

New study challenges myth that low-income parents and children suffer from a 'poverty of aspiration'

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Credit: University of Stirling

Children from low-income families risk being failed by schools – because of the belief their parents lack ambition for them, a University of Stirling academic has claimed.

Aspirations are widely used in education and policy circles as levers for closing the attainment gap between [children](#) and [young people](#) of high and low socioeconomic backgrounds.

However, Dr Morag Treanor, senior lecturer in Sociology, challenged the so-called 'poverty of [aspiration](#)' myth, claiming it transferred responsibility for aspirations and achievement from governments and schools, to [parents](#) and children.

In a study, Can we put the 'poverty of aspiration' myth to bed now?, she analysed 3,500 responses from the Growing up in Scotland longitudinal study, which is tracking the lives of thousands of children and their families from birth through to the teenage years and beyond.

She found that all parents want the best for their children but lower-income parents are less likely to know what is possible or how to achieve it. They are also less likely to know how to support their children's education.

She called on policy-makers to promote policies which open up knowledge of the whole range of opportunities available to parents and children in poverty, including routes into higher education.

"Each of us is a creation of our past and present [experiences](#) as well as our acquired skills, knowledge and education," she said. "Those of us with no experience of sailing in the Mediterranean do not aspire to yacht ownership on the Côte d'Azur.

"That does not make us deficient in aspiration; rather, we aspire to what we have experience of, what we know we can influence, and what we believe we can achieve.

"While the poverty of aspiration myth is allowed to perpetuate and even gain in momentum, it will continue to distract from the ways in which children living in poverty are failed by the [education](#) system."

The study analysed parents' responses to questions on the aspirations

they hold for their children.

It found significant difference in the types of aspirations parents hold for their children, according to their experience of poverty.

Those with an experience of living in any type of poverty were 1.6 times more likely to want their children to start a training course or undertake an apprenticeship and they were half as likely as parents with no experience of poverty to want their children to stay on at school beyond the age of 16.

Dr Treanor argued that while parents' aspirations can differ according to their experience of poverty, they are still 'high' aspirations, and are based on parents' own knowledge, understanding and experience.

The study also looked at parents' confidence in their ability to influence their children's schooling.

For every type of poverty, parents are between 1.4 and 1.8 times less likely to believe that they can positively influence their child's achievement at school, compared to parents with no experience of [poverty](#).

Dr Treanor said this corresponded to existing research which shows while poorer parents have aspirations for their children, they are less confident in their ability to assist them.

More information: Can we put the poverty of aspirations myth to bed now? dspace.stir.ac.uk/handle/1893/26654

Provided by University of Stirling

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