Young people's educational aspirations: Psychosocial factors and the home environment

Abstract

Utilising data from *Understanding Society (2010-2013)*, this study examined the contribution of young people's psychosocial and background factors and home environment to their educational aspirations in the UK. Young people's general wellbeing and self-efficacy emerged as good predictors of their educational aspirations as did some aspects of their home environment. Interestingly, filial dynamics such as emotional closeness to parents and cultural capital (eg, participating in cultural events, discussing books) were better predictors of 10-15 year olds' aspirations than were more school driven parent-child interactions (eg, homework, extra- curricular activities). Furthermore, the findings from this study showed no shortage in young people's educational aspirations although interesting demographic trends emerged with certain groups (ie, preadolescents, males) being less aspirant than middle adolescents and females. These findings have significant implications for family and educational policy, especially with regard to 'raising aspirations' and reducing early school leaving and, also, for reconsidering the role of the home environment as a web of emotionally and intellectually charged relationships between parents and children rather than an extension of the school day. Finally, discussions on young people's educational aspirations should not be polarised but informed by notions of opportunity (structure) and what young people make of it (agency).

Keywords: educational aspirations, home environment, self-efficacy, cultural capital

Introduction

Increasing aspirations has been at the heart of educational policy for a decade now. Since 2004, in the UK, New Labour policy focus shifted from implementing fiscal changes to creating aspiring citizens. Policy initiatives such as *Higher standards, better schools for all* White Paper (Department of Education and Skills [DfES] 2005a), the *Education and skills* White Paper (DfES 2005b) and *Youth matters*, the Green Paper on young people (DfES 2005c) have brought educational aspirations to the centre of policy discourses. With the coalition government (2010 - 2015), the conversations about aspirations have moved from widening participation and equality to fairness and social mobility. The key assumptions in these policy strands are that aspirations are low and linked to the lack of educational achievement and intergenerational disadvantage, especially for students who live in poverty. Thus, raising aspiration is seen as key to achievement and upward social mobility (Cabinet Office 2011).

Several theoretical models have been proposed to explain the development of educational aspirations in young people (see Berzin 2010 for a review). For example, the status attainment model focuses on the home environment and parental involvement; the 'blocked' opportunities model considers the opportunities available to make aspirations realistic; the social cognitive model examines factors such as self-efficacy beliefs, self-

esteem and behaviour; and the social support model addresses the relationships with significant others (eg, parents, teachers, peers) in young person's life to understand their influences on aspirations. Consistently with these models, two broad sets of factors, namely psychosocial and structural, have been identified in much current research to predict young people's educational aspirations, pointing to the importance of placing aspirations in the wider context of young people's life to account for economic opportunities, individual agency and social and cultural resources.

Research on educational aspirations has examined the role that young people's self-efficacy beliefs, self-esteem and relationships with significant others (eg, Eccles and Wigfield 2002; March and Martin 2011; Rubie-Davies 2010) and their socio-economic background (eg, Archer and Yamashita 2003; Kintrea et al. 2011) play in shaping aspirations. Children from very young ages have beliefs about how good they are in different areas. As children grow up, they become less positive in their achievement-related beliefs—they become more 'realistic'. They are aware of what they are good at and how valuable this ability is and, as they age, this awareness translates into their aspirations (St Clair and Benjamin 2011). Adolescents display a tremendous need of a sense of social competence, autonomy and general wellbeing. Social competencies such as emotion regulation, control of attention and prosocial behaviour have been linked with sustained learning and school success. Young people's ability to manage their own behaviour and emotions, regulate their behaviour in ways that are consistent with classroom rules and display prosocial behaviour in terms of showing empathy to and collaborating with their peers can help them learn from and with others and do well at school (McClelland, Acock and Morrison 2006). At the same time, there is a danger to view young people's aspirations as a personal attribute only; thus, it is important to examine both psychosocial and contextual factors to resolve what St Clair and Benjamin (2011) called the 'deep tension between structural and agentic aspects' or the tension between deficit thinking (lack of aspirations as an individual failure) and the socio-economic and cultural circumstances that surround people's life. Children and young people exercise agency within the structural constraints and affordances of their life but that does not mean that they should be blamed if they fail to shape their world in ways that maximise social advantage for themselves.

Research on the influences of structural factors on educational aspirations has mostly focused on parental education and occupation / income, with some studies examining the interplay between cultural capital and educational aspirations. Notions of cultural capital have entered educational discourses to explain inequality and the reproduction of socio-economic disadvantage. A number of studies have examined the nature and fluidity of cultural capital markers (eg, DiMaggio and Mukhtar 2002; Vryonides 2007), the contexts (home, school, public institutions) within which cultural capital is generated (eg, Sullivan 2007) and its links to children's educational outcomes (eg, Dumais 2002; Lareau 2003; Lareau and Weininger 2003; Lee and Bowen 2006) with some researchers (eg, De Graaf, De Graaf and Kraaykamp 2000) approaching home-based learning activities (eg, reading) as cultural capital indicators. In examining parental learning support and educational outcomes among socially diverse parents, Lareau coined the term concerted cultivation to describe middle class parental practices that foster children's learning (2003). The notion

of concerted cultivation was thought of as a counterpoint to the accomplishment of natural growth and catering for children's basic needs (eg, food, shelter), typically found among working class families. Although most studies have examined cultural capital and educational outcomes in general, a small but growing number of studies have focused on educational aspirations from a young person's point of view (eg, Archer et al. 2012; Archer et al. 2014; Davies et al. 2014; Marjoribanks 1997) to examine associations between young people's educational aspirations and their families' cultural capital and parental support that is not directly related to school work and college preparation (Turtley et al. 2010).

