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Abstract

Educational and occupational aspirations have become an important reference point in policy debates about educational inequality. Low aspirations are presented as a major barrier to closing educational attainment gaps and increasing levels of social mobility. Our paper contributes to this on-going debate by presenting data on the educational aspirations of students from the Effective Provision of Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education Project in England. We analyse factors that help predict students holding high aspirations. Our findings reveal generally high aspirations across all students but also differences by income group and other background factors. We evaluate the significance of these findings for the existing literature and public policy discussions about the importance of raising educational aspirations. In particular, we question the way in which low aspirations are framed by policy-makers as a major problem in debates around educational inequality.

Introduction

In the U.K., inequality of educational outcomes is an enduring feature of the social landscape. Research consistently demonstrates that social class and socioeconomic status (SES) are strongly associated with levels of educational attainment which in turn influences adult social status (Blanden et al. 2011, Ermisch et al. 2012). Such patterns have formed the backdrop of policy debates about the need to raise the educational outcomes of disadvantaged groups, increase social mobility and close educational attainment gaps.

An increasingly prominent feature of these debates, particularly in England, is the idea that aspirations are important for explaining differences in educational outcomes (Cabinet Office 2008, 2009, 2011, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2009, 2010a, 2010b). Despite the recognition of certain structural barriers to educational achievement, such as family poverty or school quality, low aspirations are regularly invoked to explain why patterns of educational inequality are so entrenched and policy interventions are not more effective. 'Poverty of aspirations', it is claimed, reinforce inequality because parents fail to emphasise the value of education, and children from disadvantaged and working class backgrounds do not make 'ambitious' choices regarding university or aim to go into high status occupations. For example, the 2010 White Paper *'The Importance of Teaching'* states that, 'In far too many communities there is a deeply embedded culture of low aspiration that is strongly tied to long-term unemployment' (Department of Education 2010b:4). The concern here is that such claims lean towards a 'culture of poverty' explanation of educational inequality that adopts a 'deficit view' of young people and their aspiration (St Clair and Benjamin 2011, St. Clair et al. 2013, Reay 2012).

This paper complements and extends existing research by analysing the aspirations of students in the longitudinal Effective Provision of Pre-School, Primary, and Secondary Education Project in England (hereafter the EPPSE Project). There are two parts to our analysis. The first simply presents descriptive findings on students' educational aspirations. Given the range of claims made about how aspirations vary by social background, providing an empirical grounding against which these claims can be judged is important. The second part investigates a range of factors that predict students' holding high aspirations to obtain a university degree. Contrary to claims often made in public policy debates, our results show that the vast majority of students hold high aspirations for pursuing further academic qualifications, including those from highly disadvantaged backgrounds. In addition though, we also find that socioeconomic and other background factors are predictive

of students holding high aspirations at the age of 14, even when attainment is taken into account. In the conclusion, we question the grounds for treating ‘poverty of aspirations’ as a social problem that should be tackled through interventions designed to raise them.

Research and policy context

Social scientists have a long-standing interest in the role that orientations to the future, such as aspirations and expectations, play in the educational attainment process (Haller et al. 1974, Haller and Portes 1973, Morgan 2005). They have investigated the plausible idea that educational aspirations significantly shape our thinking about how to act now and in the future, influence behaviours relevant to achieving educational success, and therefore play an important role in determining educational outcomes. Quantitative research drawing on longitudinal data suggests that career aspirations are related to adult social status and do play a role in predicting children’s educational attainment (Schoon and Polek 2011, Goodman and Gregg 2010). Differences in educational aspirations have also been observed between income and ethnic groups and appear to have a role in mediating decisions to pursue educational qualifications (Butler and Hamnett 2011, Croll 2009, Francis and Archer 2005, Gutman and Akerman 2008, Kao and Tienda 1998, Strand and Winston 2008, Vaisey 2010).

