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Aspirations and an austerity state: young people's hopes and goals for the future

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Survey findings from 1701 Year 11 and Year 13 students across 35 English educational institutions are reported, which indicate young people's hopes and goals, and the ways in which their institutions support them in their aspirations. This research adds to the literature empirical findings using a methodological stance on the study of aspirations that is open to broader perspectives of young people's agendas for their lives. The majority of young people reported high-educational (e.g. university) and career (e.g. a professional or well-paid job) aspirations. Life satisfaction and developing relationships was also high on the agenda of many young people.

Keywords: 14–19 education; aspirations; future goals; life satisfaction

Introduction: aspirations are state business

For decades, the economic view of global competition has been based on the idea that nation states compete in terms of human capital as well as manufacturing and access to natural resources (see Powell and Snellman 2004). In this world view, the most powerful jobs and best economic returns are associated with good quality human capital, as evidenced by knowledge, skills and qualifications. Governments are therefore concerned to ensure the ready supply of human capital to assure their nation's slice of the knowledge economy. Thus, nations as well as individuals are competing in terms of human capital and, it is argued, will reap the rewards of investment in education and training. Government aspirations for the education system are formalised in the target-setting and accountability systems. England has had targets for levels of attainment, participation and progression, including an aspiration for 50% of its young people going to university.

Effects of states' investments in education are monitored, not just in terms of how the overall outcomes are affected, but in terms of how those outcomes are distributed across society. After all, education is also supposed to be a vehicle for meritocracy and social mobility. However, we know that socio-economic status (SES) is highly associated with educational attainment at all levels (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2009; Goodman, Gregg, and Washbrook 2011; Rothon et al. 2011) and entry to the professions (The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009). We also know that economic inequality has widened in the UK over the past 40 years (Hills 2010) whilst participation rates in

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education and qualification levels have risen. Spohrer (2011) analysed UK policy documents on aspiration, concluding that meritocracy was no longer presented as the traditional notion associated with equal opportunities, but was regarded as a responsibility upon individuals to take opportunities. Some policy documents referred to the barriers to achieving aspirations and we return to this issue below in the definition of aspirations in the research literature. For now, let us note that there are conflated agendas here (economic and equality) and through policy texts Spohrer demonstrated that the state individualised social problems. The way such policies are framed indicates that they aim to tackle the attitudes and behaviours of disadvantaged groups, as opposed to the opportunity barriers.

The Milburn Report (The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009) showed that there are large disparities and unequal opportunities for 'unleashing aspirations'. In the fore-word to the Government response (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2010), Pat McFadden MP wrote that

> If we really want to improve social mobility in the long term we have to change people's aspirations. We have to give people the hope to aim for something higher.

Yet, we now know that many young people in England have high-educational aspirations. Chowdry, Crawford and Goodman (2009) analysed the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) data-set, comprising 16,000 young people from the age of 13 and 14 onwards. Irrespective of SES, at age 14 many young people aspired to go to university: even in the lowest of the five groups of SES, half of the 14 year olds held this aspiration (2009, 74). Only 13% of 18-year olds, however, continued to aspire to do so. Many studies have shown that young people are confronted with the realities of opportunity in their late teens (e.g. Chowdry, Crawford, and Goodman 2011).

The current study was conducted in 2010, when the then Labour government had been in power for 13 years. At this time, there were a plethora of policies that were at least being seen as directed at raising aspiration. Figure 1 is an excerpt from a 2008 Social Exclusions Taskforce document, which drew together a wide range of research on aspirations, and outlined the government's approach to aspiration policy. Given the wide-ranging nature of barriers to aspiration (Gorard et al. 2006), the policies listed may not be overly-inclusive, but the links with aspiration are not always obvious or made explicit in the report. The AimHigher initiative, included in Figure 1, was clearly an attempt to raise young people's aspirations to go to university, but less clear is what was being done with parent governors to address aspirations in those groups with low aspirations. In a separate study on the aspirations of 12-year olds conducted for the Department of Children Schools and Families (now the Department for Education), Atherton et al. (2009) identified raising the participation age as a policy relating to educational aspiration and investigated students' views of the policy. The policy on 'raising the participation age', however, is not listed anywhere in the Social Exclusions Taskforce document as a current or future initiative relating to aspiration.