The relative contribution of structural and agentic influences to young people's educational aspirations requires further 'unpicking'. Although psychosocial factors such as self-efficacy beliefs, wellbeing, social relationships and emotional closeness to significant others have been found to influence young people's educational futures, much research on educational aspirations has focussed on socio-economic factors and resources (eg, family income, parents' education / occupation), failing to capture the full range of young people's wellbeing and views of their own attributes and capabilities, their agency and their relationships with others, including their family (Rubie-Davies 2010). With this in mind, examining the contribution of young people's psychosocial profile and aspects of the home environment to their educational aspirations is timely considering the relatively small number of studies on the interplay between educational aspirations and family cultural capital and filial interactions. Furthermore, few studies on educational aspirations have included 10-15 year olds' views about higher education and other post-16 choices (with the exception of Archer et al. 2012; 2014). Finally, there is lack of consensus about the effectiveness of parental learning support regarding children's academic outcomes and research is needed to delineate aspects of the home environment and parental support that are conducive to raising young people's educational aspirations.

Studies on the home environment tend to converge into three central dimensions: parental involvement with children's education and learning (eg, Hartas 2014; Turtley et al. 2010); parent-child affective experiences and parents' emotional warmth (eg, Lugo-Gil and Tamis-LeMonda 2008); and behaviour control and modelling (eg, discipline, expectations regarding behaviour and learning, reading habits and aspirations) (eg, Barber et al. 2005). These models, although useful, define home and family life narrowly as a series of parental practices and behaviours such as helping children with their homework, being attuned to their emotions and bonding with them and having high educational aspirations. Family life is relational, affected by structures and human agency, and the process of 'making' the child through 'concerted cultivation' (Vincent and Ball 2007) reduces family interactions and experiences to parenting as an individuated act of managing risk and increasing children's life chances.

For the purpose of this study, home environment was examined as a 'family habitus' (Archer et al. 2014), a web of relationships and emotional and intellectual experiences between young people and their parents and siblings rather than as a mechanism geared to supporting young people's school work. Specifically, home environment was conceptualised in terms of parent-child intellectual and affective interactions and

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experiences; parental learning support (eg, extra-curricular activities, homework); perceptions of parental involvement with children's learning; and family's cultural capital. Much current studies have examined parent-child interactions and parental involvement with learning, from monitoring children's academic progress and peer interactions to being sensitive to their emotional needs, communicating openly and frequently, encouraging participation in extra-curricular activities and promoting a culture of learning in the home (Hartas 2012; 2014; Turtley et al. 2010). Emotional closeness, cognitive stimulation and warmth in families have been seen as crucial in supporting children's learning (Barnett et al. 2010; Lugo-Gil and Tamis-LeMonda 2008). Emotional closeness refers to parents' responsiveness to their children's emotions and capabilities in ways that balance children's needs for support and belonging with their needs for autonomy. Cognitive stimulation is about parents' efforts to enrich their children's cognitive and language development by engaging them in educational activities (eg, discussing books). Regarding cultural capital, Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital consisting of 'high-brow' cultural activities such as art, theatre, visiting museums / stately homes and the knowledge and language required to discuss literature was used.

The goal of this study was to examine the relative contribution of aspects of the home environment (eg, cultural capital, parental involvement in education, emotional closeness) and young people's behaviour, wellbeing and self-efficacy to their educational aspirations through secondary analyses of a national, longitudinal sample. This research is timely, especially considering the unprecedented policy focus on parenting to promote young people's life chances and on raising aspirations. The research questions that guided this study were:

What is the unique and cumulative contribution of psychosocial and background factors and aspects of the home environment to predicting educational aspirations (ie, aims to pursue higher education, post-16 choices, perceptions of GCSE importance) in 10-15 year olds in the UK?
What differences are there by gender and age in their educational aspirations?
Are certain psychosocial factors and aspects of the home environment more influential than others in predicting educational aspirations in young people?

Methodology

Sample

The data for this study came from *Understanding Society*, or the *United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study* (UKHLS), which is conducted by the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER), at the University of Essex. The UKHLS is an annual survey of household members of a nationally representative sample. It has multiple sample components (eg, General Population Sample, Innovation Panel) involving both adults and young people. The same individuals are re-interviewed in each wave although new participants are also recruited at each wave. For the purpose of this study, the sample consisted of young people from the General Population Sample who completed questionnaires at Waves 2 and 3. The youth self-completion questionnaire[1] is a pencil-

and-paper instrument for young people aged 10-15 (the unit of analysis). The content includes modules on computer and technology use, family support, sibling relationships, feelings about areas of life, Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, Meltzer and Bailey 1998), health behaviours and educational aspirations. This study utilised longitudinal data from Waves 2 and 3 to harness the most recent data at the time of the analyses and to include a wide range of psychosocial and home environment measures. Each wave is collected over 24 months [Wave 2 data was collected between January 2010 and December 2011 and, for Wave 3, between January 2012 and December 2013- the main survey fieldwork finished in July 2013, followed with telephone 'mop-up' interviews to increase participation rates-]. Details regarding the sample can be found at Understanding Society working paper (Lynn 2009).

The sample included 5,020 young people in Wave 2 and 5,911 in Wave 3 with the final sample including children who participated in both waves (N=4427). Regarding youth sample characteristics, in Wave 2, there were 50.4% males and 49.6% females; 15.1% aged 10 years, 17% aged 11, 17.5% aged 12, 17.4% aged 13, 16.9% aged 14 and 16.1% aged 15. In Wave 3, there were 50.2% males and 49.8% females; 16.3% aged 10, 15.5% aged 11, 17.6% aged 12, 16.5% aged 13, 17.5% aged 14 and 16.6% aged 15. In considering young people's socio-economic background, although not included in the youth questionnaire, data from household surveys showed that regarding parents' higher education qualifications, 32.7% held a degree or other higher degree; 20.5% A levels; 20.7% GCSEs; 9.6% other qualification and 14.5% no qualification. In terms of employment status (3 class NS-SEC), 26% were Professionals / Managers; 20% intermediate; 25% semi routine / unemployed (for 29% these categories were not applicable).

