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# Shaping Educational Attitudes and Aspirations: The Influence of Parents, Place and Poverty

## Stage 1 Report

April 2009 Revision

*Ivan Turok, Keith Kintrea, Ralf St Clair and Amanda Benjamin*

**An interim report of a study which aims to better understand the relationship between children's aspirations in relation to education and employment, and the context in which they are formed. In particular, the study seeks to explore how parental circumstances and attitudes, the school as an institution, and the opportunity structures of the neighbourhood come together to shape aspirations in deprived urban areas.**

This report examines:

- The assumptions of current policy that aspirations are a key ingredient of educational and labour market outcomes
- What aspirations are and how they can be understood
- What young people's aspirations are for further and higher education and for future occupations in three secondary schools,
- The main influences on those aspirations, including the roles of parents, schools and the neighbourhood context
- Messages for the second stage of the research and emerging lessons for policy.

The report provides some evidence to question the assumption among policy makers that there is a 'poverty of aspirations' among young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.





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# Shaping Educational Attitudes and Aspirations: The Influence of Parents, Place and Poverty

## Stage 1 Report

Ivan Turok, Keith Kintrea, Ralf St Clair and Amanda Benjamin



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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This is a report of the first stage of a two-stage study which aims to better understand the relationship between young people's aspirations in relation to education and employment, and the contexts in which they are formed. In particular, the study seeks to explore how parental circumstances and attitudes, schools as institutions, and the opportunity structures in neighbourhoods come together to shape aspirations in deprived urban areas. This report is based on surveys of 12-13 year olds and their parents in three schools in Glasgow, Nottingham and London.

The term 'aspirations' is used to capture the various desires and ambitions held by young people about their futures, both idealistic and realistic.

This stage of the research has three key aims:

1. To undertake a longitudinal survey of young people in three locations to identify the things they say influence their aspirations.
2. To situate this in context and triangulate the responses with a parallel survey of parents, school support staff and teachers.
3. To use these insights to contribute to the development of policy and practice designed to raise aspirations in disadvantaged areas.

### **Key Findings**

- The data does not support the idea that there is a 'poverty of aspirations' among young people living with disadvantage.
- The majority of young people in the study often think about their future.
- Most aspire to managerial, professional and associate professional jobs. The proportion aspiring to such jobs far exceeds the current availability of these jobs in the labour market.
- Young people are generally realistic about the qualifications they need to get for their ideal job, and the length of time at school required to achieve them.
- Many parents in deprived areas have strong educational and vocational aspirations for their children.
- There is little evidence from the data that living in disadvantaged areas affects young people's aspirations at the age of 13

### **The 'Poverty of Aspirations'**

The assumption underlying the current policy interest in aspirations is that at present they are too low, particularly among children from disadvantaged backgrounds and disadvantaged neighbourhoods (and raising them is a key to high achievement in education and the labour market, and to upward social mobility). This is not recognisable in our data. Young people in different cities, from deprived and non-deprived neighbourhoods and from different ethnic groups have high educational and occupational aspirations and are more alike than unlike in what they wish for and what they expect of their futures.

### **Awareness of the Future**

Generally the young people surveyed had good awareness of the need to choose a career. Ninety-eight percent agreed that it was important that they got a job when they left school. 86% had given a specific job some thought, and more than two-thirds (70%) worried about being able to get a job in the future. When asked, 96% of respondents could name a specific job they would want in an ideal world.

### **Aspiration to Managerial and Professional Jobs**

Ninety five per cent of young people were able to express a specific occupational aspiration. Eighty four per cent mentioned managerial, professional or associate professional and technical positions. In the UK, 41% of people actually work in this range of jobs. The top 'ideal' occupations desired by young people included footballer or other athlete, lawyer, doctor, computer or IT technician, teacher, and veterinarian or someone that works with animals.

### **Realism about Education and Qualifications**

The young people were generally realistic about the kinds of qualifications they would need to attain their ideal jobs. Sixty three per cent of young people thought that they would stay in school until Higher Grade or A-Levels. A significant majority of young people (66%) thought they would get college or university qualifications, an even larger number of young people (83%) agreed or strongly agreed that they wanted to go to university. When young people were asked what they thought they needed to do to get their desired occupation the two factors mentioned most often were: college or university qualifications and good exam passes (Standard Grades, Highers, GCSE's, A-Levels). Only about a quarter of young people thought they would leave school as soon as they were allowed to, i.e. after Standard Grade or GCSE's.

### **Influences on Aspirations**

At this age families were by far the strongest influence on aspirations. A substantial majority of young people talked primarily to their parents about their hopes, and parents generally supported these aspirations. There was little evidence that other factors, including social background and ethnicity, had a substantial effect on aspirations.

## **Disadvantage and Aspirations**

There is little evidence in the data of a link between pupil background and aspirations, or degree of confidence in attaining that aspiration. There were no significant links between family background and young peoples' desired or expected occupations, educational aspirations or other influences. The linkages between living in a disadvantaged area and aspirations were very weak. While the majority of young people tended to like school and studying, the more deprived the area that young people lived in the less they enjoyed studying. The young people in this study who worried about getting jobs when they were older also tended to be from the more disadvantaged areas.

There were also some differences between the case study locations; young people in London stood out by aspiring more strongly to professional jobs, with a greater proportion also wanting to go to university. This may be attributable to the family backgrounds of the young people, many of whom had recently migrated to the UK.

## **Discussion**

That there are more similarities than differences between young people from different backgrounds runs counter to expectations and the research team suggest three potential explanations:

1. 12 and 13 years olds are too young yet to show the differentiation in aspirations between social groups that the literature led us to expect. They may have limited awareness of the uneven prospects and constraints they face as a result of their social circumstances.
2. The power of social influences, including those in television and other media may have out-weighed differential parental effects.
3. The climate surrounding aspirations and the policy push to encourage them, allied with the desire of schools to see their exam performance increase, and may affect young people's expression of their aspirations.

The second round of data collection and analysis will help to clarify which of these, if any, has the most explanatory power. In the meantime, the results so far seem encouraging about the level and type of aspirations held by young people in these three locations and their awareness of what will be needed to achieve them.

# **1. Introduction: Research Aims and Policy Context**

This is a report of the first stage of a two-stage study which aims to better understand the relationship between young people's aspirations in relation to education and employment, and the contexts in which they are formed. In particular, the study seeks to explore how parental circumstances and attitudes, schools as institutions, and the opportunity structures in neighbourhoods come together to shape aspirations in deprived urban areas.

The term 'aspirations' is used to capture the various desires and ambitions held by young people about their futures. The research and policy literature is mainly concerned with the educational and occupational goals of young people. Do young people want to go onto further or higher education? Do they want to become doctors, pilots, footballers or musicians? Yet aspirations may also centre on lifestyle or self fulfilment, or revolve around roles in the family or community (such as performing a caring or leadership function).

## **1.1 Aims of the Study**

There are five objectives of the research:

1. To conduct a systematic review and original synthesis of the available evidence and ideas about the relationship between educational and vocational aspirations and factors associated with the individual, the family and 'place'.
2. To undertake a longitudinal survey of young people in three settings to identify the things they say influence their aspirations, and how these change between the formative ages of 13 and 15.
3. To situate this in context and triangulate the responses with a parallel survey of parents, school support staff and teachers.
4. To develop a robust framework to explain how children's aspirations are shaped and to help identify new and more effective ways of fostering positive and realistic aspirations.
5. To use these insights to contribute to the development of policy and practice designed to raise aspirations in disadvantaged areas.

This report examines the findings which have emerged after the first stage of the longitudinal survey. It is anticipated that further reports will be available when the research is complete in 2011.

## 1.2 Context

This study comes at a time when there is very high degree of interest in aspirations and when there is a strong assumption that raising aspirations will increase educational achievement. For example, in his speech accepting the leadership of the Labour Party, Gordon Brown (2007) maintained:

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

The idea that aspirations are currently too low, are the key to higher achievement and can be raised by public policy has been an emergent theme in recent policy papers about children and young people. Attention to aspirations has increased since 2007, for example in *The Children's Plan* (DCSF, 2007) and in *Aiming High for Young People* (HM Treasury and DCSF, 2007).

Low aspirations have also been explicitly linked to disadvantaged areas, and are seen as a key component of efforts to eradicate poverty:

*'children living in deprived communities face a cultural barrier which is in many ways a bigger barrier (to success) than material poverty. It is a cultural barrier of low aspirations and scepticism about education, the feeling that education is by and for other people, and likely to let one down'* (DCSF, 2008, p.2).

This theme gained further impetus in a recent Cabinet Office discussion paper (Cabinet Office, 2008) and in the UK Government's White Paper on social mobility (Cabinet Office, 2009), which identified a key role for communities in shaping young people's attitudes to education and employment, and announced 'Inspiring Communities', a new 'challenge fund' programme to be operated in 15 areas in England designed to support young people and their families.

But precisely how aspirations are linked to outcomes and how they can be raised is rarely made explicit. There is also a presumption that having high aspirations implies a sense of career direction and a belief that upward mobility can be achieved, as well a positive view of current learning. Low, vague or inappropriate aspirations are thought to indicate weak ambition for the future, lack of confidence and low motivation towards learning. These kinds of presumptions need to be examined.

Aspirations that seem low or high from one perspective may be realistic or appropriate from another. The assumption of a spectrum from low to high aspirations also belies the fact that they can relate to many things besides careers, and reflect a range of different values, principles and views of what is important in life.

The portrayal of aspiration in policy debates also can often suggest that they are essentially an individual attribute which is the result of open choices. This can lead to inadequate aspirations being blamed for people being poor and at the bottom of the social hierarchy. It can also mean that aspirations are seen as something that can

manipulated with a little external guidance and encouragement, either through parents, schools, mentors or some other institution. This ignores the possibility that aspirations may significantly reflect the social, economic and cultural context within which an individual lives his or her life.

This study is based on the assumption that aspirations cannot be understood without placing them in the context of wider factors, including educational and economic opportunities and resources. This study is based on the understanding that aspirations are complex and multi-dimensional, reflecting the influence and interaction of many different individual, social, cultural and environmental factors, including economic, social, neighbourhood and household structures. One implication of this hypothesis is that aspirations may not be easily susceptible to short term policy influence.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows. Section 2 develops these ideas about aspirations and lays out the model of aspirations informing this research. Section 3 provides a discussion of the research methods employed and a description of the case study locations. Sections 4-6 present the findings from the three case studies, while Section 7 pulls the findings together across the case studies. Section 8 draws conclusions and discusses some of the wider implications.



## **2. An Analytical Approach to Aspirations**

The concept of aspirations has been around for a number of years, though recently it appears to have attracted more attention from policymakers and educators (e.g. DfES 2005a, 2005b; DCSF 2007a; Treasury and DCSF, 2007; Cabinet Office, 2008; Cabinet Office, 2009). The notion that raising aspirations will lead to enhanced outcomes, both vocationally and educationally, is approaching the status of a common-sense truism. Yet amongst all the talk of aspirations, there have been very few clear definitions of what an aspiration is, why one would be better than another, or indeed how aspirations get turned into vocational or educational outcomes. This lack of clarity has significant implications for a study setting out to understand aspirations in terms of what shapes them and what, in turn, they shape.

An early task in this study, therefore, was to develop a model of aspirations that offered a more nuanced insight into aspirations than many of the existing mechanistic models, which tend to suggest that environmental and personal factors affect aspirations which then affect outcomes. While these relationships may well exist and have an influence on outcomes, it is unlikely that they are the whole story.