The election in May 2010 saw a new, Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government come to power amidst a global economic recession. Cutbacks to public spending generally have been termed 'the austerity state' (Spours 2011) and many of the policies listed in Figure 1 no longer exist, such as AimHigher, the educational maintenance allowance (for post-16 students in need) and the Building Schools for the Future project. The context in which the young people's aspirations are unfolding is therefore different from when the data were collected.

We could also question the assumed link between high aspirations and future economic well-being. Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2011) argued that there is no longer a straightforward link between educational attainment and wages because nations such as India can offer

Current Interventions	Community Building pride, self efficacy, optimism, expectations, bridging social capital	Parent and family Improve home learning environment, raise aspirations, increase value on education, self-efficacy, broaden horizons	Individual young person Raise aspirations, self esteem, self-efficacy, broaden horizons
Human capabilities Building up the skills and confidence of young people, their parents and the wider community	Extended Schools; Sure Start; Narrowing the Gap; Community development learning; Communities for Health; Skills for Health; Working Neighbourhoods; NRF; NDC; Digital Inclusion; Grassroots Grants;	Parenting Experts; Respect Parenting Practitioners; Family Intervention Projects; Parenting Early Intervention Projects; Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy; English for Speakers of Other Languages; Money Guidance Pathfinder; Financial Inclusion Champions; Tax Credit Advice in SSCCs; Informal adult learning; Multi Systemic Therapy; Family Nurse Partnership	City Challenge; Gifted and Talented; Raising Attainment of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Somali and Turkish Heritage Pupils; Raising Attainment of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Pupils; New Arrivals Excellence Programme; Extended Schools Every Child a Reader and Every Child a Writer; PSHE; 14-19 Diplomas; Aim Higher; In Harmony; Recruit into Coaching; Positive Futures; My Money; Creative Partnerships
Physical and economic regeneration Raising community pride and confidence through improvements to buildings, environment and economic outlook.	Working Neighbourhoods; NRF; NDC; Local Enterprise Growth Initiative; City Strategies; Cleaner, Safer, Greener; Digital Inclusion; Rural Development for England; Community Assets; Grassroots Grants;	Decent Homes programme	Building Schools for the Future; Primary Capital Programme; MyPlace
Providing incentives and removing financial barriers enable and encourage people in deprived communities to access opportunities and develop higher aspirations.	Grassroots grants; Community Chest	Childcare element of Working Tax Credit; Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit; Child Development Grants; Childcare Affordability Pilots; Incentives for parents in London to return to work; in work credit for additional earners and partners for JSA claimants; Better off in work credit; Rent deposit scheme	Education Maintenance Allowance;
Empowerment Enabling local people to take more control of services and community assets.	Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders; Take Part Local Pathfinders; Community Pledge banks; Empowerment Fund; Community Builders Fund;	Parent governors	National Body for Youth Leadership; Young Advisors; Youth Councils; School Councils
Information and inspiration Making people aware of opportunities and showing them they can achieve		Work focused services in Children's Centres; Parenting Experts	Reach; Connexions; Youth Mentoring Initiative (Media Trust); Respect Athlete Mentoring Scheme; Positive Futures; Creative Partnerships;

Figure 1. Summary of 2010 Labour government policy related to aspiration, taken from Social Exclusion Taskforce (2008).

a well-qualified workforce for wages well below those of similarly qualified workers in the West. Relatedly, graduates in the UK have found themselves without graduate-level jobs (Chevalier and Lindley 2009). For these reasons, Brown et al. (2011) argued that encouraging aspirations and educational attainment as a ticket to a good job has been a broken promise. Having contextualised our research in terms of the policy environment, we now turn to theories of aspiration and previous research findings.