However, given the complexity of how aspirations are likely to shape various dimensions of behaviour it is still far from settled precisely how much they matter for educational outcomes and what the ‘social mechanisms’ are that shape them (Hedstrom and Bearman 2011). A particular concern raised by Gorard et al. is the challenge in establishing the causal ordering between aspirations and educational outcomes. ‘Aspirations can be both a predictor of educational achievement and an outcome of it’ (Gorard et al, 2012: 41). They also suggest that there is little

evidence to support the claim that interventions designed to raise aspirations are efficacious. Nevertheless, we have good reason to think that aspirations may play at least some role in the educational attainment process.

Within the research literature and public policy documents there are a variety of theories that attempt to explain how students' aspirations, and other orientations to the future, are related to social structure. The most significant claim made about aspirations, given its prominence in public policy debates and documents, is that low aspirations play an important role in sustaining poverty and creating educational attainment gaps. For example, in the 2011 Social Mobility Strategy it was claimed that there was a need to '...tackle the poverty of aspiration that holds back too many young people from underrepresented backgrounds' (Cabinet Office 2011: 56). The problem, such statements allege, is not one solely or even largely of systematic inequality or injustice, but the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of disadvantaged groups who end up colluding in their own downfall. In the prominent Fair Access to the Professions Final Report it is claimed that, 'Ultimately, it is the aspirations people have to better themselves that drives social progress' (Cabinet Office 2009: 6). The assumed solution is to raise aspirations because this will improve educational attainment amongst the disadvantaged and will lead students' to make more ambitious educational and occupational choices

Conversely, some research in cultural sociology has rejected the importance of aspirations as an explanatory variable, thus posing a challenge to the status attainment tradition which places strong explanatory weight on aspirations (Morgan 2005). For instance, Swidler argues that 'the very poor share the values and aspirations of the middle class', observing that, 'In repeated surveys, lower class youth say that they value college...' (Swidler 1986: 275). The conclusion of Swidler's line of

reasoning is that aspirations are irrelevant because there are no patterned differences in educational aspirations by social class. However, recent research makes this position problematic. There appears to be at least some variation in aspirations between social classes and income groups (Croll and Atwood 2011, 2013). Moreover, longitudinal data suggests that aspirations influence students' chances of remaining in the education system (Croll 2009, Vaisey 2010).

Further accounts of aspirations have been offered by Bourdieu and those adopting a rational choice approach. According to Bourdieu, aspirations are largely shaped by the structure of available opportunities. In his early work he claimed that, 'the laws of the academic market-place determine aspirations by determining the extent to which they can be satisfied' (Bourdieu 1973: 83). His argument suggests that we should observe a strong connection between educational aspirations and social background, since social class influences the educational opportunities available to students. In a similar vein he later stated that, 'Agents shape their aspirations according to concrete indices of the accessible and the inaccessible, of what is and is not 'for us' (Bourdieu 1990: 40). This adaptive preference account again implies a strong correspondence between constructs such as social class, available opportunities and educational aspirations. His ideas have been fruitfully applied in important work analysing how social class influences students' educational decisions regarding higher education (Reay et al. 2005).

Rational choice inspired theories lean towards portraying 'educational aspirations as a purely rational assessment of students' economic and social circumstances' (Strand and Winston 2008: 250). A challenge that Frye raises for this perspective is the 'ample evidence [to suggest] that aspirations are often uncorrelated with available opportunities'. As she correctly observes, a wealth of data suggest that aspirations regularly run far ahead of the chances of them being realised. This,

she argues, 'warrants a more radical departure from the rational choice approach' (Frye 2012:1572). This data raises explanatory challenges for any position, including Bourdieu's, that advocate a tight link between educational aspirations, available opportunities and the likelihood of them being realised.

