both parents and children amongst many minority ethnic groups, but these are not necessarily associated with higher achievement. Aspirations help mitigate the effects of low socio-economic

background for certain minority groups, such as Indian and Chinese students; however, the effects are less strong for Pakistani and Bangladeshi students and least strong for Black Caribbean young people (Strand, 2007).

While the aspirations and educational achievement of girls have tended to be higher than boys' in recent years, males consistently have higher occupational status, career advancement, and financial reward than females. There are a number of possible contributory factors to this, including restrictions associated with gender-role stereotypes, women's generally lower levels of confidence in their own abilities, perceptions of sexism, and women's earlier age of entry into parenthood (Schoon et al., 2007).

Finally, as we have observed previously those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who have high aspirations may be unable to overcome the financial and social obstacles to achievement, particularly where multiple barriers exist (Schoon, 2006). For these groups, where family resources are lacking, other means of supporting aspirations, such as schools and teachers, appear to be more significant than they are for others.

### **Conclusions and Implications: Supporting Aspirations**

It is clear that, while quantifying their effect may be difficult, having high aspirations is an important mechanism in achieving good educational and occupational outcomes. However, we need to consider the nuances that exist from the crossover of different aspects of identity including gender, social class, ethnicity, religion, immigration, disability status, and sexual orientation that create individual unique experiences. For instance, while for many immigrant groups educational and occupational aspirations may be high overall, cultural norms may mean that, for some groups, such aspirations may be reduced for girls, ambitions being focused instead on their future family. In contrast, for other groups, educational effort and aspiration may be at odds with concepts of masculinity. It is not in these cases ethnicity or gender per se which influence aspirations, but the mixture of the two. It is therefore important to understand the intersection and contradiction between these different facets of identity in order to support the formation and fulfilment of aspirations of diverse groups and provide appropriate services to those facing multiple barriers.

Further, the existence of an aspiration-attainment gap for some groups suggests that, alone, raising aspirations may not be sufficient to improve outcomes. These complexities indicate that a holistic approach to supporting aspirations is needed which acknowledges both the attitudinal and the practical obstacles to aspirations and achievement.

The approach also needs to be developmental, recognising that the formation of aspirations begins early, changing throughout childhood in response to children's increasing understanding of their own abilities and the opportunities open to them. For vulnerable and disadvantaged groups ongoing support is especially important to help protect against the later development of further barriers, such as leaving school with low qualifications, or becoming a parent at a young age. The research suggests that the later teenage years may also be a crucial time, in which interventions to help young people realise their aspirations may be particularly effective.

There are a number of key players in supporting aspirations, particularly parents, whose early influence can be crucial. Those working with parents, especially in disadvantaged areas, need to be aware that they can play a role in helping them develop these early aspirations and attitudes not only for their children, but for themselves. This will give them a sense of confidence and empowerment that they can help their children and persevere to overcome obstacles when things are not going well.

Schools may have a key role to play, expanding children's own horizons and supporting their parents – for instance through extended schools and the SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) programme, as well as through partnerships with businesses. School staff also need to be aware of the role they play in cultivating children's aspirations through assessment and messages about academic performance and that these may be more significant for children whose family background does not offer support for their abilities and aspirations.

As children mature, they need easy access to appropriate information, advice and guidance services, but for some disadvantaged young people, accessible services alone are not enough: support needs to come from a tutor, youth worker or mentor who knows the young person well, can help them see beyond their situation to what they can become, and motivate them to take the steps necessary to reach their goal.

Finally, involvement in extracurricular activities may enhance educational and occupational aspirations. Such activities can help to improve communication skills and offer opportunities and mentorship that may raise aspirations. Staff working alongside young people taking part in positive activities, including those organised as part of extended schools initiatives, can make a difference to young people's aspirations and futures.

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## 1. Aims and Methodology

The choices that individuals make shape the course of their lives, determining whether potentialities are cultivated or remain untapped (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara and Pastorelli, 2001). These choices are influenced, in part, by the aspirations of young people and their parents as well as the opportunities available to them. Yet, understanding the development of aspirations is not a straightforward task. Aspirations are shaped by the characteristics of young people and their families, peers, schools and neighbourhoods as well as wider social forces such as the labour market.

In this report, we acknowledge the influence of broader social contexts, but focus mainly on the individual determinants of educational and occupational aspirations of young people and their parents. To do this, we examine research from a variety of disciplines, including psychology, education, sociology, economics and political science although most have a psychological perspective. Most of the studies adopt a quantitative, longitudinal approach; however, several are qualitative. We also focused on research conducted in the UK, although studies from the US and Australia were examined whenever relevant.

The breadth of material available has meant it has not been possible to include full consideration of all dimensions here – for example, peer effects and teacher expectations are largely excluded - and even in existing research, many questions remain unanswered. It is true, too, that aspirations are formed against a changing social context – for instance, the changing economic position of women and the rise of new media - so the determinants of aspirations and their relative importance may change over time. Rather than an exhaustive review, our report aims to offer a useful summary of the current state of knowledge regarding aspirations and to provide a springboard for further exploration. In particular, we examine the following questions:

- Why are aspirations important given the current policy context?
- What are aspirations?
- What are the individual determinants of parents' aspirations for their offspring?
- What are the individual determinants of the aspirations of young people?
- How do aspirations influence the education and career path of young people?
- What are the implications for policy and practice?

## 2. Background: What is the importance of aspirations in the current policy context?

There “*must be a new culture of learning and aspiration – with high expectations for every young person* (2007)”. Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families

Recent government policy has focused more sharply on the aspirations of young people in order to raise educational standards and performance. In a speech setting out his vision of education (University of Greenwich, 2007), for example, the Prime Minister emphasised that “Aspiration matters in every aspect of education.” Although

aspirations were highlighted in past measures such as *The Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* (2004), raising aspirations is at the heart of the approach to moving forward on education in the current government.

A fundamental aspect of the approach is engaging parents in every stage of children's education. This is evident in the *2007 Children's Plan*, which makes an explicit link between raising aspirations and attainment, and states that "parents remain the most direct influence on young people's outcomes, shaping their aspirations and values". The plan also recognises that its aim of keeping children and young people on the path to success (which echoes Public Service Agreement 14) "depends on everyone – parents, families, school and colleges, government, local services, communities and employers – having high aspirations for young people and working closely with young people themselves".

Another fundamental aspect involves raising the aspirations of young people for increased training and higher education. The *Education and Skills Bill 2007-08*, which ensures that all young people stay on in education or training until age 18, acknowledges that this goal can be achieved only if the aspirations of young people, parents and the education and training system are raised. The *Children's Plan* also underlines the importance of the higher education sector working with schools to raise ambition – for example, through the Government's *Aimhigher* programme, which establishes local partnerships of institutions to target young people from backgrounds currently under-represented in HE.

Government has also highlighted the importance of increasing opportunities for young people to recognise their talents and raise their ambitions. The *Gifted and Talented Learning Programme*, which sets out to improve the attainment and aspirations of gifted and talented pupils, will be expanded for the most talented school-age children. Enterprise education, which forms part of statutory work-related learning at key stage 4, is being used successfully by many schools to inspire creativity in young people and increase their aspirations and engagement with school. *Aiming high for young people: A ten year strategy for positive activities* (2007) sets out the importance for young people of being able to take part in high-quality, enjoyable activities outside of school. The significant role played by parents is again highlighted, and while the *Children's Plan* emphasises that "increased participation and achievement by one generation will raise aspiration and participation for the next", *Aiming high for young people* acknowledges the generational effect of aspirations in that "parents' aspirations for their children tend to be influenced and limited by their own experiences". Therefore, these programmes, created and/or expanded by the present Government, underline its commitment to raise the aspirations and ambitions of young people and their parents.

### **3. Definitions: What do we mean by aspirations?**

"A strong desire to achieve something high or great." Definition of aspirations, Merriam-Webster Online.

The notion of aspirations can be vague, from dreams and fantasies to concrete ambitions and goals. Aspirations, however, usually connote the achievement of something high or great. They also address both present and future perspectives. In

this sense, aspirations can be defined as an individual's "ability to identify and set goals for the future, while being inspired in the present to work toward those goals" (Quaglia and Cobb, 1996).

### **3.1 The Multidimensional Nature of Aspirations**

Traditionally, aspirations in political and research spheres have focused on the career and educational ambitions of young people. In research, for example, educational aspirations typically have been measured with questions regarding how far one hopes to go in school or how much education one hopes to achieve. Career aspirations may be classified according to the type of job that young people aspire to do in the future. The classification can be based on the socio-economic classification of occupations. For instance, job aspirations may be classified into higher managerial and professional occupations, intermediate occupations, technical occupations, semi-routine occupations and routine occupations.

