

What Do We Know About Girls' Aspirations and Achievement?

Abstract This chapter provides a context for the research study. It reviews published literature, research, national education policy and government reports concerning issues of working-class students' aspirations and achievement. These highlight the aspects relating to girls, but where appropriate, also draw on wider discourses, irrespective of gender. The primary focus is on education and school-based issues, but wider social influences like those of families and peer groups are also explored to help understand how these inter-relate within girls' educational and social identities.

Keywords Education · Research · Policy · Girls · Schooling

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a context for the research study. It explores national education policy, government reports and other research findings concerned with the issues of working-class pupils' aspirations and achievement. These draw primarily on the aspects that relate specifically to girls, but also include wider discourses which are significant irrespective of gender. This provides a background of interacting factors that were instrumental in creating the current education landscape within which the girls participating in the research experienced their schooling. Inherited expectations and cultural drivers had a distinctive part to play

in the futures these girls anticipated for themselves and so contribute towards a more detailed understanding of their ‘world’ and decision-making.

When the parents of the girls involved in this research study were born, their families’ lives revolved around the mining industry. Generations before them had worked in the pits and deep social networks had been formed. The community was described within UK national reports as ‘working-class’, and this label was claimed with pride by many living there. While sociological definitions identify ‘working-class’ as comprising manual workers who generally live within deprived communities with reduced access to social, economic and cultural capital (Ward 2015), the girls’ families saw themselves as part of a proud tradition of local mining life, despite any hardships experienced. When mines were closed across the UK, the after-effects of acrimonious strikes and unemployment divided families and devastated communities (Paterson 2014). Despite post-industrial developments and regeneration projects, the pride in being a miner, whose role exemplified the ‘working-class’ strong work ethic, was difficult to replace. During the research study, employment was still an issue within the locality. The recession had hit regeneration projects and despite increased opportunities for work, much of what was available was in the service industries, part-time and low paid, with the best prospects often requiring travel outside the area. This produced a dichotomy in which a community that had secured work was still identified by a wider range of indicators to be within the country’s lowest ten percent of deprivation (DfCLG 2015)—a status that affected girls’ aspirations as they contemplated a future of increased, but insecure, employment perceived as acceptable for women (rather than men) and conflicting perspectives about seeking work outside of the community.

2.2 GIRLS, ASPIRATIONS AND ACHIEVEMENT: AN OVERVIEW

Government led equality initiatives to increase girls’ education aspirations and achievement have had very mixed success. Although it can certainly be argued that progress has been made in reducing key inequalities of the past, concerns still remain because these have not significantly improved social mobility for working-class girls: they have benefited less than their peers from more affluent backgrounds and have a greater fear of failure (Sutton Trust 2017; DfBIS 2014; OECD 2014; Allan 2010; Fuller 2009). This group is also more likely to anticipate their working

lives to lie within traditional roles like catering, care and administration, irrespective of anticipated examination results and superficially accepting that girls are capable of achieving any career (Ofsted 2011; EHRC 2009). Such reticence appears to reaffirm findings from earlier research studies where girls were found to match their academic courses and career choices to those that meet family approval because they were viewed as suitable for people like themselves (Foskett 2003).

Powerful social influences have been shown to influence girls' aspirations and achievements (Francis and Paechter 2015; Hinkleman 2013; Ofsted 2013a, b; Ofsted 2011; Jackson et al. 2010). In particular, families and peer groups can be supportive but may also exert pressure that is difficult to resist. Parental influence has been shown to take precedence over school efforts to widen aspirations (Gorad et al. 2012), and this has been a focus for increasing debate as schools seek solutions to overcome educational disadvantage. Although the relationship between student achievement, social class and parental involvement has long been accepted by educationalists, early research attempts to isolate specific elements contributing towards this have merely emphasised the complex and contested nature of the issue (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). For example, Flouri's research (2006) suggested that authoritative parents inspired girls' self-esteem and fathers' interest significantly impacted girls' achievement, but Feinstein and Sabates' study (2006) found that mothers' own post-school experiences were to be the key factor in increasing aspirations and achievement. What these and other similar studies did make clear was that parental involvement, in its many guises, played a greater part in students' achievement than school factors.

