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Shaped by Place? Young People's Aspirations in Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods

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Corresponding author:

Keith Kintrea

Urban Studies, School of Social and Political Sciences

University of Glasgow

Bute Gardens

GLASGOW, G12 8RS, UK

Keith.Kintrea@glasgow.ac.uk

0141 330 5875

Other Authors:

Ralf St Clair

Faculty of Education

University of Victoria

McLaurin Building

3800 Finnerty Road

Victoria, MB, V8P 5C2, Canada

educdean@uvic.ca

Muir Houston

School of Education

University of Glasgow

St Andrews Building

Eldon Street

GLASGOW, G3 6NH, UK

Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk

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Abstract

This paper aims to better understand the relationship between young people's aspirations towards education and jobs, and the context in which they are formed, especially to understand better the role of disadvantaged places in shaping young people's aspirations. Policy makers maintain that disadvantaged areas are associated with low aspirations and there is support for this position from academic work on neighbourhood effects and local labour markets, but evidence is slim. Using a two-stage survey of young people in disadvantaged settings in three British cities, the paper provides new data on the nature of young peoples' aspirations, how they change during the teenage years, and how they relate to the places where they are growing up. The findings are that aspirations are very high and, overall, they do not appear to be depressed in relation to the jobs available in the labour market either by the neighbourhood context or by young people's perceptions of local labour markets. However, there are significant differences between the pattern of aspirations and how they change over time in the three locations. The paper then challenges assumptions in policy and in the literature that disadvantaged places equal low aspirations and suggests that understanding how aspirations are formed requires needs a nuanced approach to the nexus of class, ethnicity, and institutional influences within local areas.

Key words

Young People. Aspirations. Education. Disadvantage. Neighbourhoods. Labour markets.

Introduction and Aims

This paper aims to better understand the relationship between young people's aspirations towards education and jobs, and the context in which they are formed, especially to understand better the role of disadvantaged places in shaping young people's aspirations. This is important for two reasons. First, there are strong assumptions in the UK policy literature that young people who live in disadvantaged areas have depressed aspirations which contribute to lower educational outcomes, but there is very little evidence.

Second, aspirations feature in the 'neighbourhood effects' literature as providing a key transmission mechanism between place-based disadvantage and socio-economic outcomes for adults but have rarely been examined by research.

'Aspirations' is used here to capture the hopes and ambitions held by young people. Aspirations are desires to achieve something in the future, with the implication that they will drive actions in the present (Quaglia and Cobb, 1996). They may centre on lifestyle or self-fulfillment, or on roles in the family or community, such as caring or leadership roles (Brown, 2011). But much of the literature and all of the policy interest is on education and jobs. While aspirations for education and for jobs are clearly separable, the predominant requirement for workers in more highly skilled (and better paid) jobs to have achieved more than basic education means that in practice they are often conjoined. There are many possible dimensions to educational and job aspirations, including the subject and level of qualifications, the status of preferred educational institution, and the type of job and the level of job. While these issues are prominent in some debates about social mobility, for example whether young working class people aiming for university apply to Oxbridge or a local institution (Reay et al, 2009), this paper takes a pragmatic approach. A desire to stay on at school and to attend (any) university, and to aim for a job which requires qualifications and skills is taken to be indicative of higher aspirations while leanings towards early school leaving and a lower skill job is taken as a sign of lower aspirations.

The study on which the paper draws developed a conceptual model of aspiration formation based on multiple influences with a recursive loop (reference removed until after peer review). The model assumes that young people's aspirations are shaped by a complex range of influences, including their own cognitions, family and peer influences, influences from the wider society and the media, as well as the place in which they live. The model also recognises that aspirations may change over time in the light of experience (e.g. Gottfredson, 1981). In considering aspirations among young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, the model suggests that aspirations may be 'levelled down' as a result of contextual influences, i.e. that a gap will open up between initial high 'Ideal aspirations' and later, lower 'Realistic

aspirations' (or 'Expectations', particularly as young people approach decisions about school qualifications, further or higher education, and employment.