Beyond educational and occupational goals, however, aspirations are multidimensional, encompassing a range of future desires from personal needs to collective duties. Yet, few studies have examined the life aspirations of young people more generally. In a notable exception, a study of the aims and aspirations of those aged 14 to 25 found that having a family was the most important priority for most young people in the UK (The Prince's Trust, 2004). This was followed by having an interesting job, a nice home, and making lots of money.

Recent government initiatives also have recognised the need to focus on aspirations beyond academic achievement and social mobility. For example, the *Find Your Talent* programme currently being piloted gives young people access to arts and cultural activities with the aim of helping them to discover and develop their talents, while *Aiming high for young people* emphasises that participating in positive activities, together with the involvement of inspiring youth workers, can help raise young people's aspirations. Nonetheless, a strong focus remains on educational and career aspirations, both in and of themselves and as enablers of other aspirations, and it is these on which we focus in the remainder of this report.

### **3.2 The Contextual Nature of Aspirations**

Aspirations do not exist within a vacuum, but rather occur within a social context. Individuals draw their aspirations from the lives of others around them. In this sense, individuals have an *aspirations window* through which they view the possibilities that exist within their social sphere (Ray, 2006). Their window is usually based on the opportunities available in their community using their peers as a means of comparison. As a result, the notion of high versus low aspirations is subjective. A strong assumption exists that higher educational and occupational aspirations connote more motivated individuals, whereas lower aspirations imply less commitment to learning and valuing of education. Yet, high aspirations for an individual with particular life circumstances may be considered low aspirations for another individual with different circumstances. The meaning and importance of aspirations therefore vary according to the context in which people live as well as their own individual characteristics and development.

An aspirations window also may be restricted if individuals do not understand the means to achieve a particular goal. Young people may also be uncertain about their aspirations or perhaps may not hold conscious hopes and ambitions for the future because of their limited opportunities. Presenting a range of possibilities to individuals may therefore help to develop their aspirations (Andres, Anisef, Krahn, Looker and Thiessen, 1999). Programmes such as *Aimhigher* and local mentoring projects can help by providing critical information and knowledge, thus serving as a vehicle to raise aspirations. Schools will also play an increasing role, with the expectation for them to provide a member of staff to help each student identify their aspirations, and to guide them through education and training choices. 14-19 partnerships will also ensure that all young people in their area have access to good information, advice and guidance.

Aspirations are also defined by the historical context. Individuals develop within a particular historical period with different social, economic and education policies. Labour-market demands and rates of employment directly affect occupational opportunities as well as educational requirements. More young people are now involved in higher education because of increased educational requirements in the workplace (Shavit and Muller, 1998). As a result, education has taken on a more important role in adult occupational attainment (Bynner, 2001). Schoon and her colleagues, for example, compared the aspirations of teenagers born 12 years apart (in 1958 and 1970). Job aspirations showed a stronger influence on adult occupational outcomes in the earlier-born cohort, whereas exam performance was a more important predictor of adult occupational status for the later-born cohort (Schoon, Martin and Ross, 2007). In the current labour market, therefore, poor educational achievement makes it harder to find work (Bynner, Joshi, and Tsatsas, 2000).

In the light of this, past government has introduced measures to provide opportunities for those who have not flourished under the traditional school curriculum. For example, the *Increased Flexibility Programme*, launched in 2002, supports partnerships of schools, further education colleges and providers of work-based learning to improve vocational learning opportunities for 14 to 16-year-olds, and keep more over-16s in education and training. The 2005 White Paper, *14-19 Education and Skills*, also contained significant reforms, including a major review of the key stage 3 curriculum, giving schools more freedom to help those who fall behind academically, and new Diplomas, a vocational alternative to the GCSEs and A-levels route. Extended schools and *Aiming high for young people*, mentioned above, both aim to provide young people with opportunities to take part in a broad range of activities and raise their ambitions outside the classroom.

### **3.3 The Developmental Nature of Aspirations**

Aspirations are developmental in that they are influenced by changes and life transitions as one matures. The theory of Circumscription and Compromise (Gottfredson, 2002) provides a useful framework for understanding developmental shifts in aspirations. Gottfredson outlines four developmental processes that are necessary for understanding the progression of aspirations and occupational choices as children mature into adolescents. According to Gottfredson, all children move through the same four stages but some progress faster or slower than others depending on their cognitive ability. The ages associated with the stages are therefore only approximate.

The first process represents the cognitive growth that children experience in their pre-school years (ages 3 to 5). As children mature during this stage, they progress from magical to intuitive thinking. They begin to classify people according to simple distinctions such as big and powerful versus little and weak. They also recognise occupations as adult roles and have ceased reporting that they would like to be animals, fantasy characters, or inanimate objects when they grow up. They will eventually become an adult and getting a job is part of that role.

The second process is the orientation to sex roles (ages 6 to 8). Children at this stage have begun to view their occupational aspirations through concrete, visible attributes including masculine and feminine roles. Primary school boys, for example, often want to be professional footballers, while girls may wish to be actresses or teachers. As children grow into adolescents, they are able to make career decisions based on more nuanced, complex distinctions including the social value of different professions combined with views of their own capabilities and interests. However, their naïve early understandings have already turned them towards some possible futures and away from others.

The third process involves circumscription, which entails the progressive elimination of least-favoured alternatives (ages 9 to 13). As children grow older, they are able to think abstractly and become more aware of status hierarchies. They also become aware of the constraints concerning occupational choices. They understand that occupational choices can be distinguished according to sex-type and prestige. For example, females may not choose careers in maths or physical sciences that have traditionally been dominated by males. Young people also recognise the floors and ceilings of their aspirations, resulting from their socio-economic circumstances. Young people from higher-income families may set a higher floor for acceptable career choices, whereas there may be a ceiling for those from lower-income families. For example, perceived barriers such as racial discrimination may limit the types of occupations that young people believe are available to them (Smith, 1983). Adolescents may also be limited by their own views of their abilities and see some careers as too difficult or as posing too high a risk of failure. By this stage, young people therefore often dismiss a large number of occupations for being the wrong sex-type, unacceptably low or high level, or beyond their capabilities. Although the process of circumscription eases the cognitive burden of career choice, it also forecloses the potentialities of individuals by limiting their experiences and educational choices. As a result, they are unable to determine whether they possess the interest in and/or ability for certain kinds of work.

The fourth process occurs in adolescence (ages 14 and older). In this stage, adolescents consider occupations that would be personally fulfilling but are within acceptable social spheres. This stage also involves compromise, which is the recognition of the external constraints on vocational choices. Compromise is the process through which young people relinquish their most preferred choices and settle for more acceptable, available choices. Compromise involves the acceptance of barriers to choice because of a variety of factors such as limited knowledge, non-accessibility, and compatibility to life circumstances. In this sense, the concept of aspirations (idealistic aspirations) is distinguished from expectations (realistic aspirations). Whereas aspirations involve desired ambitions and goals, expectations

connote a more realistic assessment of how much an individual believes he or she will actually achieve based on their own abilities and society's opportunity structures. Therefore, expectations are tempered by the reality of social circumstances (Andres et al, 1999). Young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, for example, have a wider gap between their aspirations and expectations for success (Armstrong and Crombie, 2000; Hanson, 1994, and Trusty, 2002).

#### **4. Influences: What are the individual determinants of parents' aspirations for their offspring?**

*“As they held their first baby in their arms, 99 per cent of those parents who fail wanted desperately to succeed. They have been defeated by the mountain of multiple disadvantage against which they have to struggle.”* Lord Northbourne, speaking in the House of Lords, March, 26, 2003.

Parents are the most important influence on children's socialisation. They act, for example, as both providers of experiences for their children and interpreters of children's everyday reality. They also determine the economic and social resources available to their children. However, a number of factors can influence the aspirations that parents hold for their children. We consider these as parent characteristics and cognitions/behaviour. Characteristics include demographic variables such as socio-economic factors, age of first birth (i.e., teenage parenting), gender, and ethnicity. Cognitions include perceptions of their own parenting abilities as well as the abilities of their child, and behaviour includes involvement.