Pressures from peers may add another layer to girls' decision-making. Acceptance by social groups and maintenance of status within these often affect individual's behaviour (Action for Children 2010; Clark and Paechter 2006; Jackson 2006). Plummer's study (2000) probed working-class girls' experiences of attempting to achieve their aspirations. She found that although the girls saw educational success as providing an escape route from an uninspiring future, many viewed the changes required of them to achieve success came at a personal cost that was too high to pay. Instead, they left school as soon as they could, seeking to gain status through the traditional female roles of wife and mother. This provided them with an opportunity to gain family and peer approval, while avoiding a life of tedious low-paid work or being labelled as getting 'too big for their boots'. Others struggled to balance their dreams with

these expectations, creating a personal conflict that manifested in behaviour which rejected stereotypical notions of passive, feminine women aiming instead for social rather than academic esteem though smoking, swearing and acting out sexually. Plummer also found that the girls who did well academically encountered other barriers. Their parents often lacked the social capital to support career aspirations and so without access to wider networks, they became reliant on teachers' judgements and were reluctant to challenge these. Those who gained a place at university faced isolation when they moved away from home. The change of culture had a negative effect on their former relationships, and the girls struggled with fears of rejection.

More recent studies (Hutchinson et al. 2016) have increased our understanding of the diverse factors affecting young people's aspirations and achievement. These have all made explicit that 'social class remains the strongest predictor of educational achievement in the UK, where the social class gap for educational achievement is one of the most significant in the developed world' (Perry and Francis 2010: 2). This gap between young people from working-class backgrounds and their peers has a 'defining characteristic' of accelerating during primary school years and then widening for pupils aged between 11 and 16, unlike other countries (AfA 2016a; Hutchinson et al. 2016; Morrison et al. 2012; Sutton Trust 2011). Concerns about the young people negatively affected by this 'gap' are increasingly the focus of UK government and wider reports, where they are described as representing a 'waste of human capital on a grand scale' (Hutchinson 2016: 7), with the cost to an individual acknowledged: 'When one child fails to learn, it may have a small impact on a school, but it represents 100% failure for that child and is unacceptable' (Hattie et al. 2016: 219).

2.3 THE LINK BETWEEN ASPIRATIONS AND ACHIEVEMENT

Research focusing on the relationship between aspirations and achievement has offered deeper insights into the complex issues involved (Khattab 2015; St Clair et al. 2013; St Clair et al. 2011). Aspirations can be defined as 'hopes and dreams', but these can be disconnected from pupils' socio-economic and school reality, unlike 'expectations' which are more likely to take account of these. Khattab argued that we will learn more from examining the combination of educational aspirations, expectations and achievement to see how the interplay between

their alignment affects ongoing school achievement. His study found that raising aspirations and expectations only worked for some young people. His observation that 'disadvantaged parents do not always have the knowledge or skills to support their children convert high aspirations into actions' (Khattab 2015: 735) led to his recommendation for wider community-based activities to provide families with greater resources and enriched social capital to better support high expectations.

These themes were also viewed as significant within other studies. Kirk et al. (2012) described how educational aspirations and expectations embedded young people's hopes, fears and fantasies into what was they saw as their future lives. This was affected by perceptions of what was 'possible' (idealised aspirations) or 'probable' (realistic expectations) and then adjusted through external experiences that influenced self-perception and school behaviour. Believing what *will* be obtained is particularly important among disadvantaged and marginalised groups because expectations are usually lower than aspirations and more susceptible to external influence. This belief starts early. Elliot (2010) analysed 14,000 children's essays from the 1969 National Child Development Study to compare the futures they predicted for themselves with their actual occupations. She found that high aspirations were more likely to result in a professional career, even if this wasn't the one predicted, and the greatest gaps were experienced by working-class boys, middle- and working-class girls. Flouri and Pangourgia (2012) found similar differences between primary school children's career aspirations, which reflected their sense of hope for the future and adolescence, 'where aspirations changed from vague plans to ones that involved their interests, abilities and options open to them' (p. 14).