Aspirations, Policy and Place

The idea that aspirations underpin attainment and are therefore relevant to education policy has been recently very influential in the UK¹. There are two underlying narratives. The first is that a workforce that is poorly educated is seen as a barrier to the UK's economic competitiveness. Recent policy has been directly informed by the UK's declining position in international league tables (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009; OECD, 2010). In this respect the UK government's interest in aspirations represents a reorientation towards education aimed at maintaining a knowledge-based competitive edge over emerging economies (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2011). The second narrative concerns social justice. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds generally have lower educational outcomes than their better off peers, and this reduces their life chances (e.g. Cassen and Kingdon 2007; Raffo et al 2007). This continues a familiar theme: if only the disadvantaged would raise their sights to professional jobs, they too could progress.

Aspirations was a key political idea of New Labour in government to 2010 (HM Treasury and Department of Children Schools and Families (DCSF), 2007; Cabinet Office, 2008; 2009, and see Raco, 2009). New Labour ran aspiration-raising programmes including *AimHigher* (a school-based programme focused on higher education) and *Aspiring Communities* (aimed at raising aspirations in disadvantaged areas) (see Riddell, 2010). Essentially the same thinking has been maintained by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition in government from 2010. Raising aspirations features in key policy documents (e.g. Cabinet Office, 2011; Department of Business Innovation and Skills, 2011; National Careers Council, 2013) whose contents are fully consistent with the continuing political theme of the entrepreneurial, self-motivated 'aspiration nation'.

¹ The devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have not emphasised aspirations as a policy object to the same extent as the UK government.

Policy papers consistently ascribe an instrumental role to disadvantaged neighbourhoods in shaping low aspirations in the absence of evidence (for example under New Labour, Cabinet Office, 2008; DCSF, 2009). Under the Coalition, the *Schools White Paper* (Department of Education, 2010) highlights differences in attainment between groups of young people and attributes them in key part to a lack of aspiration ‘*in far too many communities*’ (Cameron and Clegg, 2010, p.4).

Influences on Aspirations

Research certainly supports the idea that aspirations play a role in the reproduction of educational inequalities. Goodman and Gregg (2010) build a strong evidence base for the importance of aspirations as providing a link between disadvantage and educational attainment at key stages of children’s lives. It is also clear that aspirations are not evenly distributed across society. Class plays an important role in shaping the possession of the cultural capital -of which aspirations are a component- that helps middle class young people successfully navigate the education system (Archer et al, 2010). A number of studies have shown solid links between social class and young people’s aspirations (Andres et al, 1999; Schoon and Parsons, 2002; De Cevita et al, 2004).

There are also ethnic and gender dimensions to aspirations. Young people from ethnic minority backgrounds are sometimes positioned as having undeveloped aspirations, for example by the UK Prime Minister as part of a discussion about social mobility (Dominczac, 2013). However others suggest that low aspirations are in part a product of the low expectations held for them by others (e.g. Fine et al, 2004). But there is also evidence that some minority groups have notably high aspirations (Abrams, 2006; Bhatti, 1999; Butler and Hamnett, 2011; Francis and Archer, 2005; Modood, 2005). Indeed, Strand and Winston (2008) identify White working class young people as the group with the lowest aspirations. Strand (2007) also reports that the factor most associated with differences in attainment between ethnic groups is pupils’ (and parents’) aspirations because they provide some groups with enhanced resilience against poverty.

Gender is also important, with occupational aspirations especially shaped by traditional discourses about masculinity and femininity in relation to the skills and attributes associated with particular types of job (Archer et al, 2001; 2010). This has implications for adult earnings and other job quality factors.

There is an overall question, though, whether the aspirations of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are fundamentally low, or whether their expressions of aspiration are tempered by circumstances. Archer et al (2010) found high aspirations even among young people who were at risk of dropping out of school. Similarly, Sinclair et al (2010) concluded that teenagers from a deprived housing estate were engaged in their schools and community and were ambitious for their futures. But research also shows that young people's self-efficacy, self-esteem, confidence and motivation are affected by circumstances, leading to their expectations being reduced, or an unwillingness to express their 'real aspirations'.

Barriers to high aspirations among disadvantaged young people may be straightforwardly material, including the need for young people to leave school early and contribute to household expenses, or psycho-social, such as conflicted identity between the attractions of social mobility and working class loyalty (Reay, 2001). Calder and Cope (2005) found underlying aspirations among disadvantaged young people and a control group to be similar, but the disadvantaged group faced multiple barriers to reaching their aspirations and 'underachieved'. It is also well known that young working class people can have negative experiences of school (Horgan, 2007; Bowman et al, 2000, Reay, 2002), which deters them from wanting to take up opportunities for further and higher education. Altogether, as MacLeod (1995) concluded in his classic US study, levelled aspirations have important roots in the 'forbidding' class constraints on opportunity.