##### **4.1 Characteristics**

Family background variables including parental education, parental income, social class and minority status have been shown to influence parents' aspirations for their children (Kao and Tienda, 1998; Schoon and Parsons, 2002, and Schoon et al., 2007). Two theoretical approaches are useful for interpreting the effects of family background on aspirations: the 'class structurationist' model and the 'blocked-opportunities' framework.

According to the 'class structurationist' model, individual differences in socio-economic background account for variation in educational and occupational aspirations. Within this model, aspirations are rational estimations of the costs and benefits of educational performance (Jencks, Crouse and Mueser, 1983). In this estimation, material resources available to young people, rather than psychological dispositions to achieve, determine educational aspirations. In a similar vein, rational action theory notes that individuals of working-class origins may be more 'risk-averse' than individuals from more advantaged backgrounds. However, given the differences in security and stability of income and wage prospects, this may be rational (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1998). Socio-economic deprivation may therefore influence parental aspirations because those living in economic hardship have less financial security and fewer material resources of their own for investing in their child. However, these models are not uncritically accepted. Status attainment research, for example, notes that while class origins have some influence on later

attainment, meritocracy – i.e., ability and effort (see sections 4.2 and 5.2) – exerts a much greater effect (Bond and Saunders, 1999).

A number of studies have found that socio-economic resources are related to parents' educational aspirations for their children. A recent UK study, for example, found that 78 per cent of parents in the highest income quintile wanted their children to attend university whereas only 43-46 per cent of parents in the two lowest income quintiles had similar aspirations (Willitts, Anderson, Tait and Williams, 2005). Working status was also related to parental aspirations. Parents who worked at least 16 hours per week, were more likely to want their offspring to attend university than parents who worked less than 16 hours a week (Willitts et al., 2005). Schoon and her colleagues have also found that parental social class was a significant predictor of parents' educational aspirations for their adolescents in both the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS) and 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS) (Schoon and Parsons, 2002, and Schoon et al., 2007). Economic hardship also predicted parental aspirations for further education. These findings highlight that parental aspirations tend to increase in line with the economic resources available to the family (Schoon et al., 2007).

Research also suggests that parental aspirations may be more important for socially disadvantaged young people. In the UK, longitudinal data from the BCS was used to compare socio-economically advantaged and disadvantaged individuals (Schoon, Parsons and Sacker, 2004). The authors found that parents' educational aspirations were more important for fostering the achievements of young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds compared with their more privileged counterparts. In support of the 'class structurationist' model, these findings suggest that decisions about the future may be based on more careful negotiations with parents about the pros and cons of additional education and the available family resources in socio-economically disadvantaged families because of the potential risks involved. The authors also suggest that parental support for additional education is crucial if young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds are to realise their full academic potential.

The blocked opportunities model is relevant for understanding differences in the aspirations of ethnic minorities (Kao and Tienda, 1998). In response to structural and social barriers to educational and occupational success, minorities may have two distinct reactions. On one hand, they may react by overachieving scholastically (Sue and Okazaki, 1990). On the other hand, they may underperform if their group status leads to scepticism about the value of educational success as a means to upward mobility (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Ogbu 1991). Ogbu and his colleagues (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986) further delineated two types of minorities: immigrant minorities who voluntarily integrated and were more motivated to achieve in school and the workplace, and subordinate minorities who were involuntarily incorporated or who maintain limited integration. Immigrant minorities often have high aspirations for their children to obtain educational credentials as a means of social and occupational mobility (Tomlinson, 1984). As subordinate minorities may feel excluded by the larger society, they may develop an 'oppositional culture' that counters mainstream values such as high educational aspirations (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986).

The blocked opportunities model is partially supported by research in both the US and Britain. Overall, minority parents hold higher educational aspirations for their children than do non-minority parents (Cheng and Starks, 2002; Hochschild, 1995; Kao and Tienda, 1995; Strand, 2007, and Willitts et al., 2005). There also is variation across different ethnic groups. In the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), parental aspirations for White British children were the lowest of any group, with only 77 per cent expecting the pupil to stay in full-time education (FTE) after the age of 16 (Strand, 2007). Aspirations for children to continue in FTE, however, were high (above 90 per cent) for the minority groups and slightly lower for the mixed-heritage group (88 per cent). Aspirations were particularly high among African (98 per cent) and Indian (95 per cent) parents. Bangladeshi parents generally have high aspirations for their children, despite their often limited educational experience and qualifications (Ofsted, 2004). For Bangladeshi parents, educational achievement is seen as a means to better job opportunities and greater social status. For Chinese parents, who often have the 'migrant outlook' of enduring the hardships of moving country and working in low-skilled jobs, their adversities are justified by their high aspirations for their children's educational and occupational success (Francis and Archer, 2005). East Asian-African parents also tend to have high levels of education and 'middle-class' aspirations for their children (Tomlinson, 1991).

In accordance with the framework of the blocked opportunities model, however, parents of marginalised groups may hold lower aspirations in regards to mainstream education for their children. Gypsy/Roma and Traveller parents, for example, are reluctant to send their children to school, particularly secondary school (Department for Education and Skills, 2006). They cite the secondary school curriculum's lack of relevance, and bullying, as the main reasons for their reluctance. Kao and Tienda (1998) also emphasise that the blocked opportunities model is incomplete. Ogbu's blocked opportunities framework fails to explain why some minority parents, such as African-American and Black Caribbean parents, tend to have high aspirations for their children even though their children are relatively low achievers. This phenomenon is discussed further in section 6.2.3.

There is also evidence to suggest that teenage parenthood plays a role in parents' aspirations for their children. Adolescent mothers represent a distinct group as they often need to focus on their own aspirations for their education as well as for their children. In this sense, their two types of aspirations are intertwined (Camerana, Minor, Melmer and Ferie, 1998). For example, a US study found that when a teenage mother aspired to go beyond high school in her child's first year of life, the likelihood of her child dropping out from high school was decreased significantly 20 years later (Brooks-Gunn, Guang and Furstenberg, 1993). Most teenage mothers, however, reduce their own aspirations for their education following their pregnancy (Beutel, 2000). This is often the result of the multiple difficulties facing young mothers such as socio-economic disadvantage, poor physical and psychological health, single parenthood, low educational outcomes, poor employment prospects, and social exclusion (see Hallam and Creech, 2007, for a review). Although teenage pregnancy and motherhood is viewed as problematic, evidence suggests that teenage mothers aspire to be good mothers and want to give their children the best care despite their less than ideal circumstances. In their review of teenage motherhood, Hallam and Creech (2007) conclude that "teenage mothers need to be supported in sustaining their personal and parental aspirations. Long-term programmes which work to mothers'

strengths and that recognise cultural differences and offer attentive listening and coaching are needed.” (p. 19)

Children’s gender has also been shown to influence parents’ aspirations. Earlier studies demonstrated that parents tend to have lower educational and occupational aspirations for their daughters than their sons, particularly in science and mathematics (Duntman, 1979). More recent studies, however, indicate that parents have higher educational aspirations for their daughters than for their sons (Schoon et al., 2007). A UK study, for example, found that parents of girls were more likely than parents of boys (63 and 50 per cent, respectively) to hope their child would attend university (Willitts et al., 2005). In the LSYPE, there was a gender gap, with 88 per cent of parents expecting their daughters to continue in FTE compared with 78 per cent of parents of sons (Strand, 2007). While parental aspirations were generally higher for girls than boys, there were also differences according to ethnicity. For Black African parents, there were no gender differences, whereas the aspirations of Pakistani and Bangladeshi parents were higher for boys than girls. For these parents, their wishes for their daughters to marry young may hinder their educational and career aspirations (Ofsted, 2004).

## **4.2 Cognitions and Behaviours**

Parents’ cognitions about their own parenting abilities as well as their children’s abilities play a central role in shaping their aspirations for them (Bandura, 1997, and Wentzel, 1998). According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1997), self-efficacy is the core belief that one has the power to produce effects by one’s actions. Perceived self-efficacy plays a critical role in the formation of aspirations as well as the strength of commitment to fulfilling them. There is a large body of evidence to suggest that a strong sense of self-efficacy promotes higher aspirations in both children and adults (Bandura, 1997). Within this line of research, parents’ self-efficacy has been found to relate to their aspirations for their children (Bandura et al., 2001). Therefore, parents’ beliefs in their ability to promote their children’s engagement in academic pursuits may raise the academic aspirations that they hold for their children.