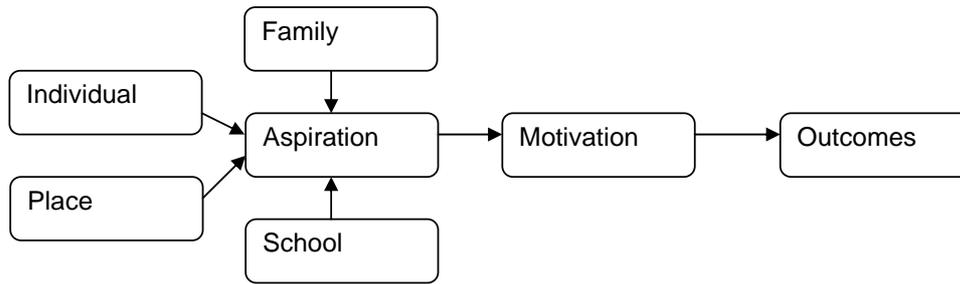
### **2.1 The Concept of Aspirations**

In this study we view aspirations as dynamic and changing over time, and as responsive to feedback from peers, family and educators. The way aspirations are used in policy is based on three connected propositions. These are:

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

These propositions have some validity, though they tend to become less clearly supported moving from 1 to 3. In other words, it is relatively easy to make the case that low aspirations leads to low achievement (Rottinghaus et al, 2001) but far harder to argue that an intervention directly targeted at aspirations will help to relieve poverty. The basic argument can be illustrated with a simple diagram (Figure 2.1).

**Figure 2.1: A simple model of aspirations**



It is important to be careful when thinking about mechanisms such as these. It can encourage the view that the ‘deserving poor’ will find a way to pull themselves up by the bootstraps simply by encouraging their children to want more education and the better jobs this will putatively lead to.

A review of the Aimhigher policy (Baxter, Tate and Hatt, 2007), which is an attempt to increase the participation of historically excluded groups in higher education, examines critiques of aspirations as a policy instrument. The most significant critique is that policies based on aspirations value middle-class ambitions and worldviews most highly, and can imply that marginalised groups are lacking in some way. The authors refer to Bridges’ (2005) argument that the perceived aspirational deficit reflects a traditional occupational hierarchy where intellectual jobs (attained by academic prowess) are most valued. Baxter, Tate and Hatt (2007) summarise these objections to aspiration-centred work by suggesting that it may be mistaken to focus upon what the student lacks, rather than upon the ways in which social structures provide opportunity to some while denying it to others. In other words, the problem may not be what people want, but rather what they are constrained or allowed to achieve. Outcomes may be far more strongly influenced by structures of opportunity than by aspiration or motivation.

In a similar vein, educational sociologists can sometimes be sceptical about aspirations because of their awareness that family and parental history, home culture and the local community worldview can sometimes contribute to a deep alienation from education that individuals cannot simply choose to change. As one writer on home-school relationships in the US puts it:

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

One of the key points here is that an adversarial stance towards schools and related lack of educational aspirations is not a failure in the individuals concerned, but may be an informed and rational response to historical and cultural context. As disturbing as this may seem to some educators, supposedly low aspirations may be a strategic move on the part of the educated to avoid repeating negative outcomes.

A further complexity is what 'aspirations' represent. The majority of literature on the topic assumes that higher aspirations, that is a desire for higher income and occupational status, are more positive. However, it makes sense to ask people what they hope to achieve, and what they expect to achieve, and to get different answers (Andres et al. 1999). Individuals appear to be aware of, and comfortable with, this distinction. The separation between what people hope to achieve and expect to achieve is different for different groups, and changes over time (Furlong, Biggart and Cartmel, 1996).

This assumption is reinforced by the tendency not to include the perspectives of young people in the research, as:

*'(t)here is a perhaps surprising absence of the voices and opinions of young people themselves ... in the work of social scientists' (McDowell 2000, p.391).*

In the light of these open issues and the importance of aspirations to outcomes, researchers must clarify the model of aspirations they will use. The challenge is to develop a model of aspirations that helps to illuminate the choices individuals make within their specific context, recognising both the constraints and the possibilities without idealising middle class educational and vocational outcomes.

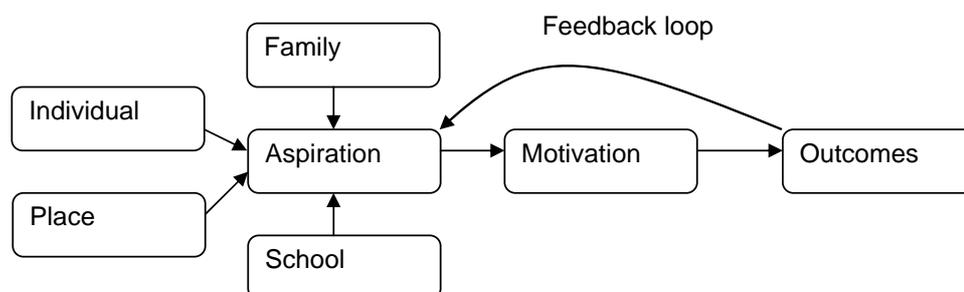
## **2.2 A Dynamic Model**

A dynamic model of aspirations addresses many of the problems identified above. Our basic argument is that understanding the way aspirations contribute to a person's movement through educational and vocational systems requires going beyond the 'snapshot' approach. Previous research on aspirations makes strong arguments that certain factors influence the aspirations identified by young people, but tends not to place aspirations within a long-term process of decision-making and development.

The first aspect to take into account when talking about aspirations is their development over time. Aspirations are far from static, and will change considerably throughout an individual's life. This change may represent changes in social circumstances or changes in an individual's reactions to the same circumstances. There is some evidence that key individuals can have a strong influence on aspirations, but we do not know when this is the case and what other factors come into play. Nonetheless, aspirations can be seen to be shaped by various forms of feedback to the individual, both through key relationships such as the peer group and through opportunity structures such as the local labour market (Furlong and Biggart, 1999).

Overall, these social factors create a feedback loop affecting aspirations. As the aspiration is accepted more or less well, and as it proves more or less useful, then it will change over time. This is summarised in the following diagram:

**Figure 2.2: A model of aspirations including a feedback loop**



This simple change has significant consequences, as it suggests that aspirations are actively shaped by the context in which the individual operates. This implies that individuals cannot simply choose to change their aspirations, but have to select aspirations that fit within a limited field of choices. Yet far from de-valuing the notion of aspirations, this makes them more valuable, as there is a potential for seeing them as key components in the way people adapt to—and transcend—their social setting.

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

In this study, we consider two forms of aspirations. The first is idealistic aspirations, meaning the individual’s preferred goal in an ideal world. The second, realistic aspirations, are more strongly shaped by real world factors and incorporate an evaluation of one’s own ability and achievements. In the literature of aspirations these are sometimes referred to as aspirations and expectations respectively. Realistic aspirations may speak more strongly to perceived individual and structural constraints, though the two types tend to be highly correlated (Andres et al, 1999). In other words, individuals with high hopes for an ideal world also tend to have high hopes for the real world.

### 2.3 Summarising aspirations

In our dynamic model of aspirations we have attempted to acknowledge the multitude of factors that may affect aspirations and the way they manifest in an individual’s

decision-making. The key addition to conventional models is the feedback loop, underlining the responsive nature of aspirations. Analysis of a wide range of social and individual factors (see Appendix A) has allowed the research team to explore the viability of this dynamic model of aspirations.



### 3. Research Methods

This section briefly describes the research team’s approach to data collection and analysis.

#### 3.1 Research Approach and Case Study Selection

The general approach of this study is to carry out two rounds of surveys of young people in three secondary schools at age 12/13 and 14/15, and surveys of their parents where possible. The surveys were designed to produce primarily quantitative data, with certain questions allowing open or qualitative responses. The information from the survey data was then extended by qualitative interviews with key actors within the schools and in the local community. At this stage we are reporting on the results of the first round of surveys.

##### Cities

The locations for the research were chosen selected to reflect a distribution across broad regions in Britain and to feature cities with different labour market conditions and socio-demographic characteristics (Table 3.1). The choices made were Glasgow, Nottingham and East London.

- London: A city with great cultural and ethnic diversity, substantial educational and labour market disparities and localised concentrations of poverty, but a buoyant economy in recent years (Buck et al, 2002)
- Nottingham A city with moderate cultural and ethnic diversity, but continuing challenges of inequality, segregation and labour market adjustment despite recent economic improvements (Turok et al, 2006)
- Glasgow: A city with very extensive worklessness and associated deprivation, but with cultural and racial diversity confined to relatively small areas in the city. Disadvantaged communities are mainly White. Economic improvements in the 1990s and early 2000s did not benefit poorer communities very much and educational attainment remains much lower than anywhere else in Scotland (Turok and Bailey, 2004)

**Table 3.1 Working Age Claimant Rates in the case study areas**

	<b>Hill School Glasgow (1)</b>	<b>Lake School Nottingham</b>	<b>Valley School London</b>
<b>Claimant rates in the ward in which the school is located</b>	13%	21%	21%

<b>Claimant rates in the local authority area</b>	24%	19%	19%
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1. Hill is situated in a relatively affluent area, but most of its catchment area is much more disadvantaged

Source: Nomis (2008) (August 2008 data)

### **Schools**

The selection of the schools was purposive rather than random. The schools were selected with the aid of the Index of Multiple Deprivation and knowledge of the geography of school catchment areas and after discussion with the local authorities. In practice this means that their catchment includes areas of disadvantage and that there are substantial numbers of children from disadvantaged households in all three schools. Each school and its locality were given a pseudonym to protect its identity and that of the participants.

This report discusses the findings across all three case studies as if the three groups of respondents can be considered as one big sample. This is not the case, but analysis showed the findings in all the settings to be so consistent that they were combined for reporting purposes. The overall strategy of the research, however, is to view them as three separate and different settings.

## **3.2 Analysing Socio-Economic Factors**

The primary measure of poverty in this study is the Index of Multiple Deprivation (CLG, 2008). This is an area based measure that allows any household in the UK to be allocated a score for the measure of deprivation experienced in that area. This score is derived from a number of key indicators, each of which is allocated a specific weight in that score. Examples within the health domain are “years of potential life lost” and “comparative illness and disability ration.” For Scotland we used the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (ref), which uses broadly the same approach to achieve the same result.

The areas described by each of these indices is relatively small, so that there are several within the catchment area of each school, giving a degree of specificity. However the disadvantage of this approach is that it does not capture the individual circumstances of each family, but only a tendency based on geographic area. IMD and SIMD remain the most widely used and most credible indicators of disadvantage in the UK, so it was decided that they would be the main instrument used.

The deprivation scores all areas can be put into order and then divided into sections, so that it is possible to talk about the 10% of most deprived areas in the UK (most deprived decile) or the 20% most derived areas (most deprived quintile). An area in the most deprived quintile, for example, has a higher index of deprivation than at least 80% of the areas in the UK.

The research team considered three other measures of deprivation before choosing the (S)IMD. One option would have been to use the census questions, but they are quite detailed and might not have produced accurate information in this case. This would also have required parental responses for each young person. A second option was to include a question on family income in the parental survey, which we did. However, the response rate was low enough to make this approach unreliable. Finally, we looked at free school meal data. While less nuanced than IMD, free school meals would at least give us data on each family. We collected this data for the Glasgow case study and analysed it alongside the SIMD data, finding that it did not add anything to the data. It was decided to remain with (S)IMD.