Aspirations and Place

A leading strand of urban studies research in recent years is the question of whether, and if so how, living in a particular place (as distinct from coming from a particular socio-economic, class or ethnic background) influences people's life chances (e.g. see Van Ham et al, 2011). This reflects the idea of place not only as a

physical setting and built environment but, more importantly, as the spatial representation of social and economic forces. In particular, disadvantaged neighbourhoods represent a coalescence of economic, social and housing system disadvantage (Sharkey, 2013). The key question is whether such neighbourhoods merely reflect poverty or if they also serve to maintain and extend it by embedding their residents in a context that activates further disadvantage.

A key theoretical dimension, derived significantly from Wilson (1987; 1996), concerns the role of collective socialisation in poor neighbourhoods in deindustrialised settings. A central element of 'neighbourhood effects' theory holds that the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of an individual are directly influenced by those of their neighbours and, in turn, they directly influence the individual's economic and social outcomes, for example their position in the labour market. There are myriad potential neighbourhood relationships through which these collective socialisation processes might operate (e.g. Andersson et al, 2007; Galster, 2007; 2012). The literature considers the power of social networks and information ('strong ties' and 'weak ties') (Granovetter, 1973) and variously attributes key roles to role models and peers. It also theorises about the intensity of neighbourhood poverty required to generate a neighborhood effect, including the possibility of 'epidemic' effects after a certain threshold of a critical subset of the population has been reached. But across all of these ideas, the local formation of subjective worldviews plays a central role. The presence of intense, place-based social relationships are said to shape individuals' social attitudes and aspirations and, in turn, those attitudes and aspirations are held to be instrumental in how individuals acquit themselves in the wider labour market and in society. In particular the theory suggests that residents in disadvantaged neighbourhoods will adopt fatalistic or negative attitudes to education and the labour market, because they have internalised low aspirations through immersion in neighbourhoods where most people are subject to social and economic exclusion (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2001; Stewart et al, 2007; Quane and Wilson, 2012). As Bourdieu similarly suggests:

'bringing together on a single site a population homogenous in its dispossession strengthens that dispossession; notably with respect to culture and cultural practices: the pressures exerted at the level of

class or school or in public life by the most disadvantaged ... pull everything down to a general levelling'. (1999, p.129).

Although neighbourhood effects theory was not developed specifically with young people in mind, it is particularly relevant for two reasons. First, especially in disadvantaged areas, young people tend to have stronger exposure than adults to local social worlds (e.g. Childress, 2004). Second, it is widely recognised that post-industrial contexts have seen a disappearance of traditional routes to work (Morris, 1995) and instead young people are engaged in a complex process of transition within which subjectivities have become much more important to adult outcomes (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Walther, 2006).

In the debate about aspirations place is also important in its locational sense. Any particular urban neighbourhood situates its residents within a wider geography of opportunity and provides differential access to the city's resources, including its jobs, tempered by mobility possibilities (Houston, 2005; Tate, 2008). Disadvantaged neighbourhoods are found in all UK cities, but are disproportionately clustered in former industrial cities and towns and in inner London (Wong et al, 2009). A key question is to what extent job aspirations are also stunted by these depressed labour market contexts.

In spite of the policy interest and the academic ideas that support the importance of place in shaping aspirations, research is surprisingly slim. Most research on neighbourhood effects has concentrated on seeking evidence of its impacts rather than its mechanisms, and work on aspirations is limited and indecisive (Gibbons, 2002; Lupton and Kintrea, 2011). Considering labour market influences, there is some research that indicates that young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods have restricted horizons. Green and White (2008) demonstrated young peoples' lack of knowledge of nearby job markets and suggested this limited their opportunities and Pickering et al (2012) showed that fierce place attachment led to tightly restricted everyday spatial behaviour, putting many opportunities beyond their imagining. Furlong and his colleagues (Furlong et al, 1996; Furlong and Biggart, 1999) considered if young people growing up amid weak post-industrial labour markets had depressed aspirations but concluded that the

labour market context had relatively little general impact. Rather it was more important how confident young people were in their own futures. However, working class boys (rather than girls) attending schools in areas with depressed labour markets did tend to have somewhat lower aspirations.