Parents’ perceptions of their children’s skills and abilities also influence the aspirations they hold for their children (Bond and Saunders, 1999; Sacker, Schoon and Bartley, 2002, and Wentzel, 1998). In a US sample of elementary-school-aged children and their parents, for example, parents’ aspirations were positively related to their confidence in their children’s academic abilities. Parents’ aspirations may be also raised for those children who do well in school, whereas parents may reduce their aspirations for those who are lower achievers. For example, a UK study found lagged effects from children’s ability at age 7 to parents’ aspirations at age 11 and from children’s ability at age 11 to parents’ aspirations at age 16 (Bond and Saunders, 1999). Therefore, there may be a dynamic relationship between parents’ aspirations and their perceptions of their children’s abilities – each influencing the other throughout the school years.

A number of studies also have examined the association between parental aspirations and their level of involvement in their children’s education. Although these studies do not suggest that parental involvement determines parental aspirations, there is likely to be a reciprocal relationship that changes as children progress through school. A study using the NCDS, for example, found that parents with higher aspirations for

their children were more involved in their children's education and development (Sacker et al., 2002). Moreover, parental aspirations had much stronger associations with parental involvement as children reached school-leaving age. Thus, the relationship between parents' aspirations and their involvement in their children's education may grow stronger as their children near the realisation of their educational destinations.

A number of studies have also examined parental aspirations as one component of parental involvement (see Fan and Chen, 2001, for a review; Singh et al., 1995). Evidence, however, suggests that parental involvement and aspirations are distinct dimensions of parenting with differential effects on children's achievement. For example, Singh et al. (1995) presented evidence that parental aspirations for children's education had the strongest association with children's achievement among all the dimensions of parental involvement examined in their study. In a meta-analysis of studies examining parental involvement and children's achievement, Fan and Chen (2001) also found that parents' aspirations had the strongest relationship with children's achievement in comparison with parental involvement, parental supervision and parent-child communication. These findings further highlight the significant role of parental aspirations on children's achievement, independent of other parenting behaviours.

### **4.3 Changes in Aspirations**

Most parents have high aspirations for their young children. For example, a British study found that 92 per cent of parents wanted their seven-year-old children to stay in school after the minimum school-leaving age (Bond and Saunders, 1999). As children grow older, however, parental aspirations are likely to change. The researchers found that there was no significant correlation between parents' aspirations for their children at age 7 and those expressed four years later, and the stability between parents' aspirations for their children at 11 and 16 years was only modest. Other research also indicates parents' aspirations for their children may become less idealistic as their children reach school-leaving age as a result of economic constraints (Sacker et al., 2002). These findings relate to the theory of Circumscription and Compromise (Gottfredson, 1981). Parents' aspirations for their children are likely to be compromised as their children mature because of expectations about the constraints of their financial situation as well as their perceptions of their children's abilities and the availability of opportunities. These changes may be especially relevant for families facing financial difficulties, yet little research has examined how changes in parental aspirations vary across different groups.

## **5. Influences: What individual factors influence the aspirations of young people?**

*"How beautiful is youth! How bright it gleams with its illusions, aspirations, dreams! Book of Beginnings, Story without End, Each maid a heroine, and each man a friend!"* Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, poet

Recently, there has been concern about the lack of ambition among young people coming of age. Negative views about schooling and the cult of the celebrity have been cited as possible reasons for limited educational and career aspirations. In a survey

from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), more than a third of the teachers said their pupils wanted to be famous for the sake of being famous. According to ATL, too many pupils believe that academic success is unnecessary as they are more than likely to achieve financial security through celebrity than through progression through higher education and a ‘proper’ career. The Primary Review (2007) echoes this concern by teachers about “the national obsession with celebrity and with values which are transient and morally questionable rather than fundamental and morally sustainable [...and] media elevation of inappropriate role models”. Nevertheless, research indicates that most young people in England want to go on to higher education. The majority of 11 to 16-year-olds (70%), for example, report that they are likely to continue on to higher education (MORI, 2004). Moreover, educational opportunities have been expanding for young people, and evidence indicates that educational and occupational aspirations of young people have generally increased across time (Schoon, 2006).

Yet, variation exists in the aspirations of young people. Although a number of factors may determine this, we focus on individual determinants, including characteristics such as socio-economic background, gender and ethnicity. We also examine abilities and talents, cognitions such as self-perceptions and attributions, and behaviours including school engagement and involvement in extracurricular activities.

## **5.1 Characteristics**

Research indicates that children from lower-income families tend to have lower educational aspirations than their more advantaged peers (Schoon and Parsons, 2002, and Willitts et al., 2005). Schoon (2006), for example, documented a persisting gap in aspirations between those young people who experienced social adversity – based on parental social status, home ownership, overcrowding and maternal education – in their early childhood and those who did not (Schoon, 2006). Nearly three out of five who experienced low social adversity in their early childhood want to continue in additional education after the age of 18, whereas only one in ten young people who experienced high social adversity in early childhood aspires to continue in education. This aspiration gap has been explained on the basis of different opportunities and socialisation processes (e.g., Keller and Zavalloni, 1964; Schoon, 2006; Vondracek, Lerner and Schulenberg, 1986). Young people from more advantaged homes have greater access to material and financial resources such as computers, tuition, and private tutoring and educational opportunities. Socialisation processes such as role models, occupational knowledge, and informal kinship/social networks may also explain socio-economic differences in aspirations.

Numerous studies also have found that girls have consistently higher educational aspirations than do boys. The LSYPE asked young people when they were 16 whether they wanted to continue in FTE and whether they would go on to higher education. Overall, there was a large gender difference, with 77 per cent of boys but 88 per cent of girls intending to continue in FTE, and 67 per cent of boys and 72 per cent of girls intending to go on to HE. Another UK study (Willitts et al., 2005) found that girls were more likely than boys to want to study full-time when they reached the age of 16 (36 and 29 per cent respectively), whereas boys were more likely to want to have a full-time job (23 and 14 per cent, respectively). Another UK study found that girls have higher occupational aspirations, are more motivated at school and achieve higher exam results than boys (Schoon, Martin and Ross 2007). Recent work also

emphasises the low aspirations and attainment of young men from working-class and minority ethnic backgrounds (Burke, 2006). Research indicates that the negative influence of economic hardship on teenage job aspirations is stronger for males than females (Schoon et al., 2007). This suggests that the aspirations of male adolescents are more adversely affected by financial difficulties. Moreover, the aspirations of young men from working-class backgrounds are closely tied to their masculine identities, with some indication that higher education may be seen as incompatible with working-class masculinity and roles (Burke, 2006). Nonetheless, wide gender disparities exist in the work force, with males consistently having higher occupational status, career advancement and financial reward than females. Factors which contribute to gender disparities in occupational attainment are discussed in section 6.2.1.

Research also indicates that aspirations vary according to ethnicity. In the LSYPE, Indian, Black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils had higher educational aspirations than White British pupils (Strand, 2007). Black African and Other Asian groups were seven times more likely than White British pupils to say that they intended to stay in education full-time post-16, and Pakistani pupils were three times more likely than White British pupils to aspire to achieve A/AS levels or a university degree (Strand and Winston, 2006). In both the US and UK, Asian students have been found to have the highest educational and occupational aspirations of all the minority groups (Cheng and Stark, 2002; Kao and Tienda, 1998; Mickelson, 1990, and Willitts et al., 2005). Trajectories of aspirations also vary according to ethnicity. For example, Kao and Tienda (1998) found that although most groups experienced a downward trajectory of aspirations in adolescence, the decline was most dramatic for Black boys. On the other hand, the high aspirations of Asians began much earlier than other groups, and remained consistently high throughout adolescence. It is important to note, however, that these higher aspirations do not necessarily translate into higher achievement equally among minorities. As discussed in section 6.2.3, there is differential effect of aspirations on educational and occupational outcomes among different ethnic groups.

In support of the blocked opportunities framework, there are also generational differences among ethnic groups (Kao and Tienda, 1995, and Fuligni, 1997). In a study of US adolescents from immigrant families, Fuligni (1997) found that first-generation students from immigrant families had higher educational aspirations than their second and third-generation peers, even controlling for language use and socio-economic background. First and second-generation students from immigrant families also believed that their parents held higher aspirations for them than their peers from native families. According to Fuligni (1997), these generational differences may reflect a greater academic eagerness and initiative on the part of the students from the recent immigrant families. While other differences also exist, children from recent immigrant families seem to share their parents' views that education is the most important route to success.

