

'Poverty of aspiration' largely a myth

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Most poor children in England do not suffer from a 'poverty of aspiration' which limits their ambitions, according to research at King's College London, which analysed the views of thousands of young people.

Instead, youngsters from all social backgrounds generally harbour high hopes for their futures, with differences in their ability to realise those goals mainly a product of the greater resources better-off families can call on to help their children succeed.

The findings, presented today at the [British Educational Research Association's \(BERA\) annual conference](#), form part of the [ASPIRES project](#) led by Louise Archer, Professor of Sociology of Education at King's.

The research challenges a political orthodoxy which says that education

policy should focus on raising [young people's aspirations](#) in themselves as a central goal. Instead, because aspirations are evidently higher than is commonly acknowledged, policy-makers should pay more attention to giving young people practical support to help them achieve their aims, including better school careers advice.

The problem of 'low aspirations', particularly among working class families, has been a recurring theme of education policy, with the coalition's schools white paper of 2010 stating that 'In far too many communities, there is a deeply embedded culture of low aspiration that is strongly tied to long-term unemployment'.

The ASPIRES research team at King's conducted a survey of more than 9,000 pupils across England aged 10-11 and a follow-up questionnaire with over 5,500 of the same year group when they were aged 12-13.

They found that most children, across all [social groups](#), aspired to professional, managerial and technical careers, with very few aspiring to skilled manual or, especially, unskilled manual, occupations.

There was little evidence of a 'poverty of aspiration', with young people from all social class backgrounds expressing broadly comparable aspirations, concluded the research, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

When asked about their parents' aspirations, 77 per cent of those surveyed said their parents wanted them to make a lot of money; 98 per cent said their parents wanted them to get a good job; and 95 per cent said it was important to their parents that their child did well at school; with 72 per cent expecting their child to go to university, a figure which is higher than university participation rates for pupils in England, currently standing at 52 per cent.

There were, however, differences in these rates, with 91 per cent of children from families classed as having very high levels of 'cultural capital' – parents with university degrees, many books in the home and who regularly visit museums – saying they were expected to go to university compared to 47 per cent among those with very low cultural capital.

Similarly, among those with high cultural capital, 45 per cent aspired to be a doctor compared to 22 per cent among those with very low cultural capital, while 23 per cent of the former wanted to be a scientist against only nine per cent of the latter.

Professor Archer's research also featured interviews with 92 children and 76 parents, which provided more detail on how family connections and approaches to helping children realise their goals might help some more than others.

Working class pupils were much less likely than those with parents with professional jobs to cite a family member's career as an inspiration. In addition, as children grew older, middle-class families tended to 'hot-house' their children towards success, while also often being able to draw on work contacts, while working-class parents generally favoured a more 'hands-off', less active, approach, satisfied that their child should pursue any career that made them happy.

Schools are often felt to have the potential to try to mitigate some of the advantages that middle class children hold over their working class peers in terms of support for realising ambition, including by providing good careers advice.

However, the King's study found that only four of 85 pupils mentioned school careers advice as having shaped their aspirations.

Professor Archer concluded: 'There needs to be a re-think of current education policy, which focuses heavily on raising young people's aspirations. Our findings indicate that 'poverty of aspiration' is largely a myth. Future [education policy](#) should focus on levelling the playing field, providing greater support to disadvantaged young people and supporting their aspirations.

'As well as bolstering the provision of career advice in schools, consideration should be given to providing the service to pupils at a younger age, as career advice tends to focus on pupils aged 14 and upwards.'

Provided by King's College London

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