Altogether, then, the literature suggests that aspirations appear to have an impact on educational and labour market outcomes and to be shaped by people's self identities and cultural conditioning, including a strong class dimension. A dominant policy narrative is that disadvantaged places have a corrosive effect on aspirations, and there is general support for this from neighbourhood effects theory and also some rather limited evidence that aspirations may also be bounded by restricted or negative or perceptions of local labour markets. This paper then seeks answers to two main questions:

- Do young people who live in disadvantaged areas have low aspirations towards education and jobs?
- To what extent are young people's aspirations towards education and jobs depressed by place-related factors, specifically:
 - the social dynamics of their immediate neighbourhood?
 - young people's perceptions of the local market?

Methods and data

The approach was to identify a cohort of young people who could be interviewed on two occasions in order to provide quantitative and qualitative data about their changing aspirations between the ages of 13 and age 15 and about the influences that shaped their aspirations. A core distinction was adopted between 'Ideal' aspirations (what young people would do if there were no constraints) and 'Realistic' aspirations (what young people expect to do given their perceptions of individual constraints and the local social worlds they inhabit).

Three locations for the study were selected in order to explore labour market influences. Newham in East London was chosen as area with a high degree of worklessness and low skilled jobs in the immediate area but situated within reach of the strong London labour market that experienced very high rates of job and

productivity growth in the 2000s. Nottingham and Glasgow can both be characterised as large post-industrial cities in transformation to service-based economies. Nottingham was chosen as a city struggling to overcome the decline of its traditional industrial base. Its economy remained weak in the 2000s with notably low levels of job growth, including falling private sector employment, modest productivity per capita and only a slight shift towards key service sectors (Experian, 2011). Glasgow was selected as providing some contrast to Nottingham as a large post-industrial city moving more successfully to a service-based economy and showing signs of economic improvement in the 2000s, albeit with limited benefits to the poorest communities (Glasgow Economic Facts, 2010). After 2008, Glasgow began to lose jobs again so that its job numbers returned to mid-2000 levels and Nottingham continued to lose them, while London was more temporarily affected (Experian, 2011).

A local-authority maintained, non-selective secondary school was selected in each location as a means of accessing a suitable cohort of young people living mainly in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Schools were identified with the aid of the Index of Multiple Deprivation, knowledge of catchment geographies and with local consent. It was not possible to precisely log the home neighbourhoods of students ahead of the empirical work, but only to identify that each school drew significant proportions of its students from disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Young people were first interviewed in 2007 or 2008, aged 12 or 13. We refer in the results below to 'age 13'. A second round of interviews was conducted in 2010 when the young people were aged between 14 and 16, referred to as 'age 15'. The age range was selected to reflect the early stage of transition to adulthood when young people were starting to get career guidance and to consider what school subjects to take, therefore aspirations were also likely to be in flux. Interviews with young people lasted 30 minutes and were carried out by the authors and paid assistants. They took place within schools but away from school staff, with students released from class for interview. As far as possible interviewers established an informal approach so as to emphasise the distance of the research team from the school. Initially, all young people in a year group were invited for interview. Interviews were pursued until a target number

was reached or there were no more willing interviewees. At the second round as many as possible of the same group were re-interviewed. Overall, 490 young people were interviewed at the first stage and 288 at the second. participation was voluntary and we do not know precisely how representative the young people were but almost all eligible young people participated in the first round and the differences between the two rounds in terms of gender, ethnicity, and neighbourhood deprivation were minimal (see Table 1).

Table 1 here.

The vast majority of young people interviewed lived in the most deprived quintile of neighbourhoods referring to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation;² 96% in London, 75% in Nottingham, and 49% in Glasgow. The London school was located within a neighbourhood dominated by pre-1919 and interwar housing, with some council-built post-war housing. In Nottingham the school was located next to a large council built estate on the edge of the city. Both in London and Nottingham most of the young people lived in neighbourhoods close to the school and there was a strong sense of schools embedded in their neighbourhoods. The Glasgow school's catchment area included council-built estates including some of the poorest areas in Scotland as well as more affluent areas but it also drew students from a number of other neighbourhoods.