Conceptualising aspiration

The ways in which aspirations have been described in the literature vary widely. Payne (2003) makes a distinction between three different approaches to studying aspiration. In structuralist approaches, young people's choices are believed to be governed by environmental factors (such as the economic, institutional or cultural structures that surround a young person) over which the young person has no control. In this approach, young people's decisions about their life course are responsive, shaped by the structures around the young people, and by the assumptions others hold about them. Conversely, the economic model assumes decisions to be a process of rational choice, weighing up costs (such as financial, effort, time, fit with self-image), benefits (including material, enjoyment, prestige) and risks (including potential failure, and uncertain long-term advantages) of different options. However, a purely rational approach is rarely observed in practice: imperfect information is used in decision-making (particularly when researching choices is costly in terms of effort); and it can be difficult to judge the long-term benefits of education, particularly in the current rapidly changing labour market. Payne's third conceptualisation is one of pragmatic rationality. This approach acknowledges the limitations placed upon choice by structure, opportunity and qualifications, and highlights the role of subjective perceptions and of chance events in the life course. Payne suggests that, within their contexts, young people still weigh up costs

and benefits. We adopt the approach of pragmatic rationality, in order to balance the opposing assumptions of free will and determinism that appear in research and policy on aspirations. This aligns with Gottfredson's (2002) circumspection and compromise theory of career choice and development.

Gottfredson (2002) outlined four stages of development of career aspiration, during which the range of potential and possible pathways gradually narrows. The first stage, she suggested, involves young children categorising those they see around them as powerful or weak. The second stage, as children start primary school, is characterised by gendered thinking about different roles. Gottfredson describes the third stage, at around ages 9–13, when ideas about prestige begin to integrate with the perspectives about gender of the second stage. At this point, young people begin to evaluate what is desirable, and realistic, for people like them, and start to think about the effort required for and likelihood of achieving particular outcomes. This results in a zone of acceptable options, which coincide with young people's expectations about gender, prestige and achievability. The fourth stage, from around age 14, is when Gottfredson suggests young people start to refine their aspirations, and develop more concrete and explicit plans according to the type of person they see themselves as. This also links with Eccles (2009) expectancy value model of motivated behavioural choice, in which she outlined how a young person's context, identity and self-concept leads to the development of particular aspirations. Traits such as artistic, realistic, investigative, social, enterprising or conventional may all be considered, in line with Holland's (1996) typology of personality and work. In addition to career roles, young people at this stage are likely to consider wider aspirations, such as family plans. Our research is with young people in their mid-to-late teens, so we would expect that aspirations would take into account prestige, gender and views of self.

Oyserman et al. (2004) and Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry (2006) suggested that young people at this stage work with the concept of possible selves. They outline how young people consider their current traits and abilities, combining this understanding with knowledge about what is needed for future roles, creating different concepts of what they could be in the future. Young people, Oyserman et al. suggest, consider not only positive or 'desired' possible selves, but also negative or 'feared' possible selves, which they would like to avoid becoming. Both positive and negative possible selves can motivate young people in following particular paths, towards positive possible selves and away from negative possible selves. Boxer et al. (2011) developed the discussion about the relationship between aspiration (what young people would like to attain) and expectation (what young people expect they will attain). They suggested that expectations – beliefs about abilities, perceived constraints such as gender and so on – can act as limiters when constructing possible selves. We suggest, however, that expectations may also support young people to *expand* their range of possible selves, by revealing options which they might not have considered.

In educational terms, young people's aspirations tend to be high, as discussed above, although as Chowdry et al. highlighted, young people from lower SES backgrounds are more likely to revise their aspirations downwards over time. Many others have also demonstrated the importance of SES in the development of aspirations (e.g. Reay, David, and Ball 2005; Destin and Oyserman 2009; Rothon et al. 2011; Schoon and Polek 2011). Related to SES, parental factors have been shown to influence aspiration. Young people who have parents with lower levels of education tend to hold lower aspirations (e.g. Ashby and Schoon 2010; Boxer et al. 2011), and young people with parents who are less engaged in and less supportive of their education also tend to hold lower aspirations (e.g. Togerson et al. 2008; Ashby and Schoon 2010; Rothon et al. 2011). Strand (2011) used the LSYPE to demonstrate the relationship between parental aspirations and educational attainment: young people whose

parents wanted them to stay on in post-compulsory education, and who themselves wanted to stay on in post-compulsory education, had notably higher levels of educational progress from ages 11 to 14 and higher levels of attainment at age 14. The localities in which families live also have an impact on aspirations: young people from areas with fewer and narrower job opportunities tend to hold lower aspirations (e.g. Green and White 2008; Hirschi and Vondracek 2009).