Given the focus on place within this research, the area base of our poverty and deprivation measure may not be a disadvantage. While it means that conclusions based on family or individual circumstances have to be drawn with care, it does helpfully reflect the circumstances and culture of a locality.

### **3.3 Categorising Aspirations**

While educational aspirations can be categorised in a relatively straightforward way, this is less true for occupational aspirations. We had to map the occupational desires of young people across onto the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) (ONS, 2008). This divides jobs into nine categories based on the types of work performed and level of skill required:

1. Managers and senior officials
2. Professional occupations
3. Associate professional and technical occupations
4. Administrative and secretarial occupations
5. Skilled trades occupations
6. Personal service occupations
7. Sales and customer service occupations
8. Process, plant and machine operatives
9. Elementary occupations.

Within each category there are breakdowns referring to specific jobs, but at the level of the nine main groups the SOC is hierarchical—jobs seen as more skilled, better rewarded and more desirable are at the top end of the chart. So aspiring to have an occupation in category SOC-2 is more ambitious than aspiring to category SOC-7.

In labour force analysis the nine categories are sometimes collapsed, in a very straightforward way, into three groupings: 1-3, 4-6 and 7-9. For most of our analysis we used the nine categories to order aspirations, though we also compared with the results of a three category approach where it appeared it might offer a different insight.

### 3.4 Participant Selection

The participants were randomly selected young people in Year 8 (England) or S1 (Scotland) from each of the schools. The young people were aged 12 or 13 at the time of the surveys, which were carried out in school year 2007/8. The number of participants per school varied based on the size of the year group, taking into account the potential for young people to move in and out of the catchment area (see Table 3.2 for number of students at each school). Valley School in London was identified as having a more transient pupil population and thus there were a greater number of young people interviewed at the school. Lake in Nottingham had a much smaller year group size and a resultant smaller number of participants available to interview.

All of the young people were chosen randomly using class lists. Consent from parents was sought by mail prior to interviewing any of the young people and those whose parents opted them out were removed from the lists. Interviews followed a standard questionnaire covering the topics listed in Appendix A. and lasted approximately 20 minutes each.

The survey of young people was matched by a parallel survey of their parents or carers. Parents were sent individually addressed letters by post from the school or given to the young people during school hours to take home to their parents or carers. There were at least two mail shots per school immediately after the young people interviews. Parents were offered a £20 supermarket voucher for their participation. Parents who were willing to participate sent back consent forms and contact information and then were interviewed by telephone. Interviews with parents were between 20-40 minutes long. In recognition of the recent migrant status of many of the London families letters and consent information were sent out in the five dominant community languages in the catchment area (Bengali, Punjabi, Urdu, Somali, and Polish) as well as English. Researchers who spoke these languages were hired to conduct interviews for any of the parents who wanted to participate in these languages. Repeated mailings were sent to those not responding and additional phone calls were made to some parents in London in an attempt to raise the participation rate.

Parent participation varied across the three cities with significantly less response in London (Table 3.2). The interviews explored the parents' own educational and employment experiences, residential choices and their attitudes towards education and their children's aspirations. The interviews also probed some of the wider neighbourhood attributes and opportunities or constraints facing school and residential location decisions.

A third stream of interviews involved guidance teachers and other teachers identified in the interviews by young people as those who they talked to most about their futures, as well as leaders of local educational and vocational projects which had some focus on raising aspirations or achievement, and local community actors. The teachers and schools staff were accessed with the help of the key contact at each school. Other key contacts in the community were identified by school staff and by the local authority (Table 3.2).

**Table 3.2: Participation by School**

	<b>Hill School Glasgow</b>	<b>Lake School Nottingham</b>	<b>Valley School London</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Number of Pupils per School</b>	1200	807	1300	
<b>Pupil Interviews</b>	150	137	203	490
<b>Parent Interviews</b>	77	50	32	159
<b>Teacher and Community Interviews</b>	13	6	6	25

### 3.5 Characteristics of the Young People

The young people in this study experienced a high degree of deprivation as determined by the Index of Multiple Deprivation. There were more males than females in the study, and family background varied depending on the city and neighbourhoods. There was a greater diversity of family background in London than in Nottingham or Glasgow (Table 3.3).

**Table 3.3: Characteristics of the Young People**

	<b>Hill School Glasgow</b>	<b>Lake School Nottingham</b>	<b>Valley School London</b>
<b>Gender</b>	59% Male 41% Female	55% Male 45% Female	59% Male 41% Female
<b>Family Background</b>	81% White British 8% Asian 2% Black 1% Chinese 1% Other 7% Mixed	93% White British 1% Asian 4% Black 2% Mixed	3% White British 64% Asian 19% Black 10% Other 3% Mixed
<b>Neighbourhood Deprivation (based on home address)</b>	60% Lowest Quintile 9% Second Lowest 9% Middle Quintile 9% Second Highest 12% Highest Quintile	75% Lowest Quintile 23% Second Lowest 2% Middle Quintile 2% Second Highest 0% Highest Quintile	93% Lowest Quintile 6% Second Lowest 1% Middle Quintile 1% Second Highest 0% Highest Quintile

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

Qualitative data was analysed thematically using the software programme nVivo. Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS to assess the relative importance of different influences on aspirations and to generate robust multivariate statistical relationships between the key variables.

Throughout the data analysis the key consideration was the meaning and importance ascribed to factors by the young people themselves, triangulated with the data from family members, teachers, and key community actors. Key influences can be considered from three viewpoints, providing a way to enrich understanding of their significance.

Overall, we collected data on a rich range of factors that we know to be associated in some way with the aspirations that young people identify, and this certainly makes it possible to look at some relationships. Given the dynamic nature of aspirations, however, there can be little doubt that deeper understanding of these issues will come when we have the chance to look at changes over time.

## 4. The Case Study Schools and their Local Contexts

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### 4.1 London

#### *Context*

The neighbourhood within which the school sits is disadvantaged. According to the Index of Multiple Deprivation for 2007 all of the 'super output areas' in the local ward sit in the top 20% of deprived areas in England, with the majority in the top 10% (DCLG, 2008, p.47). Ninety two per cent of young people in our survey at Valley School lived at an address within the top 20% of deprived areas.

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The local ward's population contains a high proportion of young people; about 40% are under 25 compared with a Greater London figure of 32%, and this proportion continues to grow, mainly through increasing density in the existing housing stock. Over 70% of the population belong to non-White groups. The largest groups are of Asian origin (over 40% describe themselves as Asian or Asian British, with the largest group among these Bangladeshi). A quarter of the population described themselves as Black, with the majority of African origin. There is a lower proportion of white people than in the region as a whole, and a corresponding larger proportion of people of Asian origin (vonAhn et al, 2007 and London Borough of X, 2008).

In the parents' survey, half of the answers to the question about why they moved to the area were positive, mainly about getting a bigger house, a better area or both, and very few reasons were negative. In our survey, 90% of the young people said that their local area was a 'good' or a 'very good' place to live; 9% said it was 'bad', and only 1% 'very bad'. Asked what they liked about the area, the most common answer referred to having friends in the area. Some young people referred to amenities in the area including shops and a local park and it was frequently mentioned that area was friendly and safe. When asked what they disliked about the area, the most frequent response was violence and crime of various kinds, including the presence of gangs. Violence and crime was not often personally experienced, rather it was more an issue of perception. The other main complaint was about rubbish and dumping.

London's labour market is strong and very diverse. Central London and major employment centres such as Canary Wharf and Stratford are within easy reach, and the 2012 Olympic Games site is within a few miles of Valley School. However, the area's population occupies a significantly disadvantaged position in the labour market. Employment rates are a long way below the British average, with men far more likely to be in part time work, unemployed, or otherwise economically inactive; the groups least likely to be working (among both sexes) are Bangladeshis and Pakistanis. A third of our survey respondents did not believe that it would be easy to get a job in London and overall 64% said that they worried about not being able to get a job

A recent survey examined the educational aspirations of young people aged 11-15. Ninety six percent agreed it was important or very important to pass their GCSEs and 93% of young people said that they intended to stay on to do 'A' levels. Eighty percent said they wanted to go to university, with only 3% saying that they did not want to go and 16% undecided. Overall 70% said they knew what they wanted to do for a job when they finished their education, with 37% aiming for a professional or managerial job and 31% an adjunct professional occupation (Burton and Laurie, 2004, p.22-23). While the sample sizes are small and therefore subject to a margin of error, these figures seem to indicate high levels of aspirations in the borough as a whole.

### **Valley School**

This is a 'Community' (i.e. comprehensive) school of about 1300 boys and girls between 11 and 16, of whom 14.5% have Special Education Needs. Educational attainment measured by assessment results has been rising with a total of 49% of young people attaining 5 or more GCSEs at Grades A\*- C, including maths and English language in 2007, compared with a borough average of 44% and an English average of 46% (DCSF, 2008).

The latest Ofsted report assessed the school as grade 2 (i.e. 'good') for overall effectiveness, with all other grades being either 1s or 2s. It noted that:

*'The school is located in a relatively disadvantaged area...with pupils from over 50 different countries. A high percentage speaks another language at home, including a large number who are at an early stage of speaking English. The number of pupils with SEN is relatively high; about a fifth of pupils are asylum seekers of refugees' (2005, p.1).*

Valley is dominated by non-White groups and its ethnic makeup contrasts strongly with the other two schools in the study. The proportion of students of Asian origin far exceeds the overall proportion of Asian people in the local area, while the proportion of White young people is far lower than proportion of white people.

Nearly all students at Valley School live near the school. Valley has the second highest proportion of children coming from linked primaries (56%) in the borough (London Borough of X, 2007, p.50). Our own survey data shows that 73% of the students in year 8 live in the postcode sector which contains the school, while a further 15% live in adjoining postcode areas within the borough. Application data shows that the school has few requests for places from those outside the catchment area. Overall, the picture appears to be one of a school strongly rooted in its neighbourhood.

As we talked to key players in the school and the community, the effect of the make up of the area on educational and vocational aspirations came up frequently:

*'Indian parents have very high expectations. At the parents evenings they are very supportive with young people' (Technology teacher, female).*

*'In the home there is pressure, there is an assumption that they will do better than their parents, have the drive to do better, to take opportunities. It's an immigrant community; the soil the kids are planted in has an effect'. (Community representative, male).*

*'It's an immigrant community; it's aspirational by nature, very supportive in a school as impoverished as this. Parents care about achievement; they're very industrious with a high awareness of the need to work'. (English and drama teacher, female).*

On the other hand, there were sometimes misgivings about the kind of support offered. One teacher complained that: *'They have a busy lifestyle, I'm not sure if they are very involving'* (Maths teacher, male), while a community representative believed that many parents had false expectations of the responsibility of the school, because they had not gone through the cultural experience themselves of being part of the British education system.

Other teachers were more critical:

*'Parents make it difficult...the school is doing better and the assumption (by parents) is that they (the children) will do better. They are pushing them too much. They say: "If you don't get an 'A', then get out of the house!"'* (Maths and learning support teacher, male).