This all suggests that some young people may come to view their early aspirations as unrealistic, not just because they recognise their interests and abilities are incompatible with what is required, but as a result of internalising these are unobtainable. While it is important to accept that what one person views as a 'low' aspiration may be seen by another as a 'high' aspiration, young people need support to navigate a pathway to achieve their goals. St Clair et al. (2011) drew attention to this in their study on educational attitudes and aspirations. They argued that low aspirations would not be addressed by only enabling young people and their families to see the range of possibilities available, because their knowledge of how to achieve these was limited. What families really needed was continued support to understand and negotiate the route to

young people's goals throughout their schooling, especially during adolescence when ambitions started to change. This approach could help to prevent the characterisation of deprived neighbourhoods as places where aspirations are expected to be low and gaps in attainment are blamed on socially disadvantaged children (Cummings et al. 2012). Perry and Francis had raised this issue in their earlier study (2010), suggesting that government programmes for raising aspirations were underpinned by 'deficit discourses' that 'conveniently focused the problem on individual problems rather than institutional, financial or societal explanations' (p. 10), leading them to question whether 'grafting' interventions onto a fundamentally unequal education system could ever significantly address inequality.

Concerns about educational inequality and the influence of parental experiences within this on young people's prospects have been highlighted in several studies. The Sutton Trust report on the implications of educational inequalities (2011) drew attention to research evidence from other countries on the importance of 'environment'. This, the Trust argued, indicated that any lack of education achievement and social mobility could not be explained away as just an issue of genetics and parents because: 'income and educational inequality can feed off each other in cycles of ever-decreasing immobility, as those with the most resources continue to invest in their children's education to maintain their advantage' (p. 11). The House of Commons report on disadvantage (2014) made similar observations, warning against a deficit interpretation of underperformance that assumed the problem was located within a particular group. It also stressed that raising young people's aspirations was not enough, for many started with high aspirations which diminished when they looked ahead to their futures and saw what had happened to other family members. The report's recommendations focused on developing parents' social capital to enable them to understand the 'rules of the game' and overcome the tactics of 'families with sharp elbows' who attempted to maintain their privileged access to opportunities (p. 36).

2.4 THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS

Educational underachievement is an issue that concerns all schools. Students from poorer backgrounds do worse in all schools irrespective of their Ofsted grade (Save the Children 2012) and this has received considerable attention in national reports that all make clear connections

between disadvantage, inequality and the variation of education experiences available to young people (Stokes et al. 2015; Centre for Social Justice 2014; Ofsted 2013a; Stewart 2012; Knowles 2011; Hattie 2009). These links raise some uncomfortable issues about education practice in the UK. They also have wider implications, as noted by the Centre for Social Justice (2014: 16) because 'educational failure perpetuates cycles of disadvantage' which create a financial and social strain on our economy. Similar points were made five years earlier by Bottero (2009: 10) who stated that 'the rising significance of education in British society ... had opened up new avenues for class disadvantage', in which privileged groups continued to successfully maintain their advantage as they negotiated their way through wide-ranging economic changes, unlike disadvantaged groups who had been hit the hardest because they had fewer resources to enable them to adapt. Reay (2009: 22) agreed, placing responsibility firmly on schools:

The educational system is rarely about positive affirmation for the working classes. Schools can enshrine and perpetuate class through its policies and practices, leaving some young people as feeling of no value and doomed to failure

as did Beatriz (2013), whose speech about 'Closing the Gap' focused on the high cost of education failure to individuals and society, arguing that: 'If you are failing some of your pupils, you are failing as a system'.

Successive governments have funded a range of national school programmes to support disadvantaged young people who are vulnerable to underachievement, including the most recent, 'Achievement for All' and 'Pupil Premium', which has been described by Hutchinson et al. (2016) as a 'flagship commitment'. Schools have attempted to show the positive effects of these, but there has been criticism about the lack of robust data to substantiate all of their claims (Stokes et al. 2015; Perry and Frances 2010), particularly where schools focus on 'quick fix' interventions rather than longer term strategies securely embedded in whole school practice (Ofsted 2013b). This lack of reliable evidence about what works and why, undermines the education community's perceptions about programmes, creating uncertainty about which strategies could be adopted in other schools and which should not. In relation to this, Stewart's challenge of the 'good school' myth (2012), appears relevant here; he suggested that some schools appear to do better with disadvantaged

students because they have so few and the strategies they use may be far less effective in schools with higher numbers.