Many have demonstrated the link between gender and aspiration (e.g. Archer, Halsall, and Holligworth 2007; Rothon et al. 2011; Gutman and Schoon 2012), with girls more likely than boys to want to remain in education. Ethnicity has been linked to aspiration (e.g. Strand and Winston 2008), with young people from black Caribbean and white working-class backgrounds tending to have relatively low aspirations. The quantity and quality of careers advice appears to have a relatively minor effect on aspiration (e.g. Togerson et al. 2008; Fuller 2009; Tilbury, Buys, and Creed 2009), although this is differential for groups of young people from different ethnic and social backgrounds. Academic attainment is linked to many of these factors, and in itself further predicts how likely young people are to want to stay on in education (e.g. Chowdry, Crawford, and Goodman 2009; Rothon et al. 2011). The relationships between all these aspects of young people's lives are complex, however, aspirations are shaped by many factors which operate in interaction.

We assume, therefore, that aspirations are a product of many individual and social factors, some of which are outlined above. As such, in this paper we take a wider approach to aspiration than many other studies in the field, looking beyond the level of education or employment to which young people aspire. Most of the previous work on aspirations asks young people specifically at what age or level they would like to leave education, or what kind of job they would like. Instead our approach in the Centre Research Study (CReSt) research was to be more open about possible aspirations, seeing them more broadly as 'hopes, goals and dreams'. The research questions for this study are:

- What are students' hopes, goals and dreams?
- How does schooling help students become the kind of people they want to be?

    (a)   How do students report institutions' support for their aims?
    (b)   What are students' beliefs about the links between qualifications, jobs and the kinds of life they want?

Method

This research draws on a national data-set from the first year of the CReSt 14–19 project (Baird et al. 2011), which investigated responses to policy reforms in 14–19 education in 52 schools, colleges and other centres across England in 2009/2010. Participating centres were selected as a cross-sectional representation of different types of educational provision available for 14–19-year olds in England, taking into account 'location, deprivation, size, intake, outcomes, denomination, and subject specialism' (Gorard et al. 2008, 3), and included a range of schools, sixth form colleges and general FE colleges.

In Spring 2010, all 52 centres were asked to administer year 11 (Y11) and year 13 (Y13) student surveys. In addition, 18 case studies from the 52 participating centres were conducted. These case studies included: 11–16 schools (5); an 11–19 school (1); a 13–19 school (1); 16–19 sixth form colleges (3); an academy (1); FE colleges (2); an independent school (1); special education centres (3); and a specialist college (1). Case visits were carried out

over three days in which interviews and focus groups were conducted with a range of stakeholders, including: principals or deputies; curriculum managers; partnership coordinators; governors; students; teachers; and parents. This paper reports analysis of the survey data. (For further details on the case studies, see Baird et al. 2011; Elwood 2012; and other papers in this special issue.)

Survey

Sample

Of the 52 centres, 35 returned a total of 773 Y11 and 928 Y13 student surveys (a 67% response rate by institution). Response rates per year group in each type of institution can be seen in Table 1.

In total, 45% of the Y11 sample were male, and 55% were female, with an age range of 14 to 20 (as an outlier), and a mean age of 16 years, 2 months. For the Y13 sample, 43% were male and 57% were female. Ages ranged from 16 to 20, with a mean age of 17 years, 11 months. The exact population of Y11 and Y13 students in these institutions is unknown. Nonetheless, this is a sizeable sample.