To adjust for unequal selection probabilities, differential nonresponse, potential sampling error, and for response rate differences between subgroups of the sample the data were weighted (McFall 2013). Data were weighed because the sample differs from the population in scale and proportion and, by applying weights we aim to make the sample more like the population at large by correcting for scale and proportion. For the UKHLS, the weight for the analysis reflects the source of the data being used in the analysis, the analysis level (household or individual), and the combination of waves involved. For this paper, the analyses used data from the youth self-completion survey from Waves 2 and 3 and thus the weight was constructed as: c_ythscus_lw, indicating a longitudinal analysis (lw) of data from self-completion (sc) surveys from youth participants (yth) collected at Waves 2 and 3 (c) (for more details see Table 29: Weights for analysis using youth self-completion from Understanding Society –UK Household Longitudinal Study: Wave 1-3, User Manual 2013).

Measures

There are four sets of measures, namely psychosocial, demographic, home environment and educational aspirations. Most variables in this study emerged from a factor analysis. An exploratory factor analysis (i.e., Principal Component Analysis with varimax rotation) was conducted to identify patterns among young people's questionnaire items (from

Waves 2 and 3). Through an exploratory factor analysis, factors related to family emotional closeness, peer relationships / bullying, self-efficacy, cultural capital, extra-curricular activities, homework and perceptions of parental interest in children's education were identified. While items have been conceptually grouped in the young person questionnaires, it is important that the factor scores employed in the analysis emerged from the empirical data rather than being imposed in an a-priori manner. The variance explained by the emerging factors was 67.87% of the total variance. The Bartlet's test of sphericity, $X^2 (528) = 115012.9$, p<.001, was highly significant and the KMO=.872 value was high, with both statistics indicating that the data were appropriate for factor analysis (Table 1).

[insert Table 1 here]

Psychosocial and demographic measures

General wellbeing: Items referring to a general sense of well-being (eg, 'How do you feel about your life as a whole?') were rated as 'completely happy' to 'not at all happy'. Data on general wellbeing were collected from Wave 3.

Self-efficacy: The values of items (eg, 'I can usually solve my own problems', 'I am as able as most people'; 'At times I feel I am no good at all') clustered under self-efficacy beliefs ranged from 'strongly agree' to strongly disagree'.

Bullying / Peer relationships: The values for items such as 'Do you physically bully other children at school?' ranged from 'never' to 'a lot (a few times every week)'. Additional measures of peer problems were offered by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ).

Behaviour: The SDQ was used, which consists of five scales with five items each (Goodman, Meltzer and Bailey 1998). The scales are: Emotional Symptoms (eg, 'Often seems worried'), Conduct Problems (eg, 'Often has temper tantrums'), Hyperactivity (eg, 'Restless, overactive, cannot stay still for long'), Peer Problems (eg, 'Tends to play alone') and Pro-social (eg, 'Often volunteer to help others'). The SDQ includes 25 attributes / items, 10 of which would generally be thought of as strengths, 14 of which would generally be thought of as difficulties, and one, i.e., gets on better with adults than with other children, which is neutral. Each item can be marked "not true", "somewhat true" or "certainly true". In each subscale, scores for each of the five items were summed, giving a range of 0–10, and the total difficulties score, which is the sum of all problem SDQ domains (i.e., hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, conduct problems, and peer problems) had a range of 0–40. The prosocial score is not incorporated in the reverse direction into the total difficulties score since the absence of prosocial behaviours is conceptually different from the presence of psychological difficulties. The SDQ has a good test-retest reliability of .85 (Goodman et al, 1998). In this study, SDQ measures (Wave 3) were reported by the young people themselves (M=10.25, SD=5.8 for total difficulties and M=7.64, SD=2.2 for prosocial behaviour).

Background measures: Age was recoded into two groups, preadolescents (10-12; 49.4%) and middle adolescents (13-15; 50.6%). There were 50.2% males and 49.8% females in the sample (N=4427).

Home environment

Emotional closeness to parents: The items refer to emotional closeness to parents (eg, 'How often talk to / quarrel with mother /father?' with values ranging from 'most days' to 'hardly ever'.

Sibling rivalry: The values for the items such as 'Call brothers/ sisters nasty names' ranged from 'never' to 'a lot (few times every week)'.

Cultural capital: This refers to participation in cultural events (eg, going to museums and art galleries, visiting historic places or stately homes), discussions of books at home and other intellectual pursuits. The values were measured on a Likert scale and ranged from 'most days' to 'never/ almost never' (for discussing books, the values ranged from 'often' to 'never').

Extra-curricular activities: This refers to participation in educational activities (eg, art tutoring, religious lessons) outside the school. The values were dichotomous ('Yes', 'No').

Perceived parental involvement: This refers to young people's views about parental engagement with their education, with values ranging from 'always or nearly always' to 'never'.

Homework: Items refer to offering homework support, with the values ranging from 'most days' to 'never'.

Educational aspirations

Perceptions about GCSEs: Initially, there were four levels to this variable, namely 'very important', 'important' and 'not important' and 'not at all important'. Because of the small number of cases in the last two categories, the variable was recoded into one with three levels, ie, 'very important' (70.6%), 'important' (19.2%) and 'not important' (10.2%).