## **5.2 Abilities, Cognitions and Behaviours**

Children's abilities and talents play an important role in the development of their aspirations. Research indicates that children's aspirations are raised when they are doing well academically. For example, children's ability at age 7 was related to their aspirations at age 11, and ability at age 11 was related to aspirations at age 16 (Bond

and Saunders, 1999). At both 11 and 16, children's aspirations were also positively related to their test scores. These findings suggest that aspirations and ability influence each other throughout the school years and therefore establishing causality between these two influences is difficult.

There is increasing concern, however, that for underprivileged children, this feedback between ability and aspirations may be blocked by other factors. Policy regarding gifted and talented children therefore has a particular focus on those for whom socio-economic barriers may hinder aspiration formation because of lack of possible mentors, opportunities and resources. While the *Gifted and Talented* programme of extra lessons and clubs, and specially trained staff, covers all schools, it is particularly aimed at improving the outcomes of the most disadvantaged children, including those from ethnic minorities; raising their aspirations is one of its primary aims. *Find Your Talent* works on a similar basis, and its inception was accompanied by extra investment in Creative Partnerships, which operate in the most deprived areas of the country to bring cultural opportunities to children who would not normally benefit from them. Meanwhile, programmes such as *Aimhigher* target gifted, underprivileged children and encourage their involvement in higher education.

Aspirations are shaped by an individual's perceptions of themselves and their abilities. The belief that one has the efficacy to successfully accomplish a task fosters aspirations to achieve, even in the face of setbacks and difficulties. When individuals believe that they can produce the desired outcome by their actions, they will provide the necessary effort to achieve their aspirations even in the face of difficulties. Research demonstrates that perceived self-efficacy predicts the occupational and academic aspirations of children and young people (Bandura et al., 2001). The conception of oneself as an academic student also plays an important role in the formation and maintenance of aspirations. A recent study found that academic self-concept (i.e., the perception of one's academic abilities) explained a significant proportion of the variance in the aspirations of Year 7 and Year 9 pupils attending five inner-city comprehensive secondary schools in Britain. These differences also explained variation among different ethnic groups (Strand and Winston, 2006). The high aspirations of Black African and Asian groups were explained, in part, by a strong academic self-concept, whereas the low aspirations of White British pupils related to a generally poor academic self-concept. Children who believe that they can achieve in school and have the ability to do so therefore are more likely to hold higher educational aspirations. However, children's ability-related beliefs and values become more negative as they progress through school and children believe that they have less academic competence as they grow older. These negative changes may be explained in two ways. First, children may have a more accurate assessment of their own abilities because of a better understanding of the evaluative feedback they receive as well as their own comparisons with their peers. Another explanation concerns the nature of the school environment. As children progress through school, there is increased focus on competition between students, which acts to reduce children's ability-related beliefs. This lowered perception of one's ability may constrain educational choices and eventual career paths as beliefs play a highly influential role in both the career aspirations and pursuits of adolescents and adults (e.g., Bandura, 1997, and Bandura et al., 2001).

Attributions for success and failure have also been shown to influence aspirations. According to attribution theory (Weiner, 1992), individuals vary in terms of the degree to which they attribute explanations for success or failure to internal causes (e.g., ability and effort) or external causes (e.g., luck, fate and task difficulty). While attributions for successful outcomes to internal causes tend to increase aspirations, attributions to external causes may decrease them. Differences may also emerge between the internal motivations of effort and ability. This distinction is important as individuals have more control over their effort than ability. If one succeeds because of effort, one can succeed again. On the other hand, if one fails because of lack of effort, one can try harder. Research indicates that marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities, may be more likely to attribute their success to effort, which may reflect their belief that they need to work harder to overcome obstacles and stereotypes (Phinney, Baumann and Blanton, 2001). Socio-economic barriers can also magnify perceptions of external attributions which are likely to reduce aspirations. Studies of attributions concerning the causes of poverty, for example, indicate that attributions involving victimisation are associated with negative outcomes (Smith, 1985). However, attributions for social disadvantage based on internal, controllable factors such as effort are also more likely to sustain aspirations, providing young people with a sense of control over their destinies.

Motivation and engagement in school also play a central role in the aspirations of young people. For example, research indicates that motivated individuals tend to do well in school and have the ambition to go on to further education (Bond and Saunders, 1999). Children who have greater school motivation are also more engaged in their school work and put in more effort to do well. Schoon and her colleagues (2007), for example, have found that greater school motivation was associated with higher career aspirations and exam performance for UK teenagers. Considering that teenage job aspirations are associated with later adult occupational status, this finding suggests that career development begins early in life, and that interventions that aim to increase participation and engagement in school can have long-term beneficial consequences, particularly for disadvantaged groups (Schoon et al., 2007).

Involvement in extracurricular activities may also enhance students' educational and occupational aspirations (see Feldman and Matjasko, 2005, for a review). However, pre-existing differences between those who participate in extracurricular activities and those who do not may account for their disparate aspirations. Nevertheless, studies have found positive associations between participation in extracurricular activities and aspirations net of socio-economic background (see Feldman and Matjasko, 2005). Participation in extracurricular activities may provide socialising experiences that foster achievement and the orientation to succeed, perhaps through taking part in competitive sports. This helps to strengthen occupational and educational aspirations (Otto, 1976). In light of this, schools may view out-of-school activities as an important element in boosting aspirations and achievement (Ofsted, 2004). In some cases, these include major investments in staffing, funded typically through initiatives such as extended schools and Education Improvement Partnerships. For example, one school took pupils on trips to universities, and had useful contacts with investment banks and other companies designed to inform pupils about careers and about business in general. Extra-curricular activities are seen by both the participating pupils and schools as an effective strategy for raising aspirations and improving communication and other skills (Ofsted, 2004).

### **5.3 Changes in Aspirations**

Research indicates that educational and occupational aspirations often decline as children grow older. In a US study, Kao and Tienda (1998) measured aspirations across ethnic groups and examined whether high aspirations persisted throughout the high school years. Kao and Tienda suggest that younger students tend to have more idealistic aspirations, whereas older ones have more concrete ideas about higher education. As high school completion is further away, younger students can afford to be more optimistic about their future opportunities, while older teenagers are more aware of the barriers to their educational and occupational success and thus more likely to lower their aspirations to meet their expectations. Aspirations may diminish particularly for those young people facing multiple barriers to success. A UK study of disadvantaged young people noted that while 14 to 17-year-olds were optimistic about getting good, well-paid jobs, their aspirations dissipated as they faced the realities of low-paid, low-skilled jobs in their later teenage years. By the time these disadvantaged young people are 18 to 21 years old, their prospects of achieving their aspirations seemed remote because of lack of qualifications and other perceived barriers (The Prince's Trust, 2004).

## **6. Outcomes: How do aspirations influence the education and career path of young people?**

*[There has been] decades of a divide in aspirations between the have and have-nots."*  
Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families

Numerous studies have found that aspirations are significant predictors of the educational and occupational attainment of young people. However, there is less evidence concerning the causal nature of these associations in terms of whether aspirations predict later achievement, controlling for other individual and family characteristics. Furthermore, the influence of aspirations on outcomes may also vary according to the characteristics of the young people themselves. For certain groups, including females, economically disadvantaged young people and those from ethnic minorities, high aspirations may not necessarily predict higher educational and/or occupational achievement.

### **6.1 Net Effects Given Child and Family Characteristics**

Due to the many factors associated with the aspirations of young people and their parents, it is often difficult to establish the direction of causality. Do aspirations determine educational and occupational achievement or does continued success maintain and support aspirations for achievement? Most likely, the relationship between aspirations and achievement is a reciprocal one, with each influencing the other throughout the educational and career paths of children and young people. Nevertheless, there is evidence to indicate that the aspirations of parents and young people, controlling for individual and family characteristics, predict later educational achievement.

#### **6.1.1 Aspirations of Parents**

Recent evidence indicates that parents' aspirations influence children's educational achievement above and beyond their socio-economic background. Gregg, Macmillan,

and Washbrook (in progress) found that maternal aspirations at age 9 were the single most important parental value or behavioural element in children's KS2 scores, controlling for family background and KS1 attainment. In total, parent and child values, including maternal aspirations, attitudes and behaviours, explained 6.1 per cent of the variance in KS2 scores when KS1 attainment and family background were held constant. Strand (2007) also found that pupils with parents who had high educational aspirations, provided a home computer or private tuition, were involved in more school activities, and infrequently quarrelled with their children all achieved greater than expected scores at KS3 even after taking into account family background. In particular, parental aspirations that the pupil would continue in education post-16 had the strongest association of all of the parental attitudes and behaviours, explaining four additional points in their KS3 scores. However, the increase in KS3 scores due to parental aspirations declined from 4.0 to .7 points when taking into account previous KS2 scores. This suggests that although high parental aspirations have a positive influence on children's educational outcomes, their effects may not contribute to substantial changes in children's achievement across the school years, particularly in relation to other possible contributing factors such as peers and schools.