The mean number of points gained in Level 2 qualifications (GCSEs and equivalents) by students in the Y11 sample for whom this data were available from the National Pupil Database (NPD) ($N = 529$) was 483.5 (SD = 124.0), with a range of 28 to 844.5. This was higher than the average point score per pupil in England for level 2 qualifications in 2010, which was 438.5 (DfE 2011a). The Level 2 points system allocates 58 points for an A*, 52 points for an A, 46 points for a B and so on to 16 points for a G. Thus, this difference of 45 points can be seen as around one grade higher across 8 qualifications than the national mean, or alternatively as approximately an additional qualification at Grade B.

The mean number of points gained in level 3 qualifications by students in the Y13 sample for whom this data were available from the NPD ($N = 515$) was 700.9. This is lower than the mean score for those taking level 3 qualifications in 2010 in the whole of England, for whom the mean number of points gained was 744.8 (DfE 2011b). This difference of 44.1 points is equivalent to roughly 1.5 grade lower in one A-level than the national mean (an A-grade at A-level would score 270 points, a B grade 240 points, a C grade 210 points and so on).

Instruments

The student survey incorporated measures used in previously published studies. Analysis of only the questions related to aspiration and students' futures is presented in this paper.

Table 1.   CReSt project centres and student survey responses.

Centre type	Number in CReSt sample Centres	Responses		
		Centres	Y11 Students	Y13 Students
11–16 Schools and academies	9	7	239	n/a
11/13–19 Schools and academies	24	17	521	328
Sixth form colleges	5	3	n/a	247
FE/Specialist colleges	7	6	n/a	339
Special education centre	7	2	13	14
Total	52	35	773	928

The survey asked participants to outline their goals, hopes and plans. This question was an open-ended, short-answer question enabling flexibility in student response, based on Eccles (2009) and modified to allow participants to include current aspirations. Participants could respond in up to five different spaces, resulting in a potential total of 8505 responses. Overall 3886 blank responses were recorded. Most of these occurred in the later spaces, although 25% of respondents ($n = 421$) did not list a single aspiration in any space.

Another question asked participants what they wanted to do when they left school or college. Different responses included 'Get a job at age 16', 'Get a job with training at age 16' (Y11 only), 'Continue studying and get a job at age 18 +', 'Continue studying and go to university at age 18 +' and 'Other' (Y11 and Y13). The response rate for this question was 89% ($n = 1515$).

The survey presented participants with a list of jobs, and asked which group of jobs was most like what the student wanted to do in the future. Different categories include manual work, (such as fitness instructor, waiter and caretaker); professional/well-paid work (such as doctor, scientist, teacher and sports coach); and skilled manual or office work (police officer, secretary, electrician and so on). Further response options included 'run my own small business', 'I don't really want a paid job' and 'I don't know what job I want'. The response rate for this question was 73% ($n = 1247$).

Participants were asked to what extent they agreed that their school or college was helping them to be the kind of person they wanted to be. Response options included 'not at all', 'a little' and 'very much'. The response rate to this question was 86% ($n = 1463$). Questions 16 and 17 were open response questions, asking in what ways students' education had helped and not helped them respectively to be the kind of person they wanted to be. Response rates for questions 16 and 17 were 55% ($n = 929$) and 38% ($n = 640$), respectively.

Participants were presented with statements about their education and future career, with response choices of 'not at all true', 'a little true' and 'very true'. The six statements used in this analysis referred to how much students believed their education would help them in different aspects of their future lives, and were from the 'Scepticism about relevance of school for future success' subscale of the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey (Midgeley et al. 1998), relating to Dweck and Leggett's (1988) social-cognitive theory of motivation. Response rates for these questions ranged from 80 to 82% ($n = 1363$ to $n = 1395$).

Administration

The survey was administered online using SurveyMonkey. Questionnaires were delivered electronically to project advisors (the contacts at case institutions) in the form of an email containing a link to the survey. Instructions requested that advisors choose a mixed ability sample (possibly based around tutor groups) of 50 Y11 and/or 50 Y13 students to complete the survey, depending on institution type. Some institutions chose to send an email to all students in the relevant year groups to take part. Consequently, differing numbers of students from each institution responded to the survey, ranging from 5 to 66 respondents for the Y11 survey (mean = 29.7 students per institution, $SD = 16.0$), and 5 to 134 respondents for the Y13 survey (mean = 35.7 students per institution, SD = 34.7).