Post-16 choices: Initially, the levels were 'full-time education', 'full-time employment', 'training/ apprenticeship' or 'other'. To avoid groupings with a small number of cases the variable was recoded into one with two levels, ie, 'full -time education' (71%) and 'full-time employment/ training / apprenticeship' (29%).

Aims to pursue higher education: This is a dichotomous variable with 'Yes' (74.1%) or 'No' (25.9%) responses.

Data Analytic Plan

A series of regression analyses (i.e., ordinal and binary logistic regressions) were employed to examine the unique and cumulative contribution of predictor variables to young people's educational aspiration (i.e., perceptions of GCSE importance, aims to pursue higher education and post-16 choices). An ordinal regression was selected because of the ordinal nature of the variable 'perceptions on GCSEs'. The binary regressions were run for categorical variables: 'higher education' (Yes, No) and 'post -16 choices' (full-time employment/ apprenticeship/ training, full-time education).

The SPSS Ordinal Regression procedure or PLUM (Polytomous Universal Model), an extension of the general linear model, was employed to run an ordinal regression. Initial data screening indicated that all the predictors were normally distributed and thus no transformation was necessary. The proportional odds assumption, i.e., the relationship between each pair of outcome groups is the same in that the coefficients that describe the relationship between the lowest vs. the higher categories of the outcome variable are the same as those that describe the relationship between the next lowest category and all higher categories, was tested via the Parallel Lines test. The results indicated no differences between the categories of the outcome variables and thus the assumption was met. Moreover, for each ordinal regression analysis, the goodness-of-fit test was found to be nonsignificant ($p=1.0$), indicating that the full model fit the data. The SPSS Logistic Regression procedure was used for the binary regression analyses. The assumptions that underpin them are linearity (each predictor has a linear relationship with the log of the outcome variable) and multicollinearity (correlations between predictor variables). As with all regression analyses, it is important to check whether the model fits the data and how well the model predicts the outcome variable. The question of how much better the constructed model predicts educational aspirations is assessed by examining the model chi-square statistic, which measures the difference between the model with the chosen predictors and the baseline model without the predictors.

In a linear regression, the co-efficient b represents the change in the outcome resulting from a unit change in the predictor variable. In logistic and ordinal regressions, the interpretation of b is similar in that it represents the change in the logit (i.e., the natural logarithm of the odds of the outcome occurring) of the outcome variable associated with one unit of change in the predictor (Field 2009). With all three regression analyses, the odds ratio for the predictor variables was examined. The odds ratio is about the odds of falling into a comparison group compared to the odds of falling into the reference category. It is a measure of the effects of the predictor variables on the odds of 'success'. For a unit of change in the predictor variable, the corresponding odds ratio is the factor by which the odds of 'success' are expected to change while controlling for all other predictor variables in the model (Connell 2006; 16). The odds ratio for a particular variable is defined as e^b whereas e is the natural log or base number (2.718) of natural logarithms and b is the logit co-efficient estimate of predictors (a log odds ratio less than 1 refers to a decreased probability whereas an odds ratio greater than 1 refers to an

increased probability of an outcome occurring). To calculate the percentage change in the odds the formula 100 x (Odds Ratio -1) was used.

The Negelkerke was used as an effect size measure for all three models, indicating the portion of variance in the outcome variable explained by the predictor variables cumulatively (in the full model). For the logistic regressions, the Wald statistic (a chi-square distribution) was considered to test the effects of an individual predictor while controlling for the other predictors in the model and to assess whether the b coefficient for a given predictor variable is different from zero. If it is then we can assume that the predictor is making a significant contribution to the prediction of the outcome (Field 2009).

Results

The ordinal regression analysis produced two prediction equations, one predicting the odds of being in the very important vs. not important, and one predicting the odds of being in the important vs. not important group. Thus, the reference category was 'not important'. The full model predicted perceptions of GCSE, $X^2(28)$= 324.217, p<.001. The Nagelkerke pseudo r^2 was .169, indicating that 17% of variance in young people's perceptions of GCSE performance was accounted for in the full model. For the binary logistic regressions on the variables 'aims to pursue higher education' and 'post-16 choices', the omnibus tests, $X^2 (28) = 175.06$, p<.001 and $X^2 (18) = 290.02$, p<.001 respectively, were statistically significant, pointing to a good model fit for both models. The Nagelkerke pseudo r^2 was .119 and .143, indicating that around 12% and 14% of variance in aiming to pursue higher education and making post-16 choices, respectively, was accounted for in the full models. Also, the Hosmer Lemeshow tests for both models ($X^2 (8)=5.007$, p<.757 and $X^2 (8)=13.5$, p<.09) were not statistically significant which means that the observed probabilities matched the predicted probabilities. Finally, to check how well the models predicted group membership, the logistic model for 'higher education' correctly classified 59.8% of cases (constant only) and 75.7% with the predictors included. Similarly, the model for 'post-16 choices' correctly classified 57.5% of cases (constant only) and 73.4% of cases with the predictors included.

Table 2 presents the parameter estimates, the standard error and the odd ratios for each predictor for all three outcome variables. Table 3 offers a summary of which measures predict which outcomes.

[insert Tables 2 and 3 here]

Predictions based on psychosocial and background measures

Self-efficacy: Self-efficacy emerged as a strong predictor. As self-efficacy decreased there was a 30% increase in the odds of rating GCSE as not important, and a 15% and 12% increase in the odds of not aspiring to go to university and choosing full employment / training / apprenticeships post 16.

General well-being: As measures of general wellbeing decreased, there was an 18% increase in the odds of choosing not to go to university and a 26% increase in rating GCSEs as not important.