*'Parents are negative and uncaring, they're not interested. I hate stereotyping but they don't give out much aspirations at home....They plod through-providing for the family- they encourage young people to join the same never ending circle. If they have work and money- the person is happy. They don't see beyond that'. (Support staff member, male).*

Others mentioned the attitudes encouraged by Asian parents specifically. Discussing expectations held in the family, one teacher offered;

*'They are motivated by money. They ask "How much does an architect make? What does a chef earn?" They go for the really well paid jobs, not what they're good at'. (Technology teacher, female).*

It was not a question in the interviews but some of the key actor interviewees mentioned Muslim culture as a problem, both in general terms and especially for girls. One teacher suggested:

*'Lots have never been to central London. Some Asian families are very protective; we organised a cinema trip, but they (i.e. young people) can't go'.  
(History and sociology teacher, female).*

One interviewee from the community especially mentioned the negative role of local mosques. Young people were spending 2 or 3 hours in the Madrasa (religious school) after school, and getting the message that Islamic studies was important, and not school work. However, he believed that this problem had now diminished.

## **Conclusions**

The context for the formation of aspirations is very important, and Valley School demonstrates a number of important factors. A key element is the recent migrant status, many first generation, of the parents, and this is very different to the other schools. There are virtually no White 'East Enders' in the sample. The Bangladeshi group, which is the largest, is quite established compared to some but even it has not been prevalent in London for more than about 30 years (Dench et al, 2006). Although they live in an area which is disadvantaged, parents appear to be broadly upwardly mobile and are highly aspirational for their young people. The parents want the children to do better than they have done themselves and to become firmly established in respectable professions. Many of young people appear to go along with this more or less without question. This is consistent with other studies such as Bhatti (1999) and Modood, (2005).

The school is very supportive of young people having high aspirations. Educational achievement at the school has been increasing, and having high aspirations is seen as contributing to academic success. The school and its staff appear to be very keen to promote a belief in the young people that they can be high achievers. This sits alongside traditional school discipline, an expectation of good behaviour, wearing uniform, and being ready to learn.

There are perhaps two main qualifications to this overall picture, concerning the fit between what the young people want to do and the wider labour market. The first is that many of the young people appear to get, and accept, advice from parents which is often highly specific but lacking in much of a sense of what the labour market is really like.

The second is that their own exposure to the wider society, and hence the range of possibilities about how lives may be led, appears in many cases to be very limited. Many young people exist within the very limited compass in their own small area, which itself offers little diversity. All the adult interviewees in the school and in the community noted the limited geographical horizons of many of the young people and believed it was detrimental to forming a wider view of the possibilities open to them in adulthood.

## **4.2 Nottingham**

### ***Context***

The case study in Nottingham is based in an area with a reputation for having high levels of deprivation. At one time the area was considered to be one of the largest and poorest public housing estates in Europe. Over the last two decades privatisation of housing stock has had an appreciable effect on the area, with 63% of housing owner-occupied and around a quarter still rented from the council. Most houses are semi-detached with small garden areas. Nonetheless, it has high levels of poverty compared to UK averages, and large numbers of residents who are living with deprivation on a day to day basis.

Nottingham Health Informatics (2005) provides a number of interesting insights into the area. It contains about 10% of the population of Nottingham city, and is strikingly ethnically homogenous; the 2001 census showed 96% of the population were White. Residents are older than most Nottingham areas, and indeed the rest of England. It is also important to note that there are substantial numbers of people with no educational qualification, around 38% of 16-74 year olds, which is substantially higher than both the rest of the city and the country as a whole. Around 1 in 10 households in the Southern part of the area is headed by a single adult with dependents. The report points out that while the area has average deprivation levels for Nottingham, the city itself shows such a level of deprivation that this is still an area with significant deprivation compared to the rest of England.

Official labour market statistics (Nomis, 2008) provide a clear portrait of employment patterns in the two local wards. While the position of the two wards is not identical, they are generally similar when the patterns of occupations are compared to national averages. The top four employment categories are Elementary Occupations (SOC9), Process Plant and Machine Operatives (SOC8), Skilled Trades (SOC5) and Administrative and Secretarial (SOC4). While the order is slightly different between the two wards, in both the proportion of people in these types of jobs is much higher than in the UK as a whole. So, for example, there are 22.2% of working people in Elementary Occupations in one half of the area, 19% in the other, but only 11.8% across the UK. The figures for Process Plant and Machine Operatives are 15.7, 12 and 8.7% respectively. This suggests that employment held by residents tends to have much lower skill and earnings than average for the UK.

This analysis is supported by detailed information on education levels in the two wards contained in the Nomis database. The proportion of residents with no educational qualification was 56% and 44.9% in the two wards, compared with 36% nationally. Higher level qualifications are held by 6 and 10% compared to 20% across the UK. Despite the strong relative position compared to other areas of Nottingham, there can be little doubt that this is not an area with a highly educated population.

### ***Lake School***

The research was conducted with one of two secondary schools in the local area. The school has 807 pupils aged from 11-16, which makes it slightly smaller than an average secondary in England (980 pupils) (Ray 2006). The proportion of pupils identified with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those with a statement of special educational need, is well above the national average at around 12%. The school has slightly more diversity than the community as a whole, with 6% of pupils coming from non-White backgrounds. All the pupils are considered to be fluent in English.

Ofsted notes that the proportion of students entitled to free school meals, considered by some researchers to be an indication of the level of deprivation in the school community, is above the national average. This reinforces the notion that while this may be one of the less deprived areas of Nottingham, there are still substantial issues of deprivation.

Ofsted was extremely positive about Lake:

*'...an outstanding school. It knows what it does well and is rightly proud of its success. Parents praise the school, as do students who are proud to be part of the caring and learning community. They feel 'valued as individuals, rewarded for their efforts and achievements' and supported through excellent personal care to achieve their best'.*

In the Local Authority brochure distributed to assist parents with school choice, Lake describes itself in the following way:

*'We are a successful, popular and regularly oversubscribed school with high expectations of ourselves and for all our pupils. We believe that our success is the result of a caring, purposeful and secure environment where parents, pupils and staff all know what is expected and work together to achieve that'.*

Despite many similar accolades, the performance of the school in terms of examination results is modest. In 2007 32% of pupils achieved 5 or more A\*-C GCSEs, including English and Maths, compared to 46% nationally. However, the Contextualized Value Added Score for the school (a measure of how far the school helps pupils to progress rather than outright results) is very positive for the school. Lake's score of 1027 is in the top 25% of English secondary schools (cf. Ray 2006). This suggests that the school is contributing substantially to the academic success of pupils with many barriers facing them.

Interviews with teachers helped to explain some of the contextual factors. One of the strongest, referred to by every interviewee, was the relative isolation of the area. Even though Lake's local area is close to Nottingham city centre, and a short bus ride away from many other East Midlands communities, it can be inward-looking. Many of the families are linked by inter-marriage and other relationships— "it's like a large village" (Teacher). This disposition is reinforced by location; Lake is a City of Nottingham school surrounded by school catchments for another local authority. There tends to be little feeding into the school from neighbouring catchments and little opting out.

One effect of the isolation is that, for many young people, being successful means being the best in the area, as they have no more distant goal to aim for. Similarly, their vocational horizons can be limited simply because the young people are unaware what else is available to them. All too often young people aspire to ?? jobs because they are what they know from family, or because of relatively trivial reasons such as wanting to be a vet because 'I like my dog' (Teacher). One teacher explained that the best approach was to start with the shared ambitions and widen out to associated jobs, such as from vet to animal technician. "It's our job to widen eyes" (Teacher).

Aspirations were seen as valuable for young people. One teacher defined aspirations as 'What are you looking forward to? Who would you like to be? Something you believe is achievable'. Another underlined their importance, saying that having an aspiration is 'brilliant, it massively helps you in terms of giving yourself some direction. Not necessarily for a specific job, but for an area of work.'

Teachers saw families as having a critical influence on young people, and tended to downplay their own role. 'Home background plays a big role' (Teacher). There was a view that home could be a limited source of ambitions, since the range of jobs the young people would become aware of was relatively narrow. Television was mentioned as a possible, but one striking feature of all of these conversations was the extent to which the area was seen as a live influence on young people's ambitions. Working through the lived experience of the young people, the area tended to emphasise boys becoming footballers, girls getting jobs with children.

One teacher had grown up on the estate and brought her children up there, but had been careful to send her children to another school so that they would know the world beyond the immediate area. At the same time, the area had changed, and there was more of a mix in the school than there had been.

Teachers talked with pride about the initiatives the school ran in order to support the aspirations of the young people. They included programmes with local football clubs, with a local university, and the Aim Higher initiative, designed to support progression to Higher Education. One teacher estimated that if motivation could be maintained among the pupils there were probably another 20% of young people who could go on to A-levels than was currently the case.

Lake is a school that has specialised its provision in response to recent policy developments concerned with improving learning outcomes, and in doing so has provided high quality services to a historically deprived community. This case study can help to illuminate the potential for a school to contribute to the development of strong aspirations in an area where education has not offered many advantages to the residents.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter paints a portrait of a group of young people who attend a school that is widely regarded as excellent, and live in an area that is starting to recover from its historical levels of deprivation. Nonetheless, it is important to note that being in a

strong position compared to the rest of Nottingham still leaves the area among the most deprived on a national level.

The school and the teachers see aspirations as a key factor in improving outcomes for the young people, and have started to build programmes to support high aspirations. At the same time, there was recognition that the area's culture, as represented in family homes and social networks, might not be entirely supportive of high vocational and educational aspirations.

## 4.3 Glasgow

### **Context**

Hill is rooted in its territory, despite having a large catchment area. First year pupils are drawn mainly from nine associated primary schools plus another 18 primaries beyond them. Much of this area is poor by Scottish standards (in the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods in Scotland), but no more so than some other parts of Glasgow. According to teachers, gang behaviour in the area is stressful for pupils who have to cross several territories in their journeys to and from school.

More than two out of every five young people in the survey (42%) lived in the poorest 10% of neighbourhoods in Scotland. Nearly one in five (18%) lived in the next poorest decile. At the other end of the spectrum, one in five (20%) lived in the least deprived 30% of neighbourhoods in Scotland.

Despite challenging neighbourhood conditions, only 7% of young people described their areas as bad or very bad. 71% said their neighbourhoods were good and 21% very good. The features most commonly identified as positive were the parks, sports facilities, shops, friends and extended family within the vicinity. These virtues were sometimes referred to purely in comparison with problems elsewhere: *'My estate is tucked away so there is no trouble'*; *'Quite peaceful, no bullies'*; *'Not much racket. It's quiet and fewer neds'*, and *'Good friends and know that you have back up if someone tries to fight with you'*.

Despite being positive on balance about their areas, most respondents could identify negative features too. These fell into three basic categories: violence and crime, litter and graffiti, and lack of recreational amenities. Examples of responses included: *'Most people who live here are drug addicts or violent people or racist people'*; *'The big boys hang about, throw bottles and fight'*; and *'Neds cause a ruckus and fights and cause fires'*.

The respondents were likely to be very familiar with their immediate neighbourhoods since they socialised quite extensively. One in three said they hung out 6-7 days a week, one in five 4-5 days a week and one in four 2-3 days a week (90% altogether).

The area is quite stable in terms of population turnover. Only 9% of parents said they had lived in the area for less than three years. Two-thirds had lived locally for at least nine years. The school rarely featured in their reasons for moving home – only 13% said they were influenced a lot by getting access to the school. 55% of respondents owned their own home and the rest rented.

Glasgow has experienced a significant economic turn-around over the last two decades. The decline of heavy industries, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, has been superseded by the growth of services, including consumer, business and public services. This has resulted in 80,000 additional jobs created in Glasgow City over the last decade (up 23%). The types of jobs available have changed accordingly, with fewer manual jobs traditionally filled by men, and more white-collar jobs (such as in call centres, shared services and back office functions) and ‘customer facing’ jobs (such as retail, hospitality and social care) predominantly filled by women and students. Ref?