### **6.1.2 Aspirations of Young People**

The aspirations of young people are powerful predictors of their educational attainment. The Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) demonstrates that intentions to leave or complete school that are formed early in secondary schooling are significantly related to participation in the latter years of schooling (Khoo and Ainley, 2005). For instance, there was a strong association between aspirations in Year 9 to proceed to Year 12 and actual Year 12 participation, emphasising the importance of examining the effects of early aspirations on later attainment and participation in schooling.

Evidence suggests that aspirations also predict achievement, controlling for individual and family background factors. Using the LSYPE, Strand (2007) demonstrated that aspirations to stay in education beyond age 16 boosted KS3 scores by 1.6 points after taking into account family background and parental aspirations. The importance of aspirations remained significant after taking into account prior attainment in terms of KS2 scores, but declined to .5 point boost in pupil progress. Therefore, aspirations have a significant impact on pupil attainment net of family background and other individual factors, but their effect is reduced when examining pupil progression.

## **6.2 Aspiration-Attainment Gap**

The predictive power of aspirations on the educational and career path of young people may also differ according to their life circumstances. An aspiration-achievement gap is the difference between aspirations and educational and/or occupational attainment. Particular groups of young people – such as females, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and ethnic minorities – are more likely to experience an aspiration-attainment gap than other groups. This gap probably reflects structural inequalities and perceived barriers which may impede the fulfilment of aspirations. The fact that these differential effects exist has important implications for policy and practice, as they highlight how government and other organisations may reduce existing inequalities that prevent young people and their parents from realising their aspirations and potentialities.

### **6.2.1 Gender**

Girls tend to have higher educational and occupational aspirations than do boys and constitute an increasing share of the workforce. However, many women choose not to follow careers in fields traditionally dominated by males, such as science and technology. These gender disparities are especially striking as males and females do not differ in tests of their quantitative abilities (Betz and Hackett, 1981). Moreover, girls have been found to show lower levels of self-confidence in their abilities and in their mathematical aspirations, even when matched with males of equivalent talent or test scores (Eccles, 1987; Wilgenbusch and Merrell, 1999). Women's career trajectories are also more complex than males' because of multiple family and work-related roles (Vonderacek et al., 1986). Career choices and attainment of females may also be constricted by gender role stereotypes, perceptions of sexism, and age of entry into motherhood (Eccles, 2005; Lucas, Wanberg and Zytowski, 1997; Schoon et al., 2007, and Swanson and Woike, 1997). Research indicates that early parenthood reduces the likelihood of attaining a high occupational status and these effects are stronger for women than for men (Schoon et al., 2007). Thus, one explanation for the gap between women's strivings and their occupational achievement may be their transition into parenthood, which usually occurs earlier for them than for men (Schoon et al., 2007).

### **6.2.2 Socio-economic Background**

For disadvantaged young people, the fulfilment and realisation of their aspirations may be more difficult than for their more advantaged peers (Armstrong and Crombie, 2000; Hanson, 1994, and Trusty, 2002). Although aspirations significantly predict attainment, regardless of socio-economic background, they may be stronger predictors of achievement for more advantaged young people. Schoon (2006) examined the predictors of exam performance at 16 and adult social status for high and low-risk young people in two British cohorts, 1958-NCDS and 1970-BCS70. High versus low-risk status was based on an index of social and economic indicators. Results demonstrated that educational aspirations were significant predictors for both low and high-risk young people, but had a stronger relationship with the exam performance of low-risk than high-risk individuals. In both cohorts, moreover, the effect of exam performance on adult social status was higher for high-risk than for low-risk individuals, particularly in the later-born cohort. Therefore, academic attainment may be more important for later success among the most disadvantaged. According to Schoon (2006), future-orientated aspirations may buffer the detrimental impact of socio-economic disadvantage; however, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds seem to have to bring a little extra and do especially well in their exams in order to achieve.

Disadvantaged young people have very clear understandings of the barriers which may prevent them from realising their aspirations. The Prince's Trust (2004) explored the aims and aspirations of young people from both disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as the obstacles that prevented them from achieving their aspirations. Of the disadvantaged sample, 41 per cent identified lack of qualifications as a block on their aspirations. Amongst 14 to 17-year-olds, 39 per cent of boys felt held back by their bad behaviour and 37 per cent by their lack of confidence. This increased to 48 per cent of girls feeling hampered by a lack of confidence but only 28 per cent feeling held back by their bad behaviour. Only 5 per

cent of disadvantaged young people said that nothing held them back, compared with 13 per cent of those in the non-disadvantaged group. In support of the theory of Circumscription and Compromise (Gottfredson, 2002), when young people near the age that they are able to realise their aspirations, their opportunities may be limited by the pathways they have already taken, such as leaving education, getting a criminal record, or becoming a parent. For these disadvantaged young people, the most important time for intervention occurs at these critical junctures during life-changing transitions.

### **6.2.3 Ethnicity**

Research indicates that the high aspirations of minority ethnic parents for their children may not necessarily translate into higher achievement. Using the LSYPE, Strand (2007) demonstrated that although minority parents are higher on all of the behaviours and attitudes associated with attainment at KS3 – e.g., high levels of parental aspirations, supervision, and involvement, low levels of quarrelling with the pupil, and providing private tuition and a home computer – all these generally advantaging factors were not associated with relatively greater attainment among minority ethnic groups. This may be the result, in part, of lack of sufficient, accessible information and career advice about their children's educational opportunities. Information and publicity materials relating to the various education sectors rarely target minority ethnic communities specifically and consequently parents from these communities may not be well-informed about the various options and choices available to their children. Moreover, teachers and other educational professionals are often unaware about the interests and expectations of parents from minority ethnic groups and therefore unable to provide relevant information and support. Language differences between teachers and minority ethnic parents may also impede communication. Hence, minority ethnic parents may not have the information they need to help their children achieve despite their high aspirations for them (Powney, McPake, Hall, and Lyall, 1998).

Researchers also have noted a similar phenomenon concerning the aspirations of minority students. Similar to parenting behaviours and attitudes, Strand (2007) demonstrated that although minority ethnic pupils are higher on the behaviours and attitudes associated with higher KS3 scores – e.g., high educational aspirations, positive academic self-concept, more likely to plan for the future, and more likely to have a positive attitude toward school – all these generally advantaging factors across the sample as a whole were not associated with proportionally greater attainment among minority ethnic groups.

Socio-economic background undoubtedly plays a role in the gap between aspirations and achievement, yet does not provide a complete picture of the explanatory factors predicting low attainment among many minority ethnic students. Although aspirations may mitigate the effects of low socio-economic background, the effect may be stronger among certain minority groups, such as Indian and Chinese students, than it is for the Pakistani and Bangladeshi grouping; it is least strong for Black young people (Connor, Tyers, Modood, and Hillage, 2004). Strand (2007), for example, examined differences in pupil progress among various ethnic groups. Indian pupils were found to make more progress than White British pupils in their KS3 scores which were explained in part by the advantaging factors in their family and home lives. Although Indian pupils had more deprived economic and social circumstances

than White British pupils, these disadvantages were offset by high parental and pupil aspirations as well as hard work as indicated by their dedication to their homework. However, these factors do not completely offset the greater socio-economic disadvantage of the schools attended by Indian pupils or the neighbourhoods in which they reside. Black African pupils, on the other hand, had less than expected progress in their KS3 scores even though they have many of the same advantaging factors as Indians, including high parental and pupil aspirations. According to Strand (2007), Black African pupils and their parents may not get the expected return from their commitment to education as they are more likely to live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and attend disadvantaged schools. Black Caribbean pupils have particularly poor progress compared with White British pupils. Although Black Caribbean pupils and their parents have higher educational aspirations, more positive attitudes toward school, and more positive academic self-concept compared with White British pupils and their parents, they are more likely to experience socio-economic disadvantage including poverty, and to attend deprived schools and live in deprived neighbourhoods. However, the broad range of socio-economic variables included in the analysis did not explain the poor progress of the Black Caribbean pupils.