The core of the survey at both stages was designed to establish the young peoples' Ideal aspirations and their Realistic aspirations. The survey also sought information about neighbourhoods, leisure, attitudes to learning, and family backgrounds, including support for their aspirations and with their school work, in order to assess the relative importance of diverse influences on aspirations. Most of the questions were used to generate quantitative data and statistical relationships between variables were explored. A matched data set was constructed that allowed direct comparisons between the same individuals at age 13 and 15. While this reduced the sample size, it allowed change among a clearly identifiable group to be

² The IMDs for Scotland and England are calculated on a different basis and the Scottish IMD used here is more recent; so they are broadly comparable but not precisely so.

identified. All the relationships between variables reported below are statistically significant using a p value of 0.05 or better.

The Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) (Elias and Birch, 2010) was used to describe job aspirations. There are nine major job classes based on the kind of work performed and their skill content, shown in Figures 3-5. SOC does not represent earnings or social status directly and, as with many other quantified social phenomena, it is based on a strategy to reduce complexity to a manageable but still meaningful scale. There is a broad progression in terms of skill level from Elementary occupations (SOC 9) through to Managers and Senior Officials (SOC 1) and it is reasonable to suggest that an Associate Professional, Professional, and Managerial occupations represent higher aspirations.

The survey also included open questions generating qualitative data. At age 15, young people were asked their reasons for holding particular aspirations and expectations, and for changes in aspirations since age 13. At age 15 the survey was also supplemented by three focus groups in each school. Data from the open questions and the focus groups was transcribed and coded for analysis.

Low Aspirations?

Considering the basic question of whether young people want to go to university as an indicator of high aspirations, Table 2 shows the percentage ranges at age 15 from 90% in London to 66% in Nottingham. In Glasgow and Nottingham the percentage wanting to go to university dropped somewhat between 13 and 15 but not in London. However all these figures are very high compared to the national participation rate which ranged between 43 and 49% in England during the period of the surveys (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013).

Table 2 here.

It was also clear that young people were positively engaged with their own futures, which further disputes the frequent claims that disadvantaged area with high unemployment have a pervasive culture of worklessness (Macdonald et al, 2014). At 13 across all three locations the large majority (86%) had thought

about what they wanted to do when they were older. When asked about the importance of getting a job, 98% agreed or strongly agreed, and 87% agreed or strongly agreed that they often thought about what they would do when they left school.

Young people were asked about what they would like to do if they could have any job (their Ideal aspiration) and about the job they expected to get (their Realistic aspiration). Almost all (96% at age 13) could identify an Ideal job, significantly skewed towards jobs requiring more skill and education. Figures 1 and 2 compare job aspirations at 13 and 15 to the occupational structure of Great Britain using the SOC. Young people's aspirations are far higher compared to the jobs existing in the labour market. Considering changes at age 15, Ideal aspirations are still strongly concentrated towards more highly skilled positions. 36% cited a higher Ideal job than at 13. Another 31% demonstrated no change in Ideal job status; however 33% cited a lower Ideal job at 15 than 13, so overall the effect was broadly neutral.

Figure 1 and 2 here.

Considering detailed changes in job aspirations between 13 and 15, altogether, 75% indicated a change in the precise job. For a number of those who, at 13, had cited aspirations for glamorous occupations such as professional sports players and actors there often was a recognition in the open responses that it was unlikely they would achieve them, using phrases such as *'too difficult'*, *'very competitive'*, *'more realistic'*; *'realised it was not going to lead to a job - but still enjoy it- chance of success...not good'*. In addition, there were others who had refined their ideas. For example an aspiring lawyer in London explained she had been influenced by films and family contacts: *'Legally Blonde - dad's friend has his own wee practice and watching law programmes'*, while for a would-be social worker in Glasgow a period of work experience was important: *'it's just more fun, during the work experience I found it became more interesting; learnt more about it and spoke to a real social worker'*. For others it was a process of maturity, gathering greater knowledge and understanding of the job market and how to go about achieving their goals. Explaining his changed ideas a Nottingham male offered: *'as I got older, got advice from teacher; got ideas for realistic*

job; I matured and ideas have moved on, because I think I've got more chance of getting an apprenticeship...'

This evidence suggests that both educational and occupational aspirations are not low although we do not have comparative data with other schools or areas. The proportion aspiring to more highly skilled jobs is much greater than the number of such jobs in the labour market, and the numbers who want to go to university by far exceed the general participation rate. While there are many detailed changes between 13 and 15 in the jobs young people aspire to, the changes seem to be more a result of gaining more refined and mature perspectives on the labour market, rather than the circumscription of ambition. The aspirations of the young people as a whole held up strongly during the two years between 13 and 15, when the literature suggested they would fade.