Several of the key informants interviewed said that perceptions among young people and many adults who influence their attitudes have not kept pace with the changing labour market, either in terms of the number and composition of the jobs available, or the shifting skill requirements. In the pupil survey, one in three respondents said they thought it would be difficult to get a job in Glasgow when they left school. A further one-quarter said they didn’t know whether or not it would be difficult to get a job afterwards.

### **Hill School**

Hill is a six-year comprehensive with about 1200 pupils aged between 11-18. It has a very diverse intake in terms of socio-economic background, with parents ranging from professionals and managers to less-skilled workers and people without jobs. Hill is a non-denominational school and about the average size for secondary schools in Glasgow. Almost one in three students (32%) was entitled to free school meals in 2006/07 (on the grounds of low household income), compared with 31% for Glasgow City and 13% for Scotland.

Levels of academic attainment are very similar to the city as a whole, with an average of 22% of S4 pupils achieving five or more Standard Grades (similar to GCSEs) at credit level over the period 2004-2007, compared to the same proportion in Glasgow and 34% in Scotland. The average proportion of pupils achieving three or more Highers (between GCSEs and A levels) was slightly higher in relative terms at 17% over the period 2004-2007, compared to 13% in Glasgow and 22% in Scotland.

**Table 4.1: Leaver destinations 2006/07**

	<b>Hill school</b>	<b>Glasgow City</b>	<b>Scotland</b>
Full-time Higher Education	27%	22%	30%
Full-time Further Education	22%	26%	23%

Training	10%	11%	5%
Employment	20%	25%	28%
Unemployed, seeking employment	15%	13%	11%
Unemployed, not seeking employment	1%	2%	1%
Not known	5%	2%	1%

The proportion of school leavers going into full-time higher education was also slightly higher than for Glasgow as a whole and slightly lower than for Scotland (Table 4.1). Slightly fewer school leavers went directly into employment than in the rest of Glasgow and Scotland.

Hill was officially inspected during 2006/07. No overall grading is given in Scotland, unlike in England. Particular strengths mentioned included: (i) pastoral care, learning support and links with external support agencies, (ii) promotion of inclusion, equality and fairness, (iii) staff commitment to the school and extracurricular activities, and (iv) partnership with parents and the local community. Further action was required to: (i) improve the curriculum at all stages to meet the needs of pupils more effectively, (ii) improve standards of attainment, particularly at S1/S2, and (iii) develop further the overall quality of learning and teaching.

Several of the teachers said that pupil aspirations could be very high, they could change quite quickly and they were not necessarily related to ability. They said that most young people this age had little knowledge of what most jobs actually entailed. The challenge for them as teachers or mentors was to channel young people's optimism into studying hard because, in their experience, having high aspirations did not translate automatically into a strong sense of purpose and work ethic. One way of trying to achieve this was to help them to think through from the skills and qualifications ultimately required to attain their ideal jobs to the competences and disciplines needed to lay sound foundations in the present.

Several professionals based in the community thought that the school should be doing more to equip young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with the range of skills, self-esteem and other attributes they would need in the future. Aspirations were not seen as being a critical issue - it was fine to dream at that age. However, young people living in poverty and who were not academically engaged were vulnerable to educational withdrawal, exclusion and ultimate failure. They believed that more comprehensive and attractive non-academic options were required to provide viable alternatives to the established curriculum, tertiary education and traditional career pathways. They thought that some young people also needed more intensive support to address various personal and behavioural difficulties in their lives. And that closer co-operation with wider community services might help to resolve some of the challenging domestic circumstances they faced as well, including long-term unemployment, family breakdown, parental stress, ill-health and substance misuse.

## ***Conclusions***

Hill School features a mixed catchment area including some relatively advantaged areas. This is significantly different from either of the English schools and reflects the Scottish commitment to comprehensive schooling and the tendency for there to be less school specialisation than in England. This has some interesting implications for the experience of young people at the school. They are likely to be exposed to people from different backgrounds with potentially different views of educational and occupational choices.

There is some suggestion in the interviews that staff at Hill might take aspirations less seriously than those at the other two schools. This is not meant to imply that they are not invested in the success of their pupils, but that they see more immediate problems for many of them. Related to this, the approach to preparing young people for the future is about the laying of immediate educational foundations tied to either academic or vocational options.

## 5. Aspirations

### 5.1 Introduction

This section of the report lays out the findings from the first round of data collection. The findings from the three schools were very strongly similar across many of the factors examined, and so unless a specific difference is identified, it should be assumed that a statement applies to all three case study locations.

The similarity of the three locations at this stage of the research is not a comment on the influence of place on aspirations for two reasons. Firstly, the data shows high uniformity across all the variables, suggesting that differentiation of aspirations among the young people has not progressed very far. Secondly, the areas were selected specifically for their disadvantaged nature, so a degree of commonality is to be expected. The next round of data collection is likely to show much more divergence of aspirations as the locality and other social factors reach their full effect.

### 5.2 Educational Aspirations

The educational aspirations across all three settings were relatively high. A strong majority of young people in all three settings stated that they enjoyed school, and many hoped to continue to study. For example, Table 5.1 shows the proportion of young people in each school who hope to attend college and university. It is striking that the proportions are considerably higher than the proportion who actually do attend these institutions—overall 83% of the young people we talked to wanted to go to university. It is interesting to note that London shows the highest proportions at both levels.

**Table 5.1: Percentage of pupils hoping to attend college or university**

	London	Nottingham	Glasgow
College	93	91	79
University	87	78	81

When asked when they wanted to leave school, very few in any location wanted to leave as soon as possible. Generally their intended leaving date was consistent with the qualifications they hoped to achieve. These were, once more, higher than the population average. Table 5.2 shows the figures for the highest qualifications the young people wanted to achieve on leaving school. Here it is noticeable that even though London and Glasgow have similar proportions of young people hoping to gain

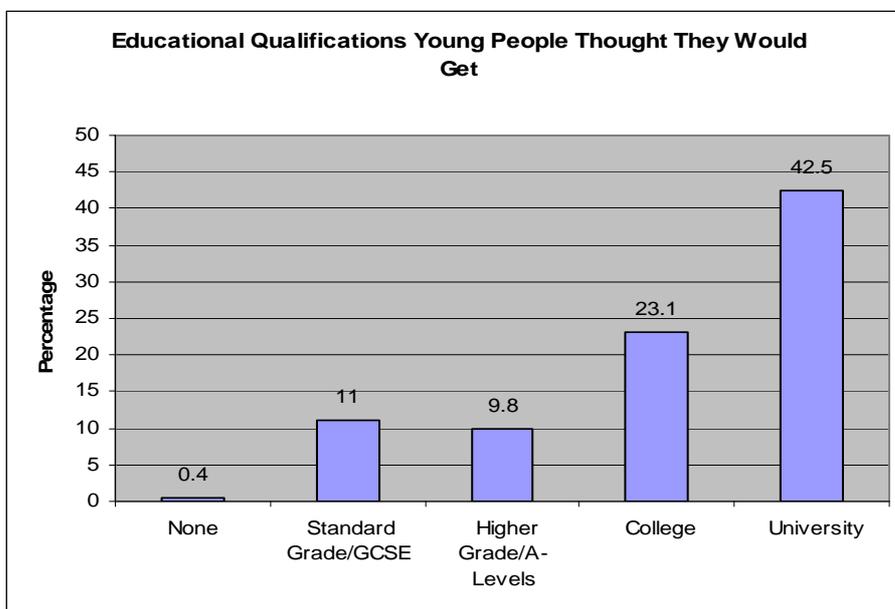
qualifications from school, the distribution is quite different. In Glasgow far more young people expect to go on to complete the higher of the two qualifications. The reasons for this are unclear, though two possible factors are the more diverse school population and the tendency in Scotland to see Highers as the traditional exit qualification for many young people.

**Table 5.2: Percentage of pupils hoped to gain GCSEs/Standard Grades or A-levels/Highers**

	London	Nottingham	Glasgow
GCSE/Standard	30	32	9
A-Levels/Highers	63	47	77
	93	79	88

Figure 5.1 shows the final educational qualification the young people thought they would realistically attain. These are relatively strong, and demonstrate that the majority of young people have a strong interest in post-compulsory education. These findings did not vary significantly by any of the social factors we examined, except in Nottingham, where the aspirations to go to college was linked with living in an area with less deprivation.

**Figure 5.1: Educational qualifications young people thought they would get**



### 5.3 Occupational Aspirations

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

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

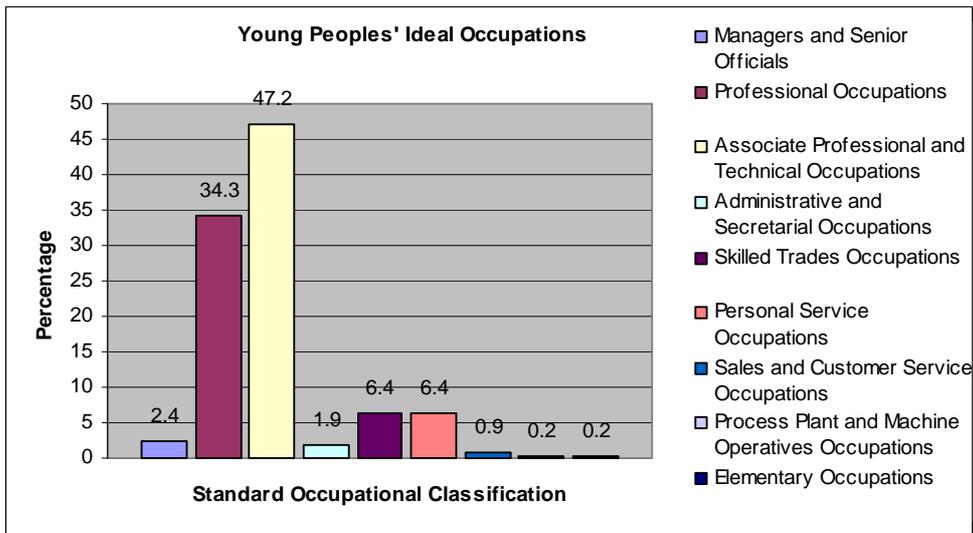
Almost all (96%) of the young people could name a job they would want in an ideal world. Around half of these jobs were in culture, media or sports occupations, including jobs such as footballer, rock star, actor and fire fighter/police officer. Of the other half, 24% were interested in professional occupations, 11% in personal service occupations, and 8% in skilled trades.

The most frequently mentioned ideal vocations were Associate Professional and Technical Occupations (SOC-3). This category includes Culture, Media, and Sports Occupations. Specifically, there were a large number of young people who wanted to be Footballers, Athletes, or in Arts related occupations like an Actor/Actress, Fashion Designer, or Graphic Designer. Some of the other occupations that young people spoke about with some frequency (approximately 10% of young people for each category) were Health Professionals, such as doctors, and Business and Public Service Professionals, including lawyers and accountants. Additionally, 7% of young people desired to have occupations in Science and Technology occupations (CSI or Scientist) and 6% of young people desired to work in the trades (Joiner, Plumber) (see Figure 5.1).

When the SOC is used to compare the distribution of occupations in the area with the pattern of ideal jobs desired by the young people, the ideal jobs are significantly skewed towards those requiring more education and experience. In other words, the aspirations held by the young people were more ambitious than the models of occupations they saw around them. This was true in all three areas.