Behavioural difficulties and prosocial behaviour: As measures of emotional difficulties decreased, there was a 15% decrease in the odds of considering GCSEs as not important. As measures of conduct problems decreased, there was an 11% decrease in the odds of choosing full-time employment/ training at post 16. As hyperactivity scores increased there was a 9% increase in the odds of not considering GCSEs important, whereas lower hyperactivity and peer difficulties scores were associated with a 12% and a 10% decrease in the odds of choosing full-time employment / training. Prosocial behaviour measures were not found to associate with any of the outcome variables.

Bullying: As bullying decreased there was a 13% decrease in the odds of considering GCSEs as not important. There were no significant associations found between bullying and post -16 choices and wanting to go to university.

Age and gender: In examining the contribution of age and gender to predicting young people's educational aspirations, the results showed that the odds of not wanting to pursue higher education were 1.8 times higher (an 81% increase) for preadolescents (10-12) than were for middle adolescents (13-15). Moreover, preadolescents showed a 41% increase in the odds of not considering GCSEs important, whereas middle adolescents showed a 53% decrease in the odds of choosing employment/ training at 16. Compared to preadolescents, 13-15 year olds are more likely to consider post-16 education. Gender differences were also found, with the odds of not wanting to go to higher education being 1.2 times higher (a 24% increase in the odds) for boys than girls. For girls, there was a 41% decrease in the odds of choosing employment / training post 16. However, gender did not significantly predict young people's perceptions on the importance of the GCSEs.

Predictions based on home environment

Family emotional closeness: The odds for considering GCSEs unimportant for young people who did not feel emotionally close to their parents was 2 times higher than those who were close (manifested as talking about things that matter and not quarrelling, feeling supported by parents and extended family members). Similarly, there was a 12% increase in the odds of choosing employment / training for young people who felt less close to their parents. However, emotional closeness was not found to be significant in predicting aspirations to pursue higher education. Also, sibling rivalry was not found to predict any of the educational aspiration measures.

Perceived parental involvement: As the frequency of perceived parental involvement decreased, there was a 26% increase in the odds of considering GCSEs unimportant. Perceived parental involvement was not found to associate with young people's aspiration to go to university or other post-16 choices.

Homework and extra-curricular activities: Participation in extra- curricular activities and homework support did not significantly predict educational aspirations. Interestingly, as the frequency of homework support increased there was a 19% increase in the odds of choosing employment / training post 16.

Cultural capital: As the frequency of participation in cultural activities / events decreased, there was a 14% and a 20% increase in the odds of not wanting to go to university and considering GCSEs unimportant. Increased participation in cultural activities was also associated with a 23% decrease in the odds of choosing employment / training post 16.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine associations between adolescents' educational aspirations and their psycho-social profile, background and home environment. Young people's general wellbeing and self-efficacy emerged as good predictors of their educational aspirations. Also, age and gender emerged as significant predictors of young people's educational aspirations: preadolescents and boys were found to be less aspiring of further / higher education than middle adolescents and girls. In considering associations between home environment and educational aspirations, emotional closeness to parents and perceived parental involvement in school predicted young people's views regarding the importance of GCSEs but not their aspirations for higher education. Interestingly, extra-curricular activities and homework support were not significant predictors of young people's educational aspirations. In contrast, cultural capital predicted young people's aspirations for further and higher education as well as their views on the importance of GCSEs.

As with previous research (eg, Archer et al. 2014; Rothon et al. 2011), the findings from this study showed no shortage in young people's educational aspirations in that around three quarters reported that they would like to pursue further / higher education. Equally, there is no shortage in parents' educational aspirations for their children. Recent analyses of the Millennium Cohort Study have shown that, irrespective of socio-economic status, education and ethnicity, over 97% of parents, selected from a large national sample, expressed high educational aspirations for their children (Hartas 2014). This raises fascinating questions, especially considering that these are the views of young people and their parents during austerity (2010-2013) in which time cuts in public spending have had a disproportionate impact on young people's capacity to stay on in education (eg, EMA was abolished in 2011). High educational aspirations in young people may be explained by considering the policy emphasis on aspirations and the fact that young people act within similar policy contexts that stress the importance of creating an 'aspiration nation' (DfE 2010). Aspiration discourses have entered schools and society being internalised by young people even when they are unrealistic. Furthermore, high aspirations trends could be understood as assertions of identity shaped by shared standards of morality, and also as models for self-transformation in that young people fashion their identity in ways that are consistent with dominant or mainstream cultural beliefs (Frye 2012).

Young people's psychosocial profile and aspirations

Consistently with previous research (eg, Bandura et al. 2001), self-efficacy and psychological wellbeing were good predictors of young people's aspirations. Specifically, low levels of wellbeing and self-efficacy were associated with a higher likelihood of not considering further or higher education and of perceiving GCSE outcomes as unimportant. Self-efficacy beliefs have been found to influence the courses of action people choose to pursue, how much effort they put into given endeavours, how long they will persevere in the face of obstacles and failures, their resilience to adversity and the level of accomplishments they realise. Self-efficacy involves a sense of "purposefulness" that Ball and colleagues found in young people, even when facing adverse circumstances (2000). As such, self-efficacy beliefs play an important role in developing the confidence and resilience to cope with external difficulties (eg, reduced resources and opportunity) and influence academic aspirations and the strength of commitment to aspirations, in that the stronger the perceived self-efficacy the higher the aspirations that are adopted (Bandura et al. 2001). Furthermore, the findings revealed associations between young people's educational aspirations and aspects of their social behaviour. Specifically, young people with higher self-ratings of behavioural difficulties (ie, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems) were less likely to choose further / higher education post 16. Bullying was found to associate with considering GCSEs unimportant but did not predict aspirations for higher / further education post 16. These findings are consistent with previous research in that young people who adhere to school rules, avoid disruptive behaviours (eg, hyperactivity, conduct problems), and respect and feel respected by others are more likely to aspire to higher education (eg, Wang, Selman, Dishion, & Stormshak 2010).