An attractive theory of aspirations, then, has to offer an explanation for why there is some relationship between socioeconomic background and educational aspirations but, additionally, why students from disadvantaged contexts also generally hold high educational aspirations. This requires providing a psychologically plausible account of why aspirations often run so far ahead of the chances of them being realised. This would further our understanding of how aspirations matter for children's educational outcomes. A particularly promising line of thinking from cultural sociology has been suggested by Frye who argues that optimistic aspirations become intelligible if understood as 'moral claims rather than as rational choices' (Frye 2012: 1566). Her research shows that aspirations are 'assertions of identity' and serve 'as models for self-transformation' (Frye 2012: 1567). High aspirations are held, at least in part, because the women who took part in her study 'associate unwavering ambition with a virtuous identity' (Frye 2012: 1608). We suggest that understanding this normative dimension of educational aspirations, where they are assertions of a 'good' identity that students hope to realise, potentially offers a way of understanding why most students report highly ambitious educational aspirations.

The available evidence suggests aspirations are related, at least minimally, to a range of educational and social outcomes. The most plausible models of aspirations stress the importance of significant others, especially parents, in shaping aspirations, whilst paying attention to the influence of overlapping social contexts such as schools and neighbourhoods on educational and occupational

aspirations (St. Clair et al. 2011). Aspirations in turn are thought to affect student's commitments to and investment in education. However, whilst plausible in theory, studies have not been able to robustly evaluate the causal relationships between aspirations and outcomes, or identify the full range of mechanisms that shapes them. Rather than adopting any strong meta-theoretical assumptions about how they are distributed or how they matter for educational outcomes our goal is more straightforward. We examine the aspirations of children in the EPPSE study and investigate factors that help to predict students holding high aspirations at 14. Given the relatively few sources of data on aspirations of students currently passing through the education system, this is an important task. It also allows us to examine whether some of the claims about aspirations in the public policy arena, and also the research literature, are well supported by the empirical evidence.

Data

This article makes use of data from the longitudinal EPPSE Project (see Sylva et al. 2010 for an overview of key findings). The first phase of the study took place from 1996-2003, it sought to investigate the social, behavioural and intellectual development of single cohort 3,172 children from the ages of 3-7 drawn from a range of types of pre-school provision. The next two phases of the study, EPPE 3-11 (2003-2008, sample size=2600+) and the EPPSE 3-14 study (2007-2011, sample size=2823) tracked this initial cohort and sought to identify the relative influence of school, family and neighbourhood contexts (and how they interact) on children's educational, social and behavioural outcomes. The focus of this article is on the aspirations of students at the end of Key Stage 3 (Year 9). The timing of the project means that the students are currently transitioning through the education system during a period of low economic growth and with the cost of higher education rising following the introduction of top-up fees.

argued that this may have a negative impact on educational achievement and attainment (Sabates et al. 2011, Schoon et al. 2012). As we have good reasons to think that people's beliefs about the possibility of pursuing particular courses of action is significant for their behaviour, it is unfortunate that more emphasis in recent educational research in the U.K has tended to fall on aspirations rather than expectations and how they may interact (for notable exceptions see Goodman and Gregg 2010, Gorard et al. 2012).

The previous two tables have been descriptive and illustrative. They have shown, generally speaking, that students from all income groups have relatively high aspirations. It also shows that their aspirations are running ahead of the chances of them being achieved given current continuation rates into higher education. The descriptive data also reveals that students from more disadvantaged background report, on average, lower aspirations. However, the fact that a very large percentage of students across all income and class groups hold high aspirations and very low numbers of students have preferences to leave the education system seems to challenge some of the received wisdom about aspirations.

Statistical analysis

We now move on to analyse in more detail the educational aspirations of students in the EPPSE dataset. We are seeking to establish to what extent educational aspirations are predicted by individual, family, neighbourhood and school characteristics. We do so through a series of binary logistic regression models. This approach is particularly helpful for examining 'the odds of success or another substantive outcome, or the odds of success faced by one group relative to another' (Powers and Xie 2008: 38). We begin this section by describing the variables used in the analysis before we move on to reporting the results.