As well as these ideal aspirations, it is important to find out about realistic aspirations, or expectations. Even at the age of 12 or 13 young people are aware that not everybody can be a footballer. The next question we asked was whether their ideal aspiration was attainable. When the young people were asked if they believed they could get their ideal job, 67% of young people stated that they believed that they could. Relatively few (19%) did not know if they could get the ideal job, and even fewer (9%) felt that they would not. Young people were relatively confident and felt that their ideal aspirations were achievable.

**Figure 5.2: Young people's ideal occupations by SOC**



Nonetheless, when asked what young people expected to do when they were older, given the constraints of the real world, 69% of young people were able to name an alternative to their ideal job. It is interesting to note that 31% did not know or chose not to answer, perhaps suggesting that this group was particularly committed to the ideal aspiration.

The SOC categories for realistic aspirations named by the 69% were slightly different from their ideal occupations. Around two-thirds (67%) of responding young people expected to have Managerial or Professional Jobs (SOC-1 to 3), lower than those young people who had these jobs as their ideal occupation (84%). A greater number of young people (26%) identified realistic jobs in Administrative, Trades or Personal Service occupations (SOC-4 to 6) whereas only 15% of the young people had these as their ideal occupations. Young people expecting to have Sales, Processor and Machine and Elementary Occupations (SOC-7 to 9) increased from 1% as ideal to 7% as realistic, see Figure 5.2..

In order to put the desires and expectations into context, the ideal and realistic occupational expectations were compared to the overall breakdown of the United Kingdom work force. In the UK, 41% of people actually work in Managerial, Professional and Associate Professional and Technical Occupations (SOC-1 to 3), 32% in Administrative, Trade and Personal Service Occupations (SOC-4 to 6), and 27% in Sales, Process and Machine and the Elementary Occupations (SOC-7 to 9).

**Figure 5.2: Young People's Realistic Aspirations**

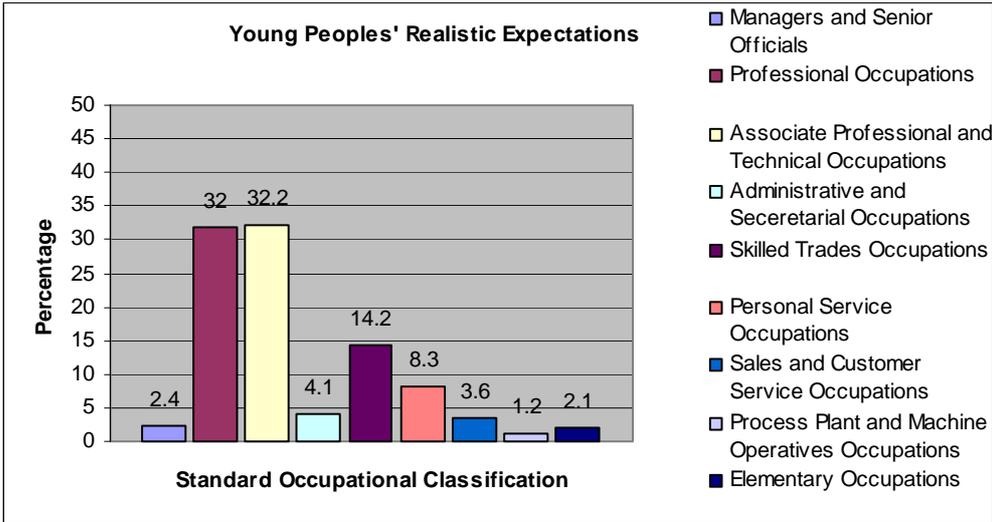
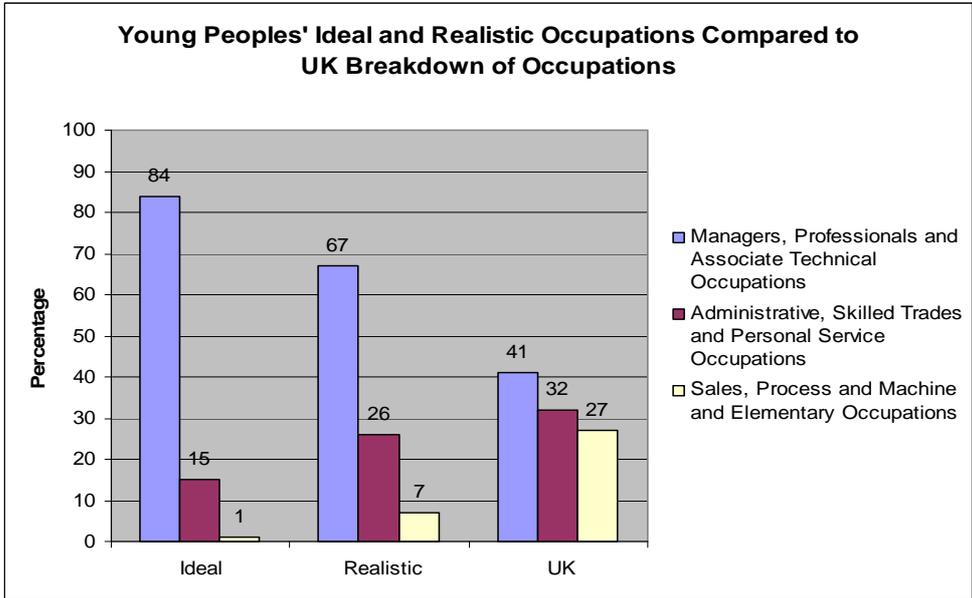


Figure 5.3 shows ideal and realistic aspirations mapped against the current UK pattern of employment. It indicates quite clearly that the proportion of young people hoping for work—both ideally and realistically—in the top three SOC categories is far higher than the availability of these jobs in the current labour market..

**Figure 5.3: Young Peoples' Ideal and Realistic Occupations Compared to UK Breakdown of Occupations**



Overall, it seems that the young people in this study had strong vocational aspirations, albeit with a high degree of interest in being professional footballers. A similar analysis was run after taking out the footballers and other potentially difficult to achieve aspirations (such as actors) to see if it would significantly affect the results, and it did not. These young people, even at the age of 12 and 13, were thinking about the future and aiming high, both realistically and ideally.

Our analysis of ideal aspirations and realistic aspirations also shows some gender effects.. Figure 5.4 shows aspirations for each gender divided into occupational classifications. Overall, the aspirations are very much crowded towards the 'left' or upper end of the graph. There are far more female pupils selecting professional and managerial jobs (SOC-2) and more male pupils selecting associate professional occupations (SOC-3), a category which not surprisingly includes professional athletes.

**Figure 5.4 Gender and ideal aspiration by SOC**

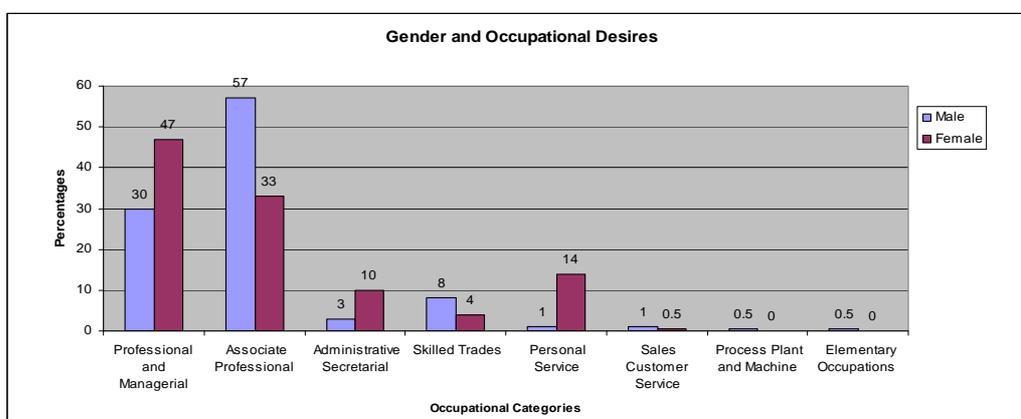
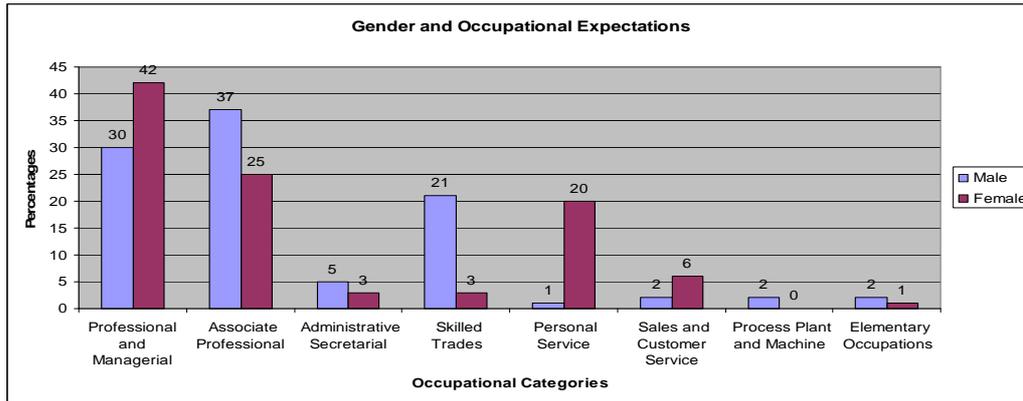


Figure 7.5 shows realistic aspirations divided the same way. The same proportion of male pupils aspire to professional and managerial jobs, but the percentage of female pupils drops from 47 to 42. The percentage of female pupils in the associate professional category drops from 33 to 25, while the percentage of male pupils drops considerably, from 57 to 37. The drops in this category are due mainly to respondents who initially stated that they wanted to be footballers, actors and the like, but who had a more modest back-up plan.

Where gender really counts is in the pattern of redistribution. For the male pupils, the realistic aspirations are extremely strongly focused on the trades, which go from 8% to 21%. For the female pupils, they move to personal service (14 to 20%) and sales and customer service (0.5 to 6%) categories. This suggests that while 12 and 13 year old boys and girls have equally ambitious ideal aspirations, their realistic aspirations are separated by gender and that boys' tend to be slightly higher up the occupational scale.

**Figure 5.5 Gender and realistic aspiration by SOC**



A second dynamic of the aspirations across the three case studies was the higher degree of interest in 'idea' professional jobs in the London school. Forty two per cent suggested a professional or managerial occupation, with lawyer, doctor and accountant all featuring frequently. Forty seven per cent preferred an associate professional position, so altogether almost 90% aspired to a professional occupation of some kind. This is consistent with other studies of aspirations among Asian groups.

#### 5.4 Worrying about the future

Young people were asked whether they worried about getting a job when they were older. There were several questions related to this issue, and they brought up two important findings. First, it is worth noting that a significant majority of the young people (64%) agreed that they worried about getting a job. This flies in the face of conventional wisdom to some extent, as most people might not expect 12 and 13 year olds to be concerned about future employment, and also bearing in mind the interviews were carried out before the economic downturn.

The young people who expressed concern about getting a job were the same young people who also said that they often thought about what they wanted to do when they were older. The correlation between these two groups was significant ( $r=0.15$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). This suggests that anxiety about employment may translate into time spent considering options.