The survey requested student names: the reason for this (to match responses with national attainment data) was explained to participants to avoid resultant lower levels of disclosure. Multiple responses with the same name and date of birth were removed from the sample, leaving only the final response with those details.

Coding of data

Data collection and analysis for the 'hopes, goals and plans' question was both theory- and data-driven, initially based on Kasser and Ryan's Aspirations Index (1996). The coding frame (see Table 2 in results) included broad first level codes of education, career, lifestyle, relationships, wealth, community, health, image and personal growth, with additional second-level codes. In total 12 first-level and 24 s-level codes were developed, including a 'blank' code for participants who had not responded. The distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivations was not always clear, however, particularly with reference to education and career goals. It was not possible to say whether these arose from an intrinsic interest, or from an extrinsic interest in other benefits that may arise from them.

An inter-rater reliability sample of 250 participants (resulting in 631 responses with 'Blank' responses removed) was chosen using a random number generator. These were coded separately by two researchers. Researchers disagreed on only 72 responses, resulting in a reliability rate of 88.6% on second-level codes. For first-level codes inter-rater agreement was 91.3%.

Codes of responses to 'how your school/college helps/doesn't help you to be the kind of person you want to be' were data-driven. The responses given were often complex, however, so multiple codes were used where appropriate (up to three per response). Response rates to these questions were 42% ($n = 714$) for 'how has your school/college helped you be the kind of person you want to be' and 54% ($n = 924$) for 'how has your school or college not helped you be the kind of person you want to be'.

Data for the Y11 and Y13 samples were very similar – as can be seen in the data tables there were few substantive differences between the two groups. For example, responses to the 'hopes, goals and plans' question resulted in similar proportions of responses in both the broad first-level and more detailed second-level codes of career, lifestyle, relationships, wealth, community, health, image and personal growth. Thus, while the data tables will present Y11 and Y13 results separately, discussion will focus mainly on the whole sample. Differences between institution type, specifically between FE and other post-16 institutions, were investigated in Baird, Rose, and McWhirter (2012).

Results

High aspirations

Coding of responses to the 'hopes, goals and plans' question can be seen in Table 2. Career was the most frequently mentioned category. In particular, it can be seen that around 15% of all responses referred to a well-paid or professional job, such as '*become a barrister*', '*be a graphic designer*' or '*teacher*'. Similarly, a substantive proportion of responses referred to higher education, such as wanting to go to university, or gain a degree. A higher proportion of Y13 students mentioned higher education/university (Code E1): many of these students may be anticipating university as the next step after completing their A-levels. Y11 students, on the other hand, were more likely to mention other educational goals such as A-levels (E2): again this may well be the next step in their educational career.

This is further supported by responses to the question on what students hoped to do when they left school or college (Table 3). 'Study to go to university at age 18+' was by far the most popular response in both year groups, demonstrating high educational aspirations. These figures are similar data from the national LSYPE: in 2006 at age 16, 84% of the sample wanted to stay on in education post-16 and 58.3% wanted to go on to university (Attwood and Croll 2011).

Table 2. Frequencies of coded responses to 'Please write down goals, hopes, and plans you have'. Note that each participant has up to five response opportunities.