Aspirations have been found to vary by gender. As with previous studies, girls showed higher aspirations to pursue higher education than boys (eg, Rothon et al. 2011). This follows university graduation trends, suggesting that girls see more value in pursuing higher education. One explanation may be that girls tend to accept a social hierarchy based on educational effort and striving rather than an economic hierarchy that is more prominent among boys. And, in some cultures, girls perceive education as forward thinking and a morally worthy and virtuous pursuit (Frey 2012). With regard to age, in contrast to previous studies, middle adolescents were more likely to aspire to higher education and to consider GCSEs important than did preadolescents. Perhaps this is a reflection of young people becoming more 'realistic' as they grow up, accepting that without further education their career opportunities are limited. This raises interesting issues in light of government's goal of 'Raising the Participation Age' to 18 by 2015 with regard to sustaining participation in upper secondary education by tackling 'early school leaving'. To this end, initiatives to support students stay on in secondary education may need to start much earlier than previously thought (during the first years of secondary education when their aspirations may be low or unrealistic) to promote educational aspirations.

Home environment and educational aspirations

In much research on the home environment, general parental support is thought to be conducive to fostering aspirations in children. In a study by Archer and colleagues (2014), 'family' (mainly in the form of parental occupation and access to cultural or symbolic capital) was the most cited source of young people's educational aspirations. In this study, aspects of the home environment consistent with promoting a culture of learning, manifested through participation in cultural events and discussions of books and other intellectual matters, emerged as better predictors of post-16 choices than did school-driven factors such as homework, extra-curricular activities and parental interest in school. These findings revealed a more complicated picture as to the ways in which the home environment influences young peoples' aspirations. Families' cultural capital was a better predictor of young people's aspirations than were more educationally driven parent-child interactions (ie, homework support, participation in extra-curricular activities / tutoring, parental interest in school). Considering that extra-curricular activities, homework support and parental interest in education did not predict young people's aspirations, parents are likely to be more influential when they possess cultural capital that stimulates a wider culture of learning than mere engagement with school matters (eg, homework). In fact, increased homework support was found to associate with a higher likelihood to choose employment/ training post 16, possibly because parents tend to offer learning support when children experience school difficulties, which may prompt them to take a vocational route. However, participation in cultural activities and literary conversations are more likely in families with material resources and social and cultural capital (eg, Archer et al. 2014; Hartas 2012), whereas working class parents tend to offer learning support as a direct response to school demands (Ritblatt et al. 2002).

As the findings suggest, parents' influences on young people's academic aspirations may be more subtle than originally thought, manifested not so much through direct support with homework and extra-curricular activities but through engagement with intellectual and cultural activities and access to forms of cultural capital. This is consistent with recent research (eg, Davies et al. 2014) showing strong links between cultural capital and young people's intention to purse higher education. The findings raise interesting questions about aspects of parenting that are conducive to fostering educational aspirations in young people and the role that Lareau's concerted cultivation plays in enhancing children's educational opportunities and aspirations (2003). They draw a distinction between aspects of concerted cultivation (eg, cultural capital and its manifestation in cultural activities and intellectual pursuits) likely to predict young people's aspirations to pursue higher education and those that did not (eg, school-driven parental involvement with learning and extra-curricular activities / tutoring). It seems that aspects of the family habitus that encourage intellectual explorations and dialogic interactions between parents and adolescents may be more effective than mere 'hot-housing' practices (eg, tutoring) in predicting young people's educational aspirations.

Emotional closeness to parents also emerged as a good predictor of young people's views about GCSEs and post-16 options. Positive parenting can exert a variety of effects that simultaneously influence young people's outcomes in divergent directions. The findings stressed the importance of parent-adolescent interactions that are emotionally and intellectually charged and influential in shaping young people's aspirations, even if they

are not directly responsive to school demands. These interactions encompass a broad array of family resources, values, dialogic practices and cultural discourses. They form the core of the 'family habitus', a space that influences children's aspirations through a combination of parents' attitudes to learning, cultural practices and ways of being (Archer et al. 2014).

Strengths, limitations and future research directions

There are strengths and limitations to this study. The strengths lie in its use of a population-based representative sample which enabled replication of other studies with fairly small samples to explore the contribution of UK adolescents' psychosocial characteristics, background and home environment to their educational aspirations. Aspirations were examined through young people's own voice rather than their teachers' or parents'. Offering a research platform, outside the school context, to reflect on their aspirations, beliefs, wellbeing, family and peer relationships has important ethical and practical implications, especially for disadvantaged young people who do not have many opportunities to represent their views. Also, combining multiple factors, i.e., young people's psychosocial and background characteristics and their home environment, enabled an examination of their educational aspirations within dynamic contexts in their life. Most importantly, examining young people's home learning opportunities (eg, participation in extra-curricular activities and cultural events) and also those that directly relate to school (eg, homework) is critical to understand the contribution of the home learning environment to young people's educational aspirations.