The local context is significant when selecting strategies to address disadvantage. Young people eligible for free school meals are found in greater numbers in the lowest performing schools within deprived areas (Perry and Francis 2010). Understanding their local circumstances, employment prospects and the difficulties they are facing is key to tailoring effective intervention strategies (Andrews et al. 2017; St Clair et al. 2011; Dyson et al. 2010). Schools need good evidence, not just about what works, but what will work locally. Data can play an important part in identifying this, but may prove less useful if individual issues behind the disadvantage are unknown. Without this deeper background knowledge, Dyson et al. (2010: 18) argue: ‘There is little point in multiplying teaching interventions if students’ other needs are also not being addressed’. Others agree, with Stewart (2012) pointing out that *more* resources did not necessarily mean *better* resources and Higgins’ observations (2013) that some interventions were ineffective because despite improving attention or behaviour, they did not improve learning and attainment. Blandford and Knowles’ (2013) reminder that learning does not only happen in school, so families and communities should be recognised as important partners in any developments, reaffirms the earlier views of St Clair et al. (2011) and Cummings et al. (2012: 5) that young people could be better helped to achieve their aspirations if schools engaged with parents ‘on their own terms’. Lacey’s early work (2001) provides an example of the importance of this. She reported on a teacher who despite treating a family she was working with respectfully, had ‘failed to spend time getting to know the family situation and their current approach to the problem and then work jointly with the them to develop a strategy that was in tune with their lives’ (p. 136), and as a result, it was unsuccessful.

Such ‘local knowledge’ could help schools understand the difference between ‘aspirations’ and ‘educational aspirations’, an important distinction, because some young people may not see school as instrumental to achieving their aspirations (House of Commons 2014). It can also help to identify gaps in life-experiences that can make individuals vulnerable and target these wider ‘soft skills’ to prepare them for life after school (Sammons et al. 2016; Centre for Social Justice 2014; Ofsted 2013b). Several studies have identified ‘resilience’ to be a key element of this. Stokes et al.’s review (2015) on resilience and attainment observed that

some young people appeared to be more resilient to effects of disadvantage. This occurred when they were supported by schools that placed a high value on diversity and inclusion, matched with high expectations for all students and good engagement with families. Other school-based factors can be linked with increased resilience, especially a sense of 'belonging' and 'well-being' (O'Brien and Bowles 2013; Kirk et al. 2012; Dyson et al. 2010), although these may be seen by teachers as less of a priority than academic achievement, creating what O'Brien and Bowles describe as a 'blind spot' in schools' practice (2013: 3).

Successful schools make evidence-based decisions. They consider a wide range of evidence, beyond achievement data, that drill down into issues and relationships. This provides a rich understanding of how to overcome barriers to achievement (Ainscow 2016; Sharpe et al. 2015; Ofsted 2013b). Wider research studies can supplement local knowledge and offer broader perspectives on common topics of concern, like that of Sammons et al. (2016) who found links between adolescents' academic self-concept and aspirations with A-level achievement, and Morrison Gutman and Vorhaus (2012) who identified the Key Stages at which boys, girls and those eligible for FSM made the most academic progress. International initiatives, such as the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ), can also provide useful new ideas for schools to consider. HCZ developed successful strategies to overcome young people's resistance to attending college. Many of the students they worked with lived in severely disadvantaged situations; they were keen to leave school as soon as possible, find employment and earn their own money. HCZ staff offered enrichment activities to make them 'post-school ready' and in particular, provided support into college through accompanying them to open days. They also gave year-round support while the young people were studying at college, offering internships and work experience, and postgraduate career planning (HCZ 2015). Although these activities might be viewed as too extensive for individual schools to deliver, they could provide a basis for smaller-scale targeted support, or be offered through wider school and community partnerships.