First level codes	Second codes	level	Description	Year 11			
				zTotal	%	Total	%
Career	C		Non-specific job/'good job'	114	5.4	150	6.5
	C1		Manual work, e.g. Fitness instructor, postal worker, factory worker, hairdresser, etc	25	1.2	8	0.3
	C2		Well paid/Professional job – Doctor, scientist, accountant, teacher, sports player/coach, games designer, 'promotion'	309	14.8	346	14.9
	C3		Skilled manual, e.g. Police officer, builder, childminder, armed forces	99	4.7	84	3.6
	C4		Own business	31	1.5	31	1.3
			Career Total	578	27.6	619	26.3
Community	Comm		Helping others, charity work	22	1.1	44	1.9
Education	E1		Higher Education (look at end goal e.g. 'get A grades so I can go to uni' =E1)	209	10.0	400	17.2
	E2		Other educational goal – finish course, pass A levels (no mention of HE), Apprenticeship	450	21.5	186	8.0
			Education total	659	31.5	586	25.3
Health	H1		Wanting to be fit, to live long	10	0.3	14	0.6
Image	I		Fame/reference to famous people, admiration of others, beautiful wife, ASBOs	47	1.2	43	1.9
Lifestyle	L1		Travel – Holidays (including space), work abroad, gap year	143	6.8	194	8.4
	L2		Sex	3	0.1	9	0.4
	L3		Own home, Independence	61	2.9	74	3.2
	L4		Work/life balance and Retirement	5	0.2	9	0.4
			Lifestyle total	212	10.1	286	12.3
Personal growth	PG		Be happy, wanting to better themselves, driving test, excel at chosen sport (if professionally C2), write a book/play, gaming achievements	213	10.2	315	13.6
Relationships	R1		Family (including wanting to do well to please family, wanting to buy things for family)	180	8.6	208	9.0
	R2		Pets	11	0.5	9	0.4
	R3		Friendships	21	1.0	15	0.7
			Relationships total	212	10.1	232	10.0
Wealth	W1		Money – to be comfortable, have enough	43	2.1	64	2.8
	W2		Expensive possessions – cars etc, Not own home unless they specify 'mansion', 'huge house'	50	2.4	59	2.5
	W3		To be rich, loads of money, wealthy	49	2.3	58	2.5
			Wealth total	142	6.8	181	7.8
Total				2095	100	2320	100
	Blank		No response	1659		2227	
	Spoof		Silly answers e.g. 'to have a pint with God'	89		77	
	None		Stated 'none'	22		16	

Table 3.   Responses to 'What do you hope to do when you leave school or college?'.

	Y11		Y13	
	N	%	N	%
Get a job at age 16	37	5.6	n/a	n/a
Get a job with training at age 16	54	8.1	n/a	n/a
Continue studying and get a job at age 18+	201	30.2	151	17.8
Study to go to university at age 18+	330	49.5	576	67.8
Other	44	6.6	122	14.4
Total	666	100	849	100

Table 4.   Responses to 'What type of job would you like to do in the future'.

Job	Y11		Y13	
	N	%	N	%
Fitness instructor, hairdresser, postal worker, factory worker, cleaner, caretaker, farm worker, waiter, security guard	25	4.2	21	3.2
Doctor, scientist, lawyer, architect, vet, accountant, teacher, hospital nurse, journalist, manager, artist, musician, sports player/coach	293	49.5	406	62.0
Police officer, fire officer, secretary, nursery nurse, office clerk, electrician, builder, childminder, motor mechanic, clothes designer	132	22.3	93	14.2
Run my own small business	59	10.0	61	9.3
I do not really want a paid job	10	1.7	5	0.8
I do not know what job I want	73	12.3	69	10.5
Total	592	100	655	100

Additionally, when asked specifically which group of jobs contained those most like the one they would like to do in the future (Table 4), the professional category was by far the most popular. This again demonstrates high career aspirations, and is similar to the LSYPE data, where approximately 60% of respondents at age 16 aspired to a professional job (Gutman and Schoon 2012).

Life satisfaction

Many responses to the 'hopes, goals and plans' question were about careers and education. This was hardly surprising, given the context of the survey: administered by and completed in school. A substantial minority of responses focused on other aspects of life, such as personal growth (12.0%) and relationships (10.0% responses). Responses coded as personal growth focused on personal development (such as 'advance my skills in photography', and 'become a better person') and life satisfaction, such as enjoying work and life. Relationships referred to the development of future relationships, current family relationships (such as 'to make my family proud of me'), friendship (e.g. 'have a good social life with friends') and pets. These responses tended to be given after the career and educational ones, however, their prevalence suggests that life satisfaction is also important to young people.