Perhaps more significantly, there was a small tendency for young people living in more deprived neighbourhoods to be more concerned about finding employment. When we mapped the responses to this question against the IMD there was a small correlation ( $r=-0.11$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

#### 5.5 Conclusions

The picture that emerges from this data is not a picture of low aspirations. The young people in this survey seem to take work and education seriously. They are concerned

about getting a job, and have well-defined aspirations. Rather than being a barrier, their current occupational aspirations are higher than the than the availability of those jobs in the UK labour market.. Since all three areas have occupational patterns considerably different from the desires of the young people, this raises the question of what influences their aspirations and the next section turns to that question.

## 6. Influences on aspirations

### 6.1 Introduction

In this section we discuss the key findings on the factors that influence the aspirations held by the young people interviewed. We will look at them in five sections: individual; parents and family background; leisure activities and the media; neighbourhood; and school. Before beginning this discussion it is important to point out that the influence of all of these factors has been remarkably consistent across all three cases and across pupils from all backgrounds. Currently in the data analysis there were no significant links between family background and young peoples' desired or expected occupations, educational aspirations or other influences. There is little evidence that class background, for example, affects the aspirations of 12 and 13 year olds.

### 6.2 Individual

When asked what appealed to them about their choices, the most popular response was that they enjoyed the activity, such as playing football, music or computers. An aspiring special effects manager in feature films said *'it's exciting and fun because you get to blow things up'*. An aspiring skiing instructor enjoyed skiing, and a skateboarder *'liked the tricks'*. An aspiring author *'really liked to read and wanted to write'*, and a fireman said *'saving people is exciting'*.

A second type of response involved an interest in caring for other people or animals. Someone wanted to work in a children's home because she felt *'sorry for the kids and wants to help them'*. Another aimed to help animals because *'you are making the world better and people happy'*. One wanted to be *'a plastic surgeon in order to make ugly people pretty and fat people slim'*, and another a teacher *'to help other people learn'*.

The third response involved direct material rewards, especially money and fame. One wanted to be *'a famous rock star - to have fans screaming my name and the power and rush of playing to thousands of people'*, and another to be *'in a band because it's cool and easy'*. An aspiring actor said you *'get paid lots of money and nice clothes'* and a chef said *'you get to be creative and you could be famous'*. People aiming to be footballers said *'it's cool and you get loads of money'*, and *'a lot of people watch you on TV'*. An aspiring TV presenter said you *'meet loads of people and are famous'*, and an aspiring bounty hunter said *'it's very cool and you get paid a lot'*.

These attractions were sometimes linked. An aspiring forensic detective said *'they're well paid so I could take care of my family'*, and a footballer said *'my mum's not got a*

*lot of money and I can help her out with the house and help out my favourite team too*'. An aspiring plumber liked *'fixing things, it's a good job with lots of money and driving about helping people'*.

Finally, while some young people mentioned the need to work hard in their answers, some of the jobs that were mentioned were attractive because they seemed like easy money. Being a *'business man, owning big shops'* was attractive because it meant *'a lot of money and not a stressful life'*; a would-be fiction writer considered *'in fact it is not very hard, you can make a lot of money'* and selling cars was a route to *'make a lot of money'* but *'not a very hard job'*.

In a few cases the idea seemed to go beyond these types of immediate appeal to be more carefully considered. Someone wanted to be a sports journalist because *'football is a passion and I'm good at English so it's a perfect job'*. However, only about 5% seemed to make a link to their own skills or abilities by suggesting they might be good at doing this job: *'My teacher tells me I'm good at IT'*. An aspiring accountant said *'I like maths and am quite good at it'*, and a potential singer/actress said *'I've been told I'm a good singer and my family call me a drama queen'*.

When asked what was required to get their ideal job, some responses were rather under-developed. One in four said they had to study a particular subject(s) at school. Another quarter went beyond this in indicating that they needed good grades or to develop a relevant skill. Nearly one in five (18%) said simply that they had to work hard or keep trying, and 13% said going to university. An aspiring paediatrician gave an unusually elaborate response: *'be good with kids, be smart, go to university, be compassionate and appreciate what you do'*.

The individual factors in occupational choices varied to a significant extent, but clustered around enjoyment, money and helping people or animals.

### **6.3 Parents and family background**

Across all case study areas there was no statistically significant relationship between the nature of pupil aspirations and the socio-economic status of their parents. Young people from poorer backgrounds or living in deprived areas were just as likely to want to be footballers, vets, teachers, doctors, or work in computing as those from middle-income households and areas.

Families, and particularly parents, were important to consider when looking at the aspirations of adolescents. Families tended to support the young people well, with approximately 72% of young people saying that they talked to their parents about what they wanted to do when they were older. Parents are extremely positive about their young people's aspirations, with two thirds saying that they thought their children's aspirations to be realistic.

Families were also a very important source of occupational ideas for young people. Many cited family members as giving them ideas for their preferred job; either there was someone in the family who already had that job (*'one of my granddads was a*

*doctor*; *'my cousin is a computer tech*'; *'some of my cousins are security guards*') or the idea for the job came from parents (*'mum wants me to be one*'; *'my dad's dream for this*'; *'my dad would like me to be a doctor and repay my parents...'*). The exact job they want is often influenced by members of their extended family, such as an aunt who is a lawyer or similar. One aspiring mechanic explained *'Dad drives lorries and my brother likes it too'*. An individual wanting to be a bricklayer commented that *'My dad does it; he's a plasterer and works for himself and other people'*. A hopeful architect had got the idea from their step-father and a pupil who wanted to be a beauty therapist explained that *'Sometimes I do my mum's hair.'*

Interviews with parents provided background demographic data, but also allowed their views on the young people's aspirations to be explored. Some caution is required, however, given that only 30% of parents agreed to be interviewed and the results should be seen as indicative rather than representative.

Responding parents were very interested in the future of their children, with 74% describing themselves as thinking a lot or somewhat about what they wanted their child to do when they left school. An even greater number of parents (84%) described themselves as having talked a lot or somewhat with their child about what they wanted to do when older.

One of the findings of this study is that there was a link between parents having clear ideas of what they wanted their children to do for an occupation and those families that lived in deprivation. Thirty nine per cent of parents had specific ideas about what they wanted their children to do when older as compared to 61% who didn't have a clear idea or wanted their child to do whatever made them happy. The correlation between those parents who had a clear idea and the IMD suggests that parents who lived in more deprived areas were more likely to have clear aspirations for their child ( $r=0.208$ ). The corollary is that parents who lived in less deprived areas were more likely to have a more relaxed attitude to their children's aspirations.

There was a clear preference (89%) by the parents for their children to find work in the Managerial, Professional, and Technical Professional Occupations (SOC-1 to 3). A much smaller number of parents gave the specific suggestion of working in the Trades or in Personal Service Occupations, although a larger number of parents agreed and strongly agreed that they would be happy (73%) with their child working a trade or doing an apprenticeship.

A large number of parents (67%) felt that their children's expectations were realistic, but that there was a high likelihood of their children changing their minds about what it was they wanted to do when they were older (55%). There was also a correlation between deprivation and whether parents thought their children would change their mind about what they wanted to do when older ( $r=0.168$ ). This indicates that parents who were living in more deprived areas tended to think that their children were more likely to change their mind about their ideal occupations.

Parents tended to worry about whether their children would be able to get jobs when they were older. Just over half (52%) of parents agreed or strongly agreed that they worried about their children being able to get jobs when older. A significant proportion

(20%) of these parents had experienced being out of work, not by choice, for more than a year in the last 10 years. There was a correlation between parents who worried about their child being able to get a job when they were older and the kinds of qualifications they thought their child would eventually get ( $r=-0.172$ ). This suggests that the parents who thought their children would get lower qualifications were also worried about them being able to get a job.

Parents had fairly high educational aspirations for their children, generally higher than their own education level. Over three quarters (77%) of parents expect their children to go to college or university, but only 30% of parents themselves have actually gone to college, university or had a professional qualification. Seventy eight per cent of parents agreed or strongly agreed that they thought it was important that their child got better qualifications than they had.

Parents appeared to be unhappy with the idea of their children entering the workforce at sixteen with 63% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that they would be happy if their child left school at sixteen in order to start work.

Overall, the relatively uniform picture is of parents who want their children to do well, and who support them as much as they can.

#### **6.4 Leisure activities and the media**

Hobbies and activities did play a role in how young peoples' aspirations were formed. The young people were asked about their personal hobbies and activities in and out of school, and both in-school and out-of-school personal activities were found to have some effect on vocational desires and expectations. Forty three per cent of young people felt that activities made a difference to what they wanted to do when older.

When asked how the idea for a job was formed one of the important influences young people cited was a current activity they enjoyed. Across all three case studies almost half of the young people indicated that they had been influenced in their choice of ideal future occupation by a leisure activity. Of that subsample, sport was the most frequently mentioned by far, although 18% specified arts and 11% mentioned computers. Answers were very varied, but many mentioned an activity that they felt they were good at and could be used in a job. For example, it was very common for students who aspired to work in IT to say that were good at computing.

Television and the internet both played roles in the formation of young peoples' aspirations. Around three quarters agreed that they had taken ideas from television in deciding what they wanted to do when older, and just over half mentioned the internet. The young people who often thought about what they wanted to do when they were older were often the young people who said that television ( $r= 0.21$ ) and the Internet ( $r= 0.13$ ) give them ideas about what they wanted to do when older.

This finding was also supported in the qualitative analysis as young people mentioned particular TV programmes and films as factors giving them the idea for the vocations that they desired to have. An open question about the source of their idea

yielded many responses suggesting television was influential. Several wanted to work with animals because *'I enjoy watching programmes on animals'* and *'I saw adverts on TV about donating money'*. An aspiring chef said *'I like watching cooking programmes'* and a potential army engineer said *'adverts on TV'*. Several aspiring doctors, forensic scientists, police detectives and paramedics mentioned programmes such as CSI and Scrubs. An aspiring fireman said *'when I was small watching a programme called Fireman Sam'* and a car designer got the idea *'from a TV documentary about car designing'*.

However, the influence of TV and the media was mainly considered negative by the school and community interviewees:

*'They see on TV the things they want to do. Footballers and actors, the Apprentice. (They believe) success is fame' (London learning support/ maths teacher, male).*

Others saw TV and video games and an interest in music stars as especially detrimental for boys:

*'TV- it sees life as cheap, Videogames, they're a big influence, they see it as acceptable behaviour, violence and aggression towards women. Rock stars- they idolise- how do we compete? They see it as a way to money, fast cars and women' (London support staff member, male).*

*'In videogames, songs and films casual violence and amorality is a given. It changes their preconceptions and backdrop' (Community representative, male)*

There is evidence that media have been influential, but overall immediate experience, including leisure activities, are far more likely to be mentioned as direct influences on the aspirational choices of young people.

## **6.5 Neighbourhood and place**

The large majority of young people thought that the neighbourhood they lived in was either good or very good (90%). Young people across all schools and cities held the same kinds of views on the best and worst parts of living in a particular area. The two factors young people mentioned most often as the best parts were:

1. Friends in the area
2. Local facilities for recreation – sports teams, football pitches, leisure centres, and youth clubs

The two factors young people mentioned most often as the worst parts were:

1. Violence, crime, gangs, fights, stabbings, murder, and generally 'bad people' hanging about.
2. Rubbish, litter and pollution.

Even though young people tended to like the area that they lived in almost three quarters (72%) of young people agreed or strongly agreed that they worried about getting mixed up with people who might get them into trouble. The majority of parents (76%) who were interviewed also tended to worry about their children getting mixed up with people that might get them into trouble. This suggests that even though there is little evidence that peer groups are having a strong influence on aspirations at this age, they may become more important with time. Already around 90% of young people spend time with friends two or three days per week, and about half agreed that their friends looked down on those who worked hard at school.