As in the majority of longitudinal studies there have been non-trivial rates of attrition over the course of more than a decade. 89% of the original sample at the end of Key Stage 3 remained fully active members. Furthermore, student's survey responses to questions relating to aspirations, and their experiences of school, family and local neighbourhood was 60%, which is a relatively high figure given the duration of the study. In order to deal with missing data multiple- imputation has been used. This is a well-established procedure that replaces missing values with a set of predicted values across several imputed data sets (Little and Rubin 2002). The new data sets are then analysed simultaneously and the results are then pooled. This is a very similar strategy to that followed in the EPPSE Project major reports which also reveals consistency between the results (Sammons et al 2012a, 2012b and Sylva et al 2012). We compared the results of the imputed analyses with the non-imputed results and there were only minor differences that do not affect the substantive findings.

Dependent variable

For the purpose of this paper high aspirations are defined as those responding 'Very important' to the question above relating to the importance students attach to achieving an undergraduate degree. A binary variable was constructed. All responses 'Very important' were coded as one and all other responses were coded as zero. We focus on the high aspirations category for two reasons. Firstly, holding high aspirations are thought to be particularly salient with regard to educational decision making. Secondly, a larger number of students fall into this category, compared to the bottom two, providing greater statistical scope to examine the effects of social background on student aspirations.

Independent variables

a) Child, family and home factors.

In the analysis we included both gender and maternal levels of education. The maternal education variable captures important distinctions between levels of educational qualifications. This ranges from a category 'no qualifications' to 'higher degree'. An important strength of the EPPSE study is the information collected on the early 'Home Learning Environment' (H.L.E). Data was collected on parent-child activities and routines, the presence of a computer in the home and levels of 'creative play'. All the measures were aggregated into a scale measure from 0-45. The higher the score on this index the higher the quality of the home learning environment. This variable was transformed into three groups to represent high, medium and low quality home learning environments. We also include a measure of family salary recorded at Key Stage 1. Due to the relatively small numbers of individuals in the majority of ethnic groups ($n < 30$), the effects of ethnicity on aspirations could not be assessed. This is unfortunate as other research suggests significant differences in aspirations between ethnic groups (Modood 2004, Shah et al. 2010, Strand and Winston 2008).

b) Neighbourhood factors – IMD score and employment rates

The IMD (Index of Multiple Deprivation) is used in the U.K to try and capture the multi-dimensional nature of deprivation. This is a nationwide index that integrates measures of deprivation relating to education, health, crime, income and living conditions. In our analysis IMD is a continuous variable (0-78) with lower scores reflecting higher levels of deprivation. A further continuous variable (0-62) relating to local employment rates is included with a higher figure indicating higher levels of employment deprivation.

c) Academic self-concept, student-teacher relationships, parent's views and homework.

In our analysis we included three variables derived from the results of factor analysis conducted on the EPPSE questionnaire given to students at 14. Factor analysis is an effective method of data reduction and for studying patterns of relationships between variables. It allowed us to evaluate the underlying structure of the students' responses and to examine underlying latent variables relating to academic self-concept, relationships with teachers and enjoyment of school. Indicators suggested factor analysis was suitable for 28 of the survey items (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin = .883; Bartlett's test of sphericity, $X^2 = 16176$) =df 325, $p < .0001$). Principal component analysis was used to examine the underlying factor structure; the analysis revealed five factors with eigenvalues >1 . This explained 57.65% of the variance. In order to delineate the factor structure more clearly a Varimax rotation solution was applied. The differences between Varimax and Oblimin solutions were negligible. Following the initial analysis the internal consistency of the scales was assessed. The Cronbach's alpha scores for the first three factors were strong: Maths self-concept (.891), English self-concept (.899), Student-teacher relationship (.833). The Cronbach's alpha score for enjoyment of school was slightly weaker (.674).

