

Today's children decide their school and career path early

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Children as young as 12 have a strong sense of their personal futures and can reflect thoughtfully on what life might hold for them, according to new research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and led by Professor Paul Croll of Reading University and Professor Gaynor Attwood of the University of the West of England.

'What is very striking,' says Professor Croll, 'is that for this generation there is absolutely no gender stereotyping in hopes for the future. Furthermore, what [children](#) say at the age of 11 about school participation after the age of 16 is highly predictive of their actual behaviour.'

The research concludes that to increase participation in schooling post-16, schools need to focus on giving advice and information to children as soon as they enter secondary education. Greater attention also needs to be paid to [social relationships](#), in order to make school a more enjoyable experience for some children. But the study acknowledges that schools face a difficult balance between encouraging high expectations and providing realistic opportunities and goals.

[Girls](#) are as likely as boys to see themselves as supporting families and boys are as likely as girls to see marriage and children as a significant part of their lives. However, by far the most important, for both boys and girls, is getting a good job. School is seen as instrumental in achieving this.

'A major background of the research is concern for relatively low levels of participation in education post-16,' says Professor Croll, 'as well as the under-representation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds at university.'

However, the study found no support for the view that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have attitudes to education or value systems that are incompatible with those of school. Indeed, virtually all children think school is important.

Furthermore, although intentions for post-16 participation are lower than might be hoped, only a small proportion of the children said that they definitely would not go to university. This suggests that the possibility of higher education is becoming a norm for this generation of young people.

The study found that a significant number of children were confused about the educational routes available to them and did not understand the link between specific educational and employment opportunities. For example some planned to go to university but also said they intended to leave school at 16.

More significantly, the children in the study were occupationally ambitious with 70 percent choosing professional and managerial occupations. Children whose own parents were in such occupations were more likely to be ambitious but two-thirds of children whose parents were in manual occupations wanted professional and managerial jobs for themselves.

'Many more children wanted these kinds of jobs regardless if these [jobs](#) will be available in the future,' says Professor Croll, 'and the question arises of not just who wants them but also who will get them.'

Professors Croll and Attwood have fed their findings into the Government initiative on raising the participation age (RPA) and have briefed MPs on their work.

The study, which is designed to advance our understanding of how young children see the educational and occupational possibilities available to them and how they begin to make choices, shows that [boys](#) and girls from all backgrounds see education as important for the future.

The ESRC will return to this issue of young people's aspirations as apart of the longitudinal study, Understanding Society. For the first time thousands of young people will be surveyed about their attitudes offering a new insight into this group.

Source: Economic & Social Research Council ([news](#) : [web](#))

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