Neighbourhoods and Aspirations

The propensity for young people's level of aspiration to be influenced by their neighbourhood was pursued first by exploring the intensity of young people's exposure to local contexts as a prerequisite for neighbourhood-based socialisation. Young people were asked where they had spent leisure time with their friends in the week prior to the survey. At 15, only 3% of the whole sample said that they had spent none of their time with friends and all but 9% had met with their friends on at least two days, with almost a quarter meeting every day. Overall, given the possibility to identify more than one location, the most frequent response (75%) was that time was spent with friends outdoors in 'the local area'. Further, 60% said they spent time at the local houses of friends and about 15% mentioned neighbourhood venues such as clubs or sports centres. From this it can be seen that most young people had a high degree of exposure both to other young people in their neighbourhoods and to neighbourhood environments. Most of them often spent time hanging out with friends in the local area, often outdoors.

However, there was little sense of young people only looking inwards to their own neighbourhoods. At 15, only 3% had not left their neighbourhood in the last two weeks and 65% of males and 78% of females said

they had travelled out of their area four times or more. Ninety five per cent of the Glasgow group had travelled out of their own area twice or more in the fortnight before the interview, and 83% in Nottingham and 75% in London. So while young people had a high degree of exposure to their own neighbourhoods, they were also regularly exposed to other contexts.

The idea that young people in deprived neighbourhoods internalise negative and fatalistic world views about their life chances was also not supported by the research. The research showed that young people's own perceptions of their neighbourhoods as a jumping-off point for aspirations were mainly positive. Overall, more than 85% in each area thought that their home area was 'good' or very good' as a place to live. And in spite of the official disadvantaged status of most of the areas the young people lived in, more than 70% in each area gave a positive response to the proposition that 'adults in my area are doing well in life'. An even higher percentage in London and Nottingham also agreed that 'young people in my area expect to do well in life'.

Nor was there general evidence of a relationship between area disadvantage (using the IMD)³ and low job aspirations. At 13 there were no significant correlations and at 15, considering each city individually, and also analysing by gender, low aspirations were positively associated with living in a disadvantaged area only for boys in Glasgow. At age 15, job aspirations were analysed a for the whole sample, for each city and by gender alongside a range of socio-economic variables indicative of social position including housing tenure, overcrowding, car ownership and the number of jobs held in the household, as well as a composite disadvantage variable. However, there were no statistically significant relationships with job aspirations.

So young people certainly have very high exposure to their neighbourhoods, especially in London and Nottingham, which suggest there is a strong possibility of neighbourhood influences, but they also experience other contexts. Although the exercise is limited by the choice of areas, it is hard to find support

³ Although at least half of respondents in each area came from addresses in the most disadvantaged 20% of areas.

for the contention expressed in the literature that disadvantaged neighbourhoods create a pervasive, inward-looking, limiting perspective that 'levels down' aspirations.

City Contexts and Aspirations

The second place-related question is the influence of the local labour market context in shaping young people's aspirations. An analysis was conducted to examine change over time in Realistic aspirations and to relate them to the structure of the local labour market in each area, using official data (Nomis, 2011). Clear differences emerged between the locations.

In Nottingham (Figure 3) at age 13 aspirations towards associate professional and technical occupations were dominant. This includes both a range of common jobs as well as glamorous occupations such as singer, actor and footballer. Over a fifth of respondents expected to attain skilled trade occupations, another fifth professional occupations, and around one in seven personal service occupations. At 15 the situation was very similar. The proportion interested in associate professional jobs had dropped very slightly, as had professional occupations and skilled trades. Personal services had increased by 4.1%, the biggest single change. A quarter of girls and more than two thirds of boys expected to get associate professional jobs, which represent only 10% of local jobs, and just 3% of girls (and no boys) to get managerial jobs, which are 12% of the market. However it is the tendency to adopt traditional, gendered aspirations towards skilled trades (11% of the market but an expectation of 35% of boys and of no girls) and personal services (10% of the local market but an expectation of 35% of girls' and 9% of boys) that sets Nottingham apart.

Figure 3 here.