A limitation in this study was its reliance on self- reports due to the potential bias and also the independence of data. The possibility of a discrepancy between young people's self -reports and their actual behaviour exists and thus we need to exercise caution when we interpret the results regarding their subjective views about the learning support they receive at home, bullying or how they view themselves (although the data were collected via a self-reported questionnaire to minimise social desirability effects). Another limitation lies in the survey measures of home environment and educational aspirations. Regarding educational aspirations, although young people's views on GCSE performance and post-16 choices (employment / training, education) were included in the survey, there was no information about types of degree, career goals or choices of universities and colleges that young people may aspire to. Furthermore, no distinction was made between aspirations and expectations or between what a young person hopes and predicts to achieve based on an evaluation about how realistic their hopes are. In considering home learning environment, measures were offered for certain aspects only (eg, parental support with learning; participation in cultural activities, sibling rivalry) and, although it was conceptualised as entailing diverse intellectual, social and emotional experiences between parents and children, it is important to note that family is more than a home learning environment, a rather complex system of interactions and lived experiences. Rather than a home learning environment, the notion of parenting cultures may be more appropriate in that it encompasses diversity in how ideas and ideals of parenting are constructed by civil society and government institutions, and challenges parenting determinism or the idea that the home environment alone directly leads to measurable

educational and health outcomes and life chances for young people. It also highlights the fine balance between respecting privacy and intimate family life and supporting parents to engage with their children's education in ways that are culturally and socially meaningful to them without engendering a deficit view of parenting or approaching it as the panacea for all society's ills.

Future research is needed to shed light on factors that mediate general wellbeing and self-efficacy and the influence of parenting cultures on educational aspirations, as well as delineate changes in aspirations over time. A comparative approach stratified by class and social / cultural capital, gender and ethnicity may be used to examine the complex dynamics inherent in families and parenting and the ways in which parents are differentially involved with their children. We need studies that contextualise parenting and use multi-dimensional models to recognise the interplay between individual and systemic factors, including social polarisation, and acknowledge that children's futures are influenced by both individual agency and social structures to form what Schoon and Polek called 'constrained agency' (2011). The annual data collection of the *Understanding Society* offers an excellent opportunity for testing multi-dimensional models and conducting longitudinal analyses on parents' constrained agency and children's development and learning.

Moreover, given that bullying and behaviour difficulties did account for some of the variation in educational aspirations, factors pertinent to the value peers place on learning should be investigated considering that aspirations are likely to be indicative of wider processes and influences operating within family but also peer groups. Also, although associations between ethnicity and educational aspirations have been examined (eg, Addams and Johnson 2005; Cheng and Starks 2002; Rothon et al. 2011), future research is needed to examine interactions between ethnicity and psychosocial factors and families' cultural capital in relation to young people's educational aspirations by building upon the unique (and cumulative) contribution of some of these variables to aspirations this study showed. Future research may also shed light on the interplay between cultural capital and social class, and examine whether parental practices that generate cultural capital are constrained within middle class parents only or whether they are more heterogeneously distributed.

Finally, doing secondary data analyses has pros and cons. The technical expertise involved in *Understanding Society* in terms of developing surveys and using independently validated instruments (eg, SDQ) is high, ensuring data of the highest quality. Also doing secondary analyses has the benefit of being an unobtrusive process. However, this may affect the analysts' considerations of the dynamics of the research context which are useful in taking a nuanced approach to data analysis and interpretation.

Conclusion and implications

The relationship between young people's educational aspirations and their home environment and beliefs about themselves is complex, especially in the face of widespread policy changes regarding the importance of parental involvement with

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children's education; initiatives to reduce early school leaving; and the support / advice (or lack of it) offered to young people to remain in education post 16. The findings from this study challenge narrow understandings of parental learning support as a response to school demands and its role in young people's aspirations. It is often assumed in policy circles that the link between parental learning support and children's aspirations is direct and causal, with the view that the more school-driven parental learning support is, the more likely children are to stay in education post 16. However, as this study showed, it is important to consider less instrumental family interactions as well as forms of cultural capital and a wider culture of learning at home to ensure that aspirations are not reduced into individuated concerns about young people's success or failure to capitalise on society and its institutions.

Although young people's aspirations tend to be high (the majority of 10-15 years olds would like to pursue further / higher education), interesting psychosocial and familial trends emerged, painting a complex picture of aspirations as predicted by young people's self-efficacy beliefs and wellbeing but also by their access to cultural capital in the home. The findings showed that there is no 'aspiration poverty' among young people and thus discourses on 'raising aspirations' that have dominated UK policy for the last decade through New Labour to the Coalition Government and the newly elected (2015) Conservative Government should shift to recognise that aspirations among young people are high but their ambitions, especially for disadvantaged groups, are not often achieved due to lack of resources and forms of capital.

As such, policy should engage more strongly with the situation of different young people's groups and with questions of disadvantage and the limits of individual agency in the age of austerity. Young people are actors of their own life but require support to effectively determine their situation and make appropriate decisions regarding their future. Structural inequalities shape aspirations in ways that reproduce social disadvantage (Archer and Yamashita 2003). With this in mind, considering that the estimated expenditure of higher education institutions on 'outreach' programmes to raise aspiration was 96 million (OFFA 2013), the money could be better spent on measures of support (eg, bursaries, grants) to account for the influences of both agentic and structural factors on young people's aspirations. As Archer and colleagues (2014) argued, a focus on aspiration alone is not sufficient to effect social change, especially considering widening inequality and shortages in public resources to help young people to translate their ambitions to viable career choices.

The findings from this study matter for Higher Education (HE) policy in particular, which often presents economic benefits as the main motivating factor for young people to pursue higher education. However, considering that self-efficacy beliefs and cultural capital emerged as good predictors of post-16 educational choices, HE policy should account for these factors, especially with regard to increasing the participation rates from young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Also, considering that preadolescents were found to express relatively low educational aspirations, it may be that careers education should start earlier. Primary school children are capable of forming views about post-16 educational choices (eg, Archer et al. 2012; 2014). The Education Act

(2011), which gave schools direct responsibility for providing impartial careers advice for 13 to 16 year olds on education and training options, should expand its remit to also include primary school children.