Post-compulsory education choices are often affected by inequality and disadvantage. Young people from middle-class backgrounds are more likely to experience a smooth transition between their personal 'worlds' and other settings, unlike those from working-class backgrounds, who are more likely to feel that they must lose their identity and become someone different to succeed, especially if they consider

attending university (Perry and Francis 2010). In many cases, this is exacerbated, not by a lack of access to information, but a lack of help to interpret it and support to take the next steps (Shukla 2016). Schools' role in providing this may be hindered by a number of factors. Firstly, this student group do not always understand the importance of attainment as a limiting or enhancing factor on employment opportunities, so their desire to be with friends can induce some to select courses in which they have no actual interest and create a negative effect later on their completion rates, results and career options (Callan et al. 2009). Equally important is young people's capacity to manage self-identity within different 'worlds'. Conflicting demands can create pressure as they attempt to balance a perceived necessity to remain loyal to their 'roots' where everyone knows them and they are 'somebody', with enjoying a sense of accomplishment in a new life (Mattys 2013). This position as a 'straddler' (Lubrano 2004) can give young people a sense of loss and discomfort as they struggle to cope with parents who wish for them to do well but still be 'recognisable', and friends who reject them for aspiring to a different life. The consequences of these experiences can increase feelings of self-doubt, of being an 'imposter' and 'living a double life', where internal voices remind them to 'know your place', despite having the confidence to do well (Mattys 2013). Much of this is outside schools' reach to influence, but an understanding of the powerful impact of these factors on their students' life-decisions should inform the way that teachers seek to work with families and communities to support aspirations.

2.5 CONCLUSION

Concerns about white working-class boys' underachievement has continued to underplay the significance of girls' education experiences within the UK and internationally (Stokes et al. 2015; Cobbett 2014; House of Commons 2014; Frances 2010), side-lining the 'less noticed, but equally potent disaffection of working class girls and their educational neglect' (Reay 2009: 28). These girls are described by Callan et al. (2009) as often truanting 'in their heads'—silent within schools, not contributing, not causing trouble, but 'hiding their dissatisfaction behind a veil of compliance' (Fisher 2014: 151).

Other studies identified that 'success' seemed to require girls to meet an ever-expanding set of expectations that often generated tensions between academic achievement and social identity. Some faced

a relentless demand to be successful in everything they did, creating a situation where, as Jackson et al. (2010: 12) described: 'there is no let-up in the hothouse of some girls' worlds'. Others attempted to manage competing demands from school and their local friendship groups by downplaying their academic ability. Balancing the apparent contradictions between being 'educationally successful' and a 'successful attractive girl' demanded hard work on the part of girls to conform to ever-changing norms set by the powerful groups they mixed with inside of school and within their local community (Cobbett 2014). Bloom (2013) characterised this as the 'struggle to become the perfect girl' where notions of being a 'good girl' needed to be merged with the ideals of femininity called for by their adult worlds. Pressure to fit into popular groups often resulted in girls lowering their expectations and self-esteem as they internalised peers' expectations to be popular with boys, fashionable, sociable and not appear too clever (Hinkleman 2013; Paechter and Clark 2010). This process, described as 'girling' by Francis (2010) placed girls in the difficult position of having to be seen to prioritise social, rather than academic, goals. Some were more adept at this than others and rather than proudly displaying their intellect, downplayed this aspect of themselves when they were around boys (Hinkleman 2013). Girls do rebel against these demands with some challenging stereotypical 'girly' behaviour by presenting themselves as 'laddish', but where this includes a stance that it isn't 'cool' to work and misbehaviour, it can contribute to further underachievement (Allan 2010).

All of these tensions challenge schools' assumptions that students will invest considerable time and effort outside of school in order to be academically successful. Teachers and schools want to help their students, but are often unaware of the nuances affecting their individual lives. This limits the effectiveness of strategies to expand post-school horizons where there is a lack of sensitivity about how these may be influenced by peer pressures and family circumstances (Staki and Baily 2015). All girls need to believe they can achieve their dreams and that teachers, alongside other adults in their lives, will help to prepare them for whatever they might face in pursuit of these (Hinkleman 2013). While this support may be common with that also made available to boys, particular aspects should address known challenges for working-class girls. Attention needs to be paid to 'classroom ecology' so that girls are not sidelined and their ambitions neglected (Fisher 2014). If they are to overcome traditional and stereotyped expectations, they need to better

understand careers, progression routes, implications for long-term earning, and if wanted, how these fit with parenthood. Schools could help them achieve this by strengthening teachers' knowledge and understanding of the ways in which they can provide innovative opportunities for girls, combined with sensitive mentoring to overcome barriers and build resilience. Success will depend on partnerships with families and their communities, so that aspirations are jointly nurtured and enable girls to have a sense of achievement, unspoiled by competing expectations.

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