Among some minority ethnic groups, therefore, high aspirations may not be enough to offset other factors relating to low attainment. Although a number of explanations exist, the most accepted include low teacher expectations and cultural differences. Research indicates that teachers may have lower expectations of certain minority ethnic groups and these lowered expectations may explain differences in attainment (see Strand, 2007). Moreover the racism experienced by pupils from minority groups at school could be an obstruction to pupils' learning and their parents' expectations being realised. For example, teachers may interpret behaviours more negatively for pupils from minority groups than similar behaviours from White British pupils. These may lead to increased confrontation and/or decreased academic motivation from minority students which, in turn, reinforce stereotyping from teachers, and thus a vicious cycle ensues.

Cultural explanations may also provide insight into the gap between aspirations and achievement among some minority ethnic groups. Fordham and Ogbu (1981) identified notions of 'acting white' or 'acting black' as being in opposition with each other. 'Acting white' implies doing well in school, whereas 'acting black' necessarily implies not doing well in school. The avoidance of 'acting white' may lead academically successful black students to reduce their academic effort in order to avoid conflict with their peers. Modood (2003) also notes that this may be an explanation for the under achievement of Caribbean male students in the UK. There may also be cultural differences in attitudes about educational attainment. Mickelson (1990) has proposed the attitude-achievement paradox, which purports that differences in abstract and concrete beliefs may explain the gap between aspirations and achievement among some minority ethnic groups. According to the attitude-achievement paradox, abstract attitudes are normative beliefs regarding education such as the promise of social mobility. Concrete attitudes, on the other hand, reflect actual experiences and limited opportunities. Mickelson (1990) found that black students scored higher on abstract attitudes than whites, whereas whites scored higher on concrete attitudes than black students. Concrete attitudes, which are rooted in actual experience, are more important predictors of educational aspirations.

Therefore, although some minority students may hold higher aspirations than non-minority students, minority students may lack the opportunities and experiences that lead to the fulfilment of their aspirations.

## **7. Implications and Future Directions: What are the implications for policy, practice, and further research?**

*“Most young people don’t know what to aspire to. They need to be given the personal skills and confidence to go out and be what they want to be.”* Young person, quoted in *Aiming high for young people*

In view of the evidence that parents’ aspirations for their children have a strong association with their children’s achievement, above and beyond their socio-economic background, work to support parents in developing high aspirations for their children is crucial. For young people, too, the evidence that their aspirations predict their educational achievement, even allowing for their background characteristics, implies that efforts to boost young people’s aspirations are valuable in and of themselves. However, this must take place alongside measures that facilitate the achievement of aspirations, particularly for the most disadvantaged young people. The following points address further implications of specific findings set out in this paper, highlight where policy may have a role to play and give some examples of projects that are helping to raise the aspirations of parents and their children.

### **7.1 Implications for policies and practices with parents**

The findings that parents’ aspirations for their children play a key role in determining children’s own aspirations, and parents’ aspirations for their children tend to be higher when children are younger, indicate that the early years of a child’s life are a key time in which to offer support to parents. Since family background characteristics have an influence on parents’ aspirations for their children, it is particularly important that those working with parents in disadvantaged areas, for example through Sure Start children’s centres, are aware that they may be in a position to encourage parents to aim high for their children, and to help empower parents to see their aspirations for themselves and their children realised. The announcement in August 2007 of more funding for Sure Start to provide for extra outreach workers in the most disadvantaged areas, to encourage parents to access parenting support, is welcome, particularly if that support enables them to become more confident of their own and their children’s abilities. Moreover, as parental support for further education has been found to be particularly important for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, the question of who is talking to parents to support and encourage them is worthy of consideration. In view of the fact that early years services and primary schools generally have more contact with parents than secondary schools, seizing opportunities to encourage parents when children are young may be most effective.

Given that teenage mothers often face multiple difficulties, including lowered aspirations for their own education following their pregnancy, the kind of necessary long-term support identified by Hallam and Creech (2007) may prove vital in supporting the children of such mothers on the path to success. The Family-Nurse Partnerships programme, recently introduced in the UK following a US model, is one means of offering such support. It is an intensive home-visiting programme delivered by specially trained nurses and midwives and offered to at-risk, first-time young parents from early pregnancy until the child is two years old, and works on the basis

that pregnancy and birth are key times when families are especially receptive to support. Outcomes in the US have included increases in employment for mothers and in school-readiness for children. The programme in the UK is still in the pilot stage, but future evaluations could usefully consider its effects on parents' and children's aspirations over the long term. The support offered to vulnerable parents by these and other professionals needs to be holistic, helping parents not only to develop but to realise their aspirations – for example, by helping them to access the Care to Learn scheme that contributes to childcare and travel costs for young mothers who are studying.

Those who work with parents may require training and support to be able to fulfil the role of helping parents to overcome obstacles to raising and realising their aspirations for their children – for example, to raise awareness of how parents' aspirations may be influenced by family and child characteristics. Such training may also be valuable for Parent Support Advisers, who work through a scheme currently being piloted by DCSF – evaluation of which has found that there are challenges in advisers taking on work that is beyond their level of training and expertise (Lindsay et al., 2007). In the case of those parents from ethnic minorities whose high aspirations are not reflected in their children's achievement, bilingual parent support advisers, as well as specifically targeted information materials and advice about their children's opportunities, may play an important role, particularly when children have special educational needs (Powney et al., 1998), although there is little research in this area.

In addition to working with 'link' workers such as Parent Support Advisers, there are further measures that schools can take to help parents develop their aspirations for their children. The finding that parents' perceptions of their children's skills and abilities influence their aspirations for their children underlines the importance of schools communicating well with parents regarding the positive characteristics and achievements of their children, and encouraging both parents and children to keep on aiming high even when things are not going so well. The family element of the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme, taking the form of workshops that primary schools can choose to run for parents and their children, explains to parents how schools help children to set themselves goals, develop a "sense of personal power" and feel that they can make a contribution. The workshops aim to help parents feel that they can make a difference to their child's future by encouraging and motivating them and helping them feel successful. Parents discuss their dreams and aspirations for their children as well as their children's own dreams, and explore how they as parents can encourage children to believe in themselves enough to aim high and keep going through difficulties. Secondary schools tend to find it harder to work with parents than primary schools, but finding ways to help them support their children to achieve their aspirations could prove valuable in the light of evidence that many disadvantaged young people lack understanding as to how to achieve their aims in life (The Prince's Trust, 2004).

## **7.2 Implication for policies and practices with young people**

Professionals and volunteers who work closely with young people also have an important role in helping them to develop and realise their aspirations. On one hand this means ensuring that high quality information, advice and guidance services are accessible to young people. According to the Prince's Trust (2004), 81 per cent of disadvantaged young people liked the idea of a single organisation that could help

with all their problems. However, only 21 per cent were happy with an office hours service, while 52 per cent preferred to have support available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Connexions Direct has gone some way towards providing such a service by offering advice by telephone or online for 18 hours a day. Young people are also able to speak directly with personal advisers during office hours, through their local Connexions service.

However, accessible services alone are not always enough to support the most disengaged and disadvantaged groups, as has been recognised by the government. Its agenda of 'progressive universalism' aims to ensure that services are available to all but also specifically promoted to those who might most benefit. *Aiming high for young people* highlights the fact that having low aspirations, and facing multiple barriers to their achievement, can prevent young people from accessing services designed for them, while taking part in positive activities can help to raise aspirations. The strategy recognises the important role that youth workers can play here, particularly for disadvantaged young people: "the support and motivation [young people] receive from other adults – professional youth workers and volunteers alike – can be life changing, by providing new role models who raise aspirations." New occupational standards for youth workers go some way towards formalising this role, stating that workers should "encourage young people to broaden their horizons to be active citizens".

The *Children's Plan* goes a stage further in recognising that all young people need someone who knows them well and can help them set goals and make choices. This is particularly important for those young people whose families are not able to offer this kind of support; the *Children's Plan* envisages a school-based 'personal tutor' in this role, who will support young people academically as well as help them choose from the activities available through extended schools, develop their talents, and help them think about future education, training and career choices. For some young people, however, including those who are totally disengaged from school and/or are not in education, training or employment (NEET), this kind of trusting relationship with someone who knows and cares about them, and can help them to see beyond their current situation to what they can become, will need to be built up in other spheres. Youth workers and mentors, including peer mentors, may be successful here, enabling young people firstly to formulate aspirations about what they want to achieve in life, and then to understand the steps they need to take to reach those aspirations, alongside understanding the role that education can play in this process. When young people 'own' their education as a means of achieving their goals in life, rather than experiencing it as something that is 'done to' them, their engagement and achievement can be raised.