In our analysis we include three theoretically relevant measures. The first is a composite measure of academic self-concept in English and Maths. This was measured at age fourteen concurrently with the collection of aspirations data. The second is a 'student-teacher relationship' measure; this factor scores reflects students responses to how teachers support them in the classroom with through written and oral feedback, and if teachers show respect, give praise and tell students how to improve their work. The final measure relates to student's 'enjoyment of school'. We tested for the effects of enjoyment of school on aspirations in a range of models but found no statistically significant results. We therefore excluded it from the final analyses reported in this paper. Each of the variables was standardized around zero to. All have a standard deviation of 1. In addition we

also include two categorical variables relating to the importance students attach to their parent's views regarding GCSE subject choice and time spent on homework per evening.

d) Attainment variable – Key Stage 3

Given that attainment is often the most significant predictor of a range of educational outcomes, including decisions to stay in the education system, it is necessary to see if the other background variables contribute to predicting aspirations taking this into account. The attainment measure is a composite variable of Maths, English and Science performance at Key Stage 3 that has been standardized.

A multi-level approach?

An important issue to examine is possible school effect on students' aspirations. In public policy discussions it is often claimed that schools play an important role in promoting ambitious goals amongst their students. Also, research in the social sciences has repeatedly demonstrated variation between schools and teachers in their effectiveness in terms of student attainment and other important factors relevant to pupil success (Chapman et al. 2010). It is therefore important to investigate, and take into account, any school effects on aspirations.

We explored any possible school effects using the statistical package MLWIN. This was done by constructing a multilevel model estimating school effects on educational aspirations (the binary dependent variable described above). We fitted a null model for a Two-Level Random Intercept Logit Model. The Interclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) showed no significant effects. This figure and the Wald statistic reveal no significant variation in aspirations that could be attributed

at the school level. However, the relatively low numbers of students across each secondary school means that we are not able to robustly evaluate any school level influences impact on student aspirations.

Results

We present our results in three stages. Model 1 examines child, family and neighbourhood factors. Model 2 includes variables derived from the factor analysis - students' academic self-concept, student-teacher relationship and enjoyment of school. The final model includes a measure of prior attainment that allows us to evaluate the full range of theoretically relevant variables. Models 1 and 2 are presented in Table 3 and Model 3 is presented in Table 4.

Model 1 is concerned with examining the importance of demographic and family background variables on predicting high educational aspirations. Gender, maternal levels of education and family salary play an important role in predicting aspirations. Female students had greater likelihoods of holding high aspirations compared to boys (OR=1.42). When we turn to the effect of maternal education levels it becomes clear that having a mother with a university degree (O.R=1.77) or a post-graduate qualification (O.R=2.50) plays a statistically significant role in predicting high aspirations. Compared to the contrast group (16 Academic which was the largest group) the impact of having a mother with a higher degree is particularly noticeable. There appears to be very little difference between students in the groups below these top categories. Interestingly, students with mothers having no qualifications are more likely to have high aspirations than students in the contrast group. Model 1 suggest that rather than seeing effects at all levels of maternal education we see a dividing line between students whose mothers have a degree or higher and the other qualification groups.

above the mean on the student-teacher relationships score increases the chances (O.R=1.26) of holding high aspirations to obtain a university degree.

The inclusion of these factor scores is important because they contain measures of attitudes and experiences of schooling not commonly included in studies of educational aspirations. The results of Model 2 show that they are important predictors and potential mediators between aspirations and other background variables. This provides a more nuanced understanding of the factors that help shape student aspirations. It also suggests the need for future studies to look more closely at how attitudes to school and relationships with teachers influence aspirations rather than focusing on the standard staple of demographic variables such as gender, income or social class.

Our analysis could not directly take into account the effect of parental aspirations and expectations on students holding high aspirations. What we could do was explore the importance students attach to their parents views on choice of subject at GCSE. Our analysis reveals that students whose parent's views were very important to these decisions were far more likely to hold high aspirations than students whose parents view were unimportant (O.R=3.33). Taken in conjunction with the effects of student-teacher relationship some support is offered to the main insight of the status attainment tradition that 'significant others' are central to shaping young people's aspirations (Morgan 2005). We also examined whether aspirations were connected to behaviours likely to promote academic success. This was achieved by including time spent on homework into the analysis; the results show that a large amount of time spent on homework (O.R=2.87) was predictive of students' holding high aspirations.