In Glasgow (Figure 4) at 13 more than a quarter of young people identified aspirations for a professional job, and another equally large proportion named associate professional and technical occupations. Trades were named by another quarter of young people. The three right hand categories, the lowest skill jobs, which were named by some in Nottingham, were mentioned by no-one in Glasgow. In Glasgow 7% aspired

to be managers and senior officials, mentioned by no-one in Nottingham. At age 15 the most striking change in Glasgow is the increase in the proportion of young people aspiring to professional jobs, now up to 40%. Three times as many girls and twice as many boys expect to get professional jobs than their supply in the Glasgow labour market. The proportion aspiring to personal services was largely stable, but the number wanting skilled trades dropped from 24% to 19%. At 15 a handful each of boys and girls expected to get elementary jobs, but none to get machinery operative jobs, when together these represent 18% of the available jobs. So the Glasgow narrative was one of the increasing professionalisation of aspirations, largely at the cost of interest in skilled trades, but also some spreading out across a range which included a few of the most routine jobs.

Figure 4 here.

In London (Figure 5) at 13 the emphasis was firmly on professional occupations and associate professional and technical occupations. Whereas in Nottingham and Glasgow categories professional and associated professional jobs were named by around 55% of young people, in London the proportion was a third higher at 73%. Moreover, between 13 and 15 their aspirations moved upwards. The overall proportion aspiring to associate professional, professional and managerial jobs increased only slightly (to 76%) but there was a substantial shift upwards from the associate professional category. The overall picture in London was of a highly aspirational group of young people at 13 who became even more aspirational. The London distribution at 15 is well out of line with the labour market in the immediate area in East London. There were no young people aspiring to elementary and plant and machinery jobs even though they make up 25% of the jobs there. There were no girls aspiring to work in sales or skilled trades (20% of the market) and no boys wanting to work in personal services (9%). On the other hand, the proportion who wanted professional jobs exceeds the supply of such jobs in East London by 460%, with almost twice as many girls as boys in this group.

Figure 5 here.

These patterns of adjustment are distinctive between the three contexts and require further comment however they do not suggest that aspirations are being negatively influenced by weak local labour markets. Although aspirations are lower in Glasgow and Nottingham than London, there is little sense that the patterns have been influenced by the availability of jobs in the labour market.

The survey also asked young people about their moving intentions. Only in London was there a majority of young people who wanted to 'stay around here when I'm older'. Across the three locations a desire to leave was correlated with slightly higher job aspirations and with intention to take a higher number of school qualifications. Asked to elaborate why they wanted to leave, young people expressed a general desire to get on, or to follow careers not available locally, or sometimes a desire to live in a better place:

'I just want to see how living in another area would be like -get a better education, go to university.'
(Individual interview London)

'I want to see other places and see if there is anything better.' (Individual interview, Glasgow)

In the focus groups a consistent theme was the lack of available local jobs. A young woman explained:

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

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

'Yeah... because I'm thinking of doing like a degree in engineering ... I don't think like organisations or that are in Glasgow, so you need to move abroad somewhere' (Glasgow focus group)

There was similar story in Nottingham, such as in this conversation:

'... there's nothing. Like if you work in a shop like Greggs⁴...that's all there is. Or work in a pub'

⁴ Greggs is UK chain of bakers, specialising in savoury products such as pies, sausage rolls and sandwiches.

'And when you want to do something good with your life, then you have to travel... .' (Nottingham focus group).

These comments altogether suggest that young people were closely attuned to the limitations of local jobs but, rather than depressing their aspirations, conditions in the local labour market created a desire to relocate in order to achieve their aspirations. Young people considered local jobs to be scarce and unappealing but this did not appear to suggest that it was not worth aspiring to get a good job. In fact many were encouraged to aspire to higher education as a defence against the local labour market, and as a ticket out to somewhere with better opportunities.

Conclusions

This paper set out to better understand young people's aspirations in disadvantaged contexts. In particular it considered whether they have low aspirations and if there is evidence that aspirations are levelled down by place-related factors. However, there are certainly caveats surrounding the relatively small scale of the survey and its focus on three particular areas, and the study has necessarily simplified the multi-layered and often emotional nature of aspirations (Archer et al, 2010; Brown, 2011). Given additional resources it would also have been useful to compare these broadly disadvantaged areas with a wider range of other neighbourhoods, and to have extended the research to other kinds of labour market contexts, which would almost certainly reveal a wider range of aspiration profiles. Another enhancement would have been to link young people's aspirations at an individual level with their educational achievements, which would have provided a sharper perspective on the 'realism' of aspirations.