In London and Nottingham there were concerns that the areas could isolate young people. A consistent theme in the interviews in the school and the community was that these neighbourhoods were negative influences on aspirations, mainly because of their lack of diversity combined with inward looking behaviour:

*'A significant number of the school body live in a situation of isolation' (London community representative, male).*

*'They don't mix. They eat, breathe and live in this area. They mix in the area with people with similar characteristics (London support staff member, male)*

The balance of evidence appears to be that neighbourhood has not had a strong direct influence on the aspirations of these young people, other than by shaping the set of occupational choices they are familiar with. Yet the consistent pattern of young people's aspirations are higher than the neighbourhood norm, which suggests that this has not been completely limiting.

## **6.6 Schools**

When the young people were asked whether they felt that their teachers talked to them about what they wanted to do when they left school or about going to college or university 38% of young people agreed or strongly agreed., This group had a strong correlation ( $r= 0.24$ ) with the 83% of young people who agreed or strongly agreed that they wanted to go to university. While the majority of young people tended to like school and studying, the more deprived the neighbourhood that young people lived in the less they enjoyed studying ( $r= -0.179$ ).

Each of the schools provides several services which helped children steer their way through their studies, and Valley's support services were deemed "outstanding" by Ofsted. Despite this, teachers and other school staff did not feature highly in the young people's own identification of influences.

In none of the case study schools had the young people reached the age of exam subject selection and commitment to a particular vocational direction. It is likely that school staff will come to be seen as more influential at this point in the young people's educational careers.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

At this point, families emerge as the dominant influence on the aspirations of young people. It is interesting that they appear to make more difference than so many other aspects of the young people's background, and in many ways reassuring that their influence is so positive.

However, the foundations are already laid for other influences to come into play over the next few years. Young people are spending lots of time with their friends, who are far from universally supportive of studying. While school staff are not a common influence yet, young people are starting to listen to school staff talk about educational and vocational choices. Some young people are worried about the future, thinking about it a lot, and paying attention to media messages about what lies ahead. It is likely that the second stage of this research, which will revisit these young people after they have had to make educational decisions, will help to make the decision making process clearer and more real.

## **7. Reflections**

### **7.1 Is there a Poverty of Aspiration?**

The aim of this study is to better understand the relationship between children's aspirations in relation to education and employment, and the context in which they are formed. In particular, the study seeks to explore how parental circumstances and attitudes, the school as an institution, and the opportunity structures of the neighbourhood come together to shape aspirations among young people who live in deprived urban areas.

The study comes at a time when there is unprecedented interest in the policy community in the role of aspirations in shaping educational and occupational outcomes, and there are many initiatives and programmes within schools and communities which are designed to raise aspirations. The understanding underlying this is that aspirations at present are too low, particularly among children from disadvantaged backgrounds and disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and raising them is a key to high achievement in education and the labour market, and to upward social mobility.

This report examines the aspirations of 12 and 13 years olds in three secondary schools in broadly deprived areas in Britain and represents the first round of a longitudinal study. These young people have not long started their secondary education, nor yet made choices about their educational pathways through Standard Grades or GCSEs. We anticipate that their aspirations, expectations and target job outcomes will change in the future as curricular choices are narrowed down and the young people learn more about themselves, and about further and higher education and the labour market. This will be explored in the second round of the fieldwork in 2010.

For now, though, the view from policy makers about young people's aspirations and the assumptions that aspirations are depressed is not recognisable from our data. The aspirations of young people for their futures are almost universally ambitious; there is no 'poverty of aspirations' here. What is more the idea that there are systematic relationships between family backgrounds, , schools, neighbourhoods and cities and young people's aspirations is not demonstrated by the data to any important extent. , Young people in different cities, from deprived and non-deprived neighbourhoods (although there are many fewer from non-deprived places) and from different ethnic groups are more alike than unlike in what they wish for and what they expect of their futures.

### **7.2 Aspirations in Different Contexts**

This is not to say there are no differences at all. Young people from deprived areas were slightly less likely to say that enjoyed studying. There were also some differences between the case study locations; the young people in London stood out by aspiring more strongly to professional jobs, with a greater proportion also wanting to go to university. They were also less influenced in their ideal occupations by their leisure activities, perhaps because they participated in organised activities to much less extent than their peers in Glasgow and Nottingham. These factors may be attributable to the family backgrounds of the young people, many of whom had recently migrated to the UK.

The qualitative work with teachers and other adults who were in a position to observe the contexts in which aspiration were formed drew attention to some features which they believed would hold back young people from some disadvantaged backgrounds in achieving their goals; in Glasgow it was weak support for school work and in London and Nottingham it was the restricted worldviews that young people obtained from parents and from living in neighbourhoods which were relatively socially isolated neighbourhoods.

## **7.2 Reflections on Similarities**

So, considering what might account for the similarities rather than the differences, there are perhaps three factors to consider. The first is that the 12 and 13 years olds we spoke to in first round of the study are too young yet to show the differentiation in aspirations between social and economic groups that the literature led us to expect. The logic of the choice was to examine young people at a stage before they were subject to much in the way of formalised advice and guidance about careers and further and higher education, and before they had formulated any study specialisms. It would appear that aspirations in an unalloyed form look pretty similar across different groups of 12 and 13 year olds. Most are readily influenced by television and the internet and show little awareness of constraints that may be imposed.

Second, we may be seeing an influence on young people from the climate surrounding aspirations from the policy push to encourage them, allied with the desire of schools to see their exams performance increase, again with strong policy encouragement. Certainly there was a strong, if not a universal, sense among school staff interviewed that raising aspirations was unequivocally a good thing and this was strongly associated with future educational success. All three schools had a wide range of projects, procedures and services which were designed to support children to aspire as a route to achievement. Encouraging high aspirations was also central to some of the youth projects we contacted outwith schools; this is consistent with the (Westminster) government's current push to revitalise youth services in the pursuit of social inclusion.

Finally, like all work of this kind we need to consider if there were biases built into the research methods which have influenced the findings. Surveying students in schools (rather than, say in the street or in a youth club) has the potential drawback that their responses may be influenced by the institutional setting, and runs the risk that they

tell the researchers what they think they are supposed to say about their futures, rather than what they really think.

### **7.3 Conclusions and Future Work**

In wrapping up this report it is important to differentiate between the findings of this round of research and the potential approach to the second round. In terms of the current research, there seems little doubt that it has raised some profound questions about the operation of aspirations in children of this age. The picture we are left with is a group of almost 500 young people in three cities with strong aspirations and support available to them in achieving those aspirations. There is little evidence of a gradient of aspirations with a deficit at the lower end of the socio-economic scale,

Families come across in this study as generally supportive of their children's aspirations, and they function as a source of support for young people and a significant place from which children get ideas for what they want to do. Again, this does not appear to vary significantly by family background, and there is little evidence of any failure of parenting. However, there are indications of some mechanisms, such as more flexible expectations within families in less deprived areas, which may prove to be important.

The main question carried forward into the next round of the research is to what extent and how those aspirations and expectations get shaped to fit the constraints of the labour market. Could it be that young people from less deprived families maintain high aspirations while they are eroded among children living in poverty? Perhaps the extent to which aspirations remain vague hopes for the future or become carefully conceived goals based on an awareness of personal aptitudes and knowledge of career paths will vary systematically. Perhaps the peer group influences, still relatively limited among this age group, become stronger over the years ahead?

We also need to know whether indeed aspirations affect motivation and achievement. Finally, a greater understanding of how parents shape their children's attitudes and the relative influence of other key actors remains important.

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## **Appendix A: Data Collection**

Based on a literature review conducted for this study, the research set out to collect data on four groups of factors influencing aspirations: individual, family, school and place.

### **Individual**

The obvious starting point was whether students thought about what they wanted to do when they were older. This was accompanied by questions about values, such as whether studying for fun is more important than studying for a job, how important it is to get a job when you leave school, and whether job choices should be based on money or on happiness.

There were questions related to occupational aspirations including their ideal job, whether they saw this as realistic, and if not, what they saw as a realistic job for themselves. Interviewers asked young people what they liked about specific jobs, where they got the idea from, and whether they knew what it would take to get their chosen job. We also asked whether students worried about being able to get a job after school. Interviews also explored pupil's educational aspirations, asking about the qualifications they hoped for, when they would leave school, whether they wanted to work in a trade and whether they wanted to go to university. They were asked if they worried about leaving school with no qualifications.

Activities, both in and out of school, were covered. Interviews asked how much time young people spent with their friends, if they worried about getting mixed up with people who would get them into trouble, and how well they thought they were doing at school compared to their friends. The influence of TV and the internet on aspirations was also explored.

### **Family**

The team gathered demographic information on families, though this depended on whether parents responded and supplied this information. Categories of information gathered included Ethnicity and Religion (for those families where parents responded), Postcode (used to assign families to the Index of Multiple Deprivation) and number of adults and children in the household. If parents had moved to the UK from abroad interviewers asked about the year of parents' immigration to the UK. Questions also covered whether young people knew what parents hoped for them and what they think that might be.

Information was gathered on the parents' employment status, whether there was a computer in the home and the availability of private study space. Where parents responded interviewers also asked about family income and housing status.

Interviews included a number of questions about family involvement in education, such as who in the family helps most with school, and asked whether young people feel that family helps with homework, goes to parent meetings and are generally interested in school work. Questions also addressed the young people's perceptions

of parental qualifications (and gathered the data from responding parents). Interviews covered parents' educational experiences and what desires they had for themselves.

When parents responded they were asked about their perception of peer groups whether the child is doing well in comparison in Maths and English, as well as what qualifications parents think their children will get. Questions addressed parents' educational hopes for their children, their opinions on leaving school at 16, going to college or university, getting better qualifications than they have themselves and whether they worry about their children not getting qualifications.

Data was collected on the age at which responding parents hope students will know what they want to do, parents' views on their children's occupational aspirations and whether they think the choice is realistic, how they feel about it and what pathways their children as need to follow to get that occupation. Interviews asked if parents were talking and thinking about their children's aspirations, including their opinions on how important it is that their children think about their future, keep options open, and have more than one plan.

Parents' opinions on a range of issues were collected, including how important it is that their child gets a job immediately upon leaving school, whether they would be happy with their child working in a trade, working in a managerial or professional job, working in any job or if, finally, it is important that the pupil gets a job that makes their child happy or pays their child well. Parents were also asked whether they worry about their children not getting jobs.

### **Schools**

Schooling is an important locus for influences on aspirations, and most of the questions related to schools to some degree. There were also a number of areas that were purely school-related, such as participation in school activities, whether teachers talked to students about leaving school or about college or university and whether there was any particular teacher that talked to students about their future. Young people were asked if they liked school and enjoyed studying. Interviews looked at whether parents chose the school for their child and what they had to do to get them into that school.

### **Place**

The research team's interest in place is probably the least conventional aspect of this first round of the research. Young people were asked what they thought of the place they lived in, and what were the best and worst aspects. Questions looked at their participation in community activities, and their perception of whether it will be easy to get a job in the area that they live.

Responding parents were also asked why they moved to the neighbourhood and the importance of the schools in parents' neighbourhood choices. Interviews looked at whether parents worried about their children getting mixed up with bad people, and the activities that parents encourage their children to do.

Having data on this broad range of factors allows analysis of both the general degree of influence of the four aspects of aspirations and the specifics of influence within the aspirations.