Aspiration policies cannot properly be designed without placing aspirations in the wider context of young people's life to account for economic and educational opportunities, individual agency, cultural capital and resources (Kintrea et al. 2011). To ensure that policy conversations about aspirations are not a void rhetoric, educational aspirations should be understood through the lens of family habitus and the psychosocial /agentic aspects of young people's life. This is crucial for understanding diversity in young people's opportunities, beliefs and their ability to use the means available in their families and convert them into educational aspirations and viable futures.

Note 1: Although youth self-completion questionnaires used in Waves 2 and 3 were similar in the topics covered, they were not the same. For example, Wave 2 questionnaire included measures on self-efficacy, homework, extra-curricular activities whereas Wave 3 questionnaire included measures on bullying, sibling rivalry, emotional closeness to parents, perceived parental involvement and educational aspirations. Examples of measures common to both Wave 2 and 3 questionnaires were SDQ, technology use and school attitudes.

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Table 1 Factor Analysis

Factor	Factor content	Loadings
Cultural capital	Go to museums or galleries Adults taking to museums or art galleries Go to visit an historic place or stately home Go to a library Adults giving books as presents Adults taking to see theatre, dance performance or classical music Discussing books at home	.810 .743 .732 .620 .538 .531 .461
Homework support	Does anyone at home help with homework? How often set homework? How many evenings do homework? How many hours homework at weekends? How many hours spent helping with or doing homework?	.918 .837 .768 .651 .625
Extra- curricular activities	Art Tutorials for school subjects Music Religious classes Dance Sport	.731 .722 .700 .693 .644 .570
General wellbeing	How do you feel about your • life as a whole? • family? • school? • friends? • school work? • appearance?	.705 .671 .662 .650 .587 .552

Self efficacy	At times I feel I am no good at all	-.757
	I certainly feel useless at times	-.721
	I am inclined to feel I am a failure	-.683
	I don't have much to be proud of	-.639
	I can usually solve my own problems	.675
	I am as able as most people	.664
	I am a likeable person	.622
	I feel I have a number of good qualities.	.618
Sibling rivalry	Call brothers/sisters nasty names	.981
	Hit, kick or push brothers/sisters	.978
	Brothers/sisters call you nasty names	.977
	Make fun of brothers/sisters	.977
	Take belongings of brothers/sisters	.975
	Brothers/sisters make fun of you	.974
	Brothers/sisters hit, kick or push you	.972
	Brothers/sisters take your belongings	.971
Emotional closeness to parents	How often do you	
	• talk to your mother, about things that matter to you?	.770
		.671
	• talk to your father, about things that matter to you?	.829
		.787
	• quarrel with your father?	.608
	• quarrel with your mother?	.496
	Who would you turn to first within your family?	
	Do you feel supported by your family?	
Bullying	How often do you bully children in other ways at school?	.776
	Do you physically bully other children at school?	.767
	How often do you get physically bullied at school?	.636
	How often do you get bullied in other ways at school?	.609

Perceived parental involvement	My parents come to school parents evenings My parents are interested in how I do at school	.656 .598

Table 2 Binary and Ordinal Regressions: Parameter Estimates

	Higher education[1]		GCSE[2]		Post -16 choices[3]	
	B(SE)	Odds Ratio	B(SE)	Odds Ratio	B(SE)	Odds Ratio
Background factors						
Boys v Girls	.22 (.12)*	1.24	-.03 (.12)	-	-.52(.09)***	.59
Pre v Middle Adolescents	.59(.11)***	1.81	.34 (.11)**	1.41	-.74(.09)**	.47
Psychosocial factors						
Self-efficacy	.14(.05)***	1.15	.27(.05)***	1.30	.11(.04)**	1.12
General Wellbeing	.16(.06)**	1.18	.23(.06)***	1.26	.04(.05)	-
Emotional Symptoms	-.08 (.05)	-	-.15(.05)**	0.85	.007(.05)	-
Conduct Problems	-.03 (.04)	-	-.03 (.04)	-	-.11(.05)*	.89
Hyperactivity	-.008 (.04)	-	.09 (.04)*	1.09	-.12 (.05)*	.88
Peer Problems	.02 (.04)	-	.04 (.04)	-	-.10 (.05)*	.90
Total Behaviour Difficulties	.05 (.04)	-	.03 (.04)	-	.04 (.04)	-
Prosocial Behaviour	-.09(.03)**	0.91	-.08 (.03)*	1.08	.08(.02)**	1.08
Bullying	-.01 (.05)	-	-.13(.05)**	0.87	.01 (.04)	-
Home Environment						
Emotional	.07 (.05)	-	.25(.05)***	2.04	.12(.04)**	1.12

Closeness						
Sibling Rivalry	.07 (.05)	-	.01 (.05)	-	-.02(.04)	-
Perceived Parental Involvement	-.01 (.05)	-	.23(.05)***	1.26	-.07(.04)	-
Extra-curricular Activities	-.07 (.05)	-	.001 (.05)	-	.07 (.04)	-
Homework	-.042 (.05)	-	.05 (.50)	-	.17(.04)**	1.18
Cultural Capital	.13 (.05)*	1.14	.18(0.6)**	1.20	-.25 (.04)**	.77

N=4427

***p<.001; **p<.01, *p<.05
Note[1]: the reference category is 'not aiming for higher education'
Note[2]: the reference category is 'not important'
Note[3]: the reference category is 'post-16: employment training/ apprenticeship'

Table 3: Significant contributions to educational aspiration outcomes

	Higher education	**GCSE**	**Post -16 choices**
Age	√	X	√
Gender	√	√	√
Self-efficacy	√	√	√
General Wellbeing	√	√	X
Prosocial behaviour	√	√	√
Emotional Closeness	X	√	√
Perceived Parental Involvement	X	√	X
Homework	X	X	√
Cultural Capital	√	√	√