Accepting these caveats, the findings are not consistent with the claim that poor places equal low aspirations. The aspirations that most young people have for education are generally to stay on in school and go to university, in far higher proportions than the numbers who actually attend from all social backgrounds. The aspirations they have for jobs is generally to get professional and managerial jobs, again in proportions far greater than actually exist in the labour market, and especially in their immediate local

areas. What is more, young people's job aspirations do not fade over time: they are high at age 13 and they remain high at age 15. Individual's precise job aspirations often shift but the overall picture at age 15 is much the same as at 13. And there is a clear tendency for aspirations towards sport and celebrity roles to mature in favour of more common and less glamorous occupations.

Although extensive local socialising by young people suggests that their aspirations have strong potential to be shaped by neighbourhood context, the neighbourhood does not appear to exert a negative influence. Young people considered they lived in good neighbourhoods and saw them as places from where they could do well, even if many of them anticipated moving away. This does not readily support the fundamental idea within the neighbourhood effects literature that socialisation processes within disadvantaged neighbourhoods encourage worldviews that are inward-looking, negative and fatalistic.

The differences between the patterns of aspirational adjustment in the three cities raise a number of important questions, however. They do suggest that aspirations may be influenced by place but not in the ways that the literature anticipated. In London, the research was conducted amid a dynamic community dominated by South Asian groups, with high levels of recent migration. The highest aspirations were found there, and they rose further between 13 and 15. This is consistent with other East London studies (e.g. Butler and Hamnett, 2011; Dench et al, 2006) that revealed high aspirations among ethnic groups who are simultaneously disadvantaged and upwardly mobile. In Nottingham, a predominately White working class community within a city whose economy was struggling with the transition to post-industrialism offered a chance to consider whether young people still grew up in the 2000s 'learning to labour' in working class jobs (Willis, 1977). Here the aspirations of young people were lower than the other cities both at 13 and 15 and large numbers were interested in traditionally gendered occupations. But, on average, aspirations did not diminish between 13 and 15. But there does appear to be a shadow of Fordism in the way that young people anticipate their adult lives, long after economic restructuring has occurred. In Glasgow, young people lived in some of the poorest parts of Scotland as well as in some better off areas. Aspirations were

formed in a more mixed milieu than the other case studies, with some tendency to transition towards a common level, albeit one which was slightly lower at 15 than at 13.

The research sites are quite different in their social make up and in the resources on which young people can draw upon in imagining and shaping their lives. Place, then, is important but place represents a particular nexus of class, ethnicity, history and institutions that is set alongside lived experiences in education and the labour market. Neighbourhood is not just a postcode and an IMD ranking. So understanding aspirations needs a nuanced and place sensitive approach. These findings align with those of Strand (2007) who identified broad differences in aspirations by type of area with and ethnographies of aspirations such as Bright (2011) who calls for locally situated understandings of aspiration and social mobility.

The findings are also significant because they challenge the claims of policy statements concerning disadvantaged neighbourhoods' corrosive effect on aspirations as a source of low achievement. Many young people in this study appear to have developed strong 'aspirational identities' (Riddell, 2010). In other words they position themselves- and have been positioned by others- as upwardly mobile from their socio-economic or class position. Perhaps that represents success, at least on their own terms, for aspirations-raising programmes, which are situated within a wider social policy reform that seeks to responsabilise individuals (e.g. Cowan and Marsh, 2004). But the sure knowledge from data about young peoples' educational destinations and the supply of jobs is that very many will not be able to attain the education and careers to which they aspire. This leads to the question whether 'excessive' aspirations may be ultimately damaging to outcomes for some young people, which has been exercised in recent but unresolved debates in the USA (e.g. Baird et al, 2008; Domina et al, 2011; Rosenbaum, 2011). The recognition that high aspirations are themselves not enough to ensure success also shifts the research focus to better understanding the value of guidance on the routes to particular educational and employment destinations, and on employer engagement strategies (e.g. Le Gallais and Hatcher, 2014).

In conclusion, it is not wrong to think about low aspirations in addressing educational underachievement. In a precarious labour market, when routes into work mediated by family tradition and dominant local employers are obsolete, subjective orientations are critical to the possibility of individual success, and it is clear that the strength of aspirations varies widely between places. But it is also necessary to recognise that aspirations transfer to outcomes mainly through the mobilisation of economic, social and cultural resources (Devine, 2004). Calling for young people to 'aim higher' in itself is not likely to be enough to overcome disadvantage and to help to fuel the motor of the knowledge economy. Future

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