by 'place' and broader social contexts outside of the family and school (St. Clair et al 2011). Although the odds ratios decrease slightly once prior attainment is included in the model, academic self-concept and positive teacher-student relationships still have noticeable effects on predicting aspirations. This is also the case for parents views regarding GCSE choice (O.R=3.99) and time spent on homework (O.R=2.60). Thus, over and above the effects of prior attainment, a range of background variables influence the likelihood of children holding high aspirations.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of the aspirations of the children in the EPPSE Project at the age of fourteen. We have analysed the factors that help to predict students' aspirations and found that they generally hold high educational aspirations even if they come from less advantaged backgrounds. However, our results revealed that students from these groups do hold somewhat lower aspirations than their more advantaged peers. In the top income bracket, nearly all students reported high educational aspirations. Our results show that levels of attainment, gender and higher levels of maternal education all predict holding high aspirations. They also point towards the importance of students interactions with their teachers and the weight students attach to their parents views of subject choice. This lends further support to the insight provided by the status attainment tradition of research that 'significant others' play a pivotal role in shaping young people's aspirations (Morgan 2005). Research should continue to examine the more specific ways in which they shape students orientations to the future. It also suggests a more productive policy approach to tackling educational inequality. Rather than focussing on the supposed lack of ambitious aspirations amongst disadvantaged students a more fruitful approach would be supporting parents and teachers in providing the best possible guidance to students as they transition through the education system. Such guidance could further emphasize, especially for high achieving but disadvantaged students, the differing levels of prestige attached to institutions

of higher education and make clear the benefits and costs of pursuing particular educational pathways.

Our results complement and extend existing research, using some of the latest available data in England, which points to systematic differences in aspirations. An important strength of our analysis is the range of theoretically significant variables that could be included in the analysis. Our findings also render problematic claims that students' aspirations are largely a reflection of the opportunities available to them, or are tightly linked to the likelihood of them being achieved, because educational aspirations seem to run ahead of available opportunities. It was for this reason that Macleod, in his famous ethnography of educational aspirations *Ain't No Makin' It*, argued that Bourdieu and Passeron offered a 'too mechanistic and simplistic relationship between aspiration and opportunity' (Macleod 2009: 140). The aspirations of many disadvantaged students in the EPPSE Project are unlikely to be realised given existing patterns of continuation rates to higher education and their levels of educational achievement, yet they remain relatively optimistic. Interestingly, expectations regarding applying to university seem much more 'realistic' and are correspondingly lower. Further research on the role of expectations and how they relate to aspirations would be an important focus for future research on students' orientations to the future.

In much of the public policy discourse a prominent assumption is that educational aspirations are highly stratified by socioeconomic background. The results of this paper do indeed show important between group differences in aspirations. Importantly though, our data also show that aspirations remain high even for students from low income families. This simple data pushes back against claims that poverty of aspiration can be said to be a significant characteristic of disadvantaged or low income groups. This is not to deny that aspirations may matter or are irrelevant in explaining differentiation in educational outcomes. However, we still do not fully understand the precise role they play in the educational attainment process.

How social problems are framed and thought about matters for the types of policies likely to be enacted. The relentless focus on aspirations by policy-makers is unfortunate as it obscures the importance of other, arguably more important, factors such as structural disadvantages or practical knowledge and familiarity with the education system in explaining educational inequality. This focus may give undue explanatory weight to supposedly culturally dependent factors such as values, attitudes and aspirations, serving to reinforce popular assumptions that individuals remain disadvantaged because of their own shortcomings. Such a narrative about the causes of educational inequality is rhetorically effective in advocating certain policy solutions but is misleading in suggesting that low aspirations are more prevalent amongst disadvantaged groups than they actually are. The generally high aspirations of all students suggest that the problem is not necessarily one of low aspirations but of the absence of opportunities and conditions for them to be realised. Furthermore, there seems to be little evidence to suggest that interventions designed raise to aspirations are likely to be effective in narrowing educational attainment gaps (Gorard et al. 2012). These findings and our results suggest far greater caution should be exercised in how aspirations are used to explain educational inequality or advocated as a solution to it.

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