Activities taking place as part of extended schools initiatives could also boost young people's engagement with school, and so their aspirations, in line with the finding that interventions to increase participation and engagement with school can have long-term beneficial consequences, particularly for disadvantaged young people. This again has implications for staff training, as staff working with young people in these activities, or in other positive activities outside school, may need to be aware that far from simply filling time, participating in such activities, and getting to know others who can motivate them to achieve, can make a difference to young people's aspirations and hence to their futures.

Specific intervention programmes can also play a role, and the SEAL programme is again relevant here in view of the finding that positive feelings about themselves and what they can achieve help to raise children's aspirations. SEAL addresses children's confidence, academic self-concept and sense that they can have control over the efforts they make – and hence over their own achievement. In view of the finding that aspirations and the prospects of realising them may diminish over time, particularly for those facing multiple barriers to success, it is especially important to help children overcome attitudinal barriers: the 'internal' factors that they are able to change, even when there are other 'external' factors in their circumstances that they have less control over. Work to raise children's expectations about what they can achieve needs to form one part of a dual approach while children are young, alongside the practical support (and awareness of that support) to enable them to continue in education outlined below. Such an approach may protect against the later development of further barriers that prevent some young people from realising their aspirations, such as leaving school with low qualifications, or becoming a parent.

However, the research suggests that the later teenage years and some of the so-called barriers that arise at this time may also constitute critical moments in young people's lives, providing crucial opportunities where interventions to raise aspirations and keep young people on the path to success can be particularly effective. 'XI clubs', for example, are run in schools by the Prince's Trust. They target young people who are at risk of underachieving in their last two years at school, either because they are getting into trouble or truanting, or because they lack confidence. Over the two years, club members choose what they will learn, work together on projects and produce a folder of work to qualify for accredited awards. In a survey by the Trust, 94 per cent of young people taking part in the scheme said they wanted to go on to further education and/or training.

In the light of evidence that the aspirations of young people and their parents are influenced by the economic resources available to them, financial support to continue in education – from the Child Trust Fund for all young children to the Education Maintenance Allowance for 16 to 18-year-olds – plays an important role. Alongside such practical measures, more may need to be done to counter perceptions that participation in further and higher education inevitably carries an insurmountable burden of debt. Educational institutions are reaching out to young people from family and community backgrounds with no history of participation in post-16 education, as part of the agenda to widen participation in further and higher education and initiatives such as *Aimhigher*. However, more can be done, not only to recruit such students but to support them to stay the course. Likewise, businesses have a role in reaching out to young people from communities with little history of employment. The Government's aim for schools to work together with businesses (for example through Enterprise education) will go some way towards achieving this, along with the increased flexibility of the curriculum for 14 to 19-year-olds, meaning a greater range of options to meet young people's needs and interests – but these encouragements towards building high aspirations must begin early, before young people have the chance to become disengaged from education.

### 7.3 Further Research

Whilst much is known about the nature of aspirations, several questions remain unanswered. Although evidence indicates that parents play an important role in the formation of aspirations, there is little information regarding the intergenerational transmission of aspirations. That is, how do parents' aspirations for their own education and career path influence their aspirations for their children and how do values regarding the importance of education get transmitted from generation to generation? Further work should also continue to investigate why some young people do not realise the high aspirations that their parents have for them. Understanding the intergenerational effects in the development of aspirations as well as processes that support and/or hinder their fulfilment may aid efforts to break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage that afflicts many young people and their families.

Examining the intergenerational transmission of aspirations may also illuminate the reasons why aspirations seem to mitigate the effects of low socio-economic background on attainment for some ethnic groups more than for others. What cultural beliefs sustain aspirations for achievement despite low financial resources and how can such beliefs be cultivated to support the aspirations and achievement of young people? Within this vein, understanding the young people who defy the odds – that is, aspire and succeed more than expected – may also provide insights in how we can tackle these issues. The apparent success of some interventions targeted specifically at certain groups suggests a role for such projects. For example, the National Black Boys Can Association aims to raise the social and academic aspirations and achievements of black boys aged nine to 16 through its training and development programme, and to encourage them to continue to higher education using its links with the University of Oxford.

More investigation may also shed light on the reasons boys consistently have lower aspirations than girls as regards continuing in education, and the interplay of their aspirations with their achievement – are boys' lower aspirations a result of losing interest in education due to lower attainment? The evidence for young people in general suggests that the effect of aspirations on attainment remains significant but does diminish when taking into account pupils' progress, implying a role for interventions designed to boost aspirations alongside attainment. The question of what can be done to counter the fact that when they reach the labour market women experience lower occupational status, career advancement and financial reward than men is beyond the scope of this paper, but ensuring that girls continue to aim high despite this trend is vital.

In consideration of the studies documenting differences in aspirations according to socio-demographic characteristics, further research needs to examine the way different aspects of identity such as gender, social class, religion, sexual orientation, immigration status, disability status, and ethnic identification combine in different ways to create unique experiences. Nuances exist arising from these different combinations. For instance, while for many immigrant groups educational and occupational aspirations may be high overall, cultural norms may mean that, for some groups, such aspirations may be reduced for girls, ambitions being focused instead around their future family. In contrast, for other groups, educational effort and aspiration may be at odds with concepts of masculinity. It is not in these cases

ethnicity or gender per se which influence aspirations, but the mixture of the two. Understanding the intersection and contradiction among these multiple aspects of identity is essential in order to support the formation and fulfilment of aspirations of diverse groups. The increasing personalisation of education and other public services is a way in which policy is responding to this challenge. At the level of the individual, this is most likely to be achieved through professionals or volunteers ‘on the ground’ who have both the ability to form trusting relationships with individuals and the power to help them access the practical support they need to fulfil their aspirations.

## **7.4 Conclusions**

Evidence suggests that while raising aspirations is a valuable goal in itself, a national approach – which will be vital in helping all young people to achieve their potential, as well as to meet challenging targets such as those set out in the Leitch Review of Skills – should contain several strands. These include working with parents when children are young as well as with children themselves; supporting educational attainment alongside boosting aspirations; working with young people to overcome attitudinal barriers to achieving their aspirations; and providing support to overcome practical barriers. Further research can support these endeavours by increasing our understanding of how best to target at-risk groups as well as to consider the way different aspects such as gender and ethnic group combine to create unique individual identities and experiences.

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# Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning

## Research Report No.27

# Determinants of aspirations

Leslie Morrison Gutman, Rodie Akerman

➔ Aspirations vary for different sections of the population both in terms of parents' educational and occupational goals for their children and the ambitions of the young people themselves. In this report, we review the current research literature across a range of disciplines to set out these differences and consider how educational and career aspirations are formed and developed in response to different environments and circumstances. We also examine the extent to which aspirations are related to eventual outcomes and discuss the implications for current policies and practices.

Research indicates that aspirations begin to be shaped early in a child's life, but are modified by experience and the environment.

Aspirations tend to decline as children mature, in response to their growing understanding of the world and what is possible, and to constraints imposed by previous choices and achievements. This decline is particularly marked for those facing multiple barriers.

Girls, young people from minority ethnic groups and those from higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to hold higher aspirations than their counterparts. Parents from these

groups also tend to have higher aspirations for their children. Conversely, socially disadvantaged groups such as teenage parents tend to have low aspirations for themselves and for their children.

In general, those who have, or whose parents have, high aspirations have better outcomes, even when taking into account individual and family factors, but this is not a universal effect. For some groups, high aspirations do not lead to higher achievement. In particular, there is a gap between educational aspirations and achievement for young people from some minority ethnic groups and a gap between girls' occupational aspirations and career attainment.

Practical and attitudinal barriers to the formation of high aspirations are evident. Financial constraints may limit some groups' access to opportunities and enabling resources such as computers and private tuition. Equally, some individuals are limited by earlier achievement and choices such as leaving school or becoming a parent at a young age. But attitudes are also important. Young people who believe they have the ability to achieve and who attribute their success to hard work,

rather than luck or fate, tend to have higher aspirations than their peers.

The early years of a child's life are a key time in the formation and development of aspirations. During this time, parents may need support to overcome both attitudinal and practical barriers to high aspirations. Schools can play a part in maintaining and realising ambitions, and the support they provide becomes more important when family resources are limited. Later, young people need easy access to advice and guidance and the involvement of professionals or volunteers – for example in a mentoring role – when necessary. Involvement in positive activities may also provide important socialising experiences that encourage high aspirations.

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