Responses to questions on the extent to which young people believe that academic achievement will support their aspirations (Table 5) add to our understanding of this. Participants linked, to some extent, educational attainment with job prospects: the majority of responses indicated that the statement 'Getting good grades in school or college will not

Table 5. Frequencies of responses to the survey items on the link between education and career, taken from 'Scepticism about relevance of school for future success' subscale of the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey (Midgeley et al. 1998).

	Not at all		A little true		Very true	
	Y11	Y13	Y11	Y13	Y11	Y13
Even if I do well in school or college, it will not help me have the kind of life I want when I leave	55 8.5%	57 7.7%	198 30.5%	244 32.8%	397 61.1%	444 59.6%
My chances of succeeding in later life do not depend on doing well in school or college	101 15.5%	91 12.2%	194 29.8%	259 34.78%	355 54.6%	394 53.0%
Doing well in school or college does not improve my chances of having a good life when I leave	76 11.7%	69 9.3%	181 27.9%	208 28.1%	392 60.4%	463 62.6%
Getting good grades in school or college will not guarantee that I will get a good job when I leave	132 20.6%	167 22.7%	309 48.1%	339 46.0%	201 31.3%	231 31.3%
Even if I am successful in school or college, it will not help me fulfil my dreams	74 11.5%	77 10.6%	245 37.9%	248 34.3%	327 50.6%	399 55.1%
Doing well in school or college will not help me have a satisfying career when I leave	71 11.1%	81 11.2%	234 36.5%	246 34.1%	336 52.4%	395 54.7%

guarantee that I will get a good job when I leave' was either 'not at all true' (21.7%) or only 'a little true' (47.0%). However, other questions referred more generally to 'the kind of life I want', 'succeeding in later life', 'having a good life', 'fulfilling my dreams' and 'having a satisfying career'. The majority of respondents (53.0–61.6%, across the five items) believed that doing well in school or college would not help them achieve these outcomes. This indicates that young people's educational and career aspirations are distinct from more general aspirations around life satisfaction. While the 'hopes, goals and plans' question revealed that qualifications and good grades are important to young people, there is a distinct trend here towards the attitude that education is not necessarily *sufficient* to help young people achieve what they want to in life, or even to help them realise a satisfying career (as opposed to a 'good' or well-paid job). It would appear, then, that young people believe that education will afford them some options, and make it easier for them to gain employment, but this alone will not make them happy or enable them to get what they want from life.

Support from school or college

The majority of respondents believed that their school or college helped them to be the kind of person they wanted to be either 'a little' or 'very much' (Table 6), with a much

Table 6. Response frequencies to '*My school or college helps me to be the kind of person I want to be*'.

	Year 11		Year 13	
Not at all	113	16.3%	77	10.0%
A little	447	64.6%	430	55.8%
Very much	132	19.1%	264	34.2%
Total	692		771	

higher proportion of Y13 than Y11 saying their school or college had helped them 'very much'. This may be due to the type of support institutions offer in Years 12 and 13, around applications to higher or further education for example.

Participants were also asked open questions, about the ways in which their school helped or did not help them be the kind of person they wanted to be. Coded responses to the open question on institutional support were grouped into three broad themes: personal; educational; and career. The largest of these themes was personal issues (47% of Y11 responses and 43% of Y13 responses). Participants described how educational institutions helped them to develop personal qualities, around independence, confidence, responsibility, determination and self-discipline, for example: '*It has helped me realise my strengths and weaknesses, and I have become more focused and determined*', and '*I am more confident, I believe in my ability to produce excellent work*'. The development of friendships and working relationships as well as more general social skills was also included in this theme. Encouragement to succeed in education, such as '*they have shown me how important it is to work hard*' fell under this theme too: this type of comment was taken to be about personal qualities such as determination and motivation.

The education theme (38% of Y11 and Y13 responses) focused on qualifications, learning (such as 'they have encouraged my academic learning, helping me to reach my full potential - specifically in maths, which is highly important for my preferred career choice'), and the range of curricular and extra provision (such as Connexions, Duke of Edinburgh, and careers events). A minority of responses (15% of Y11 responses and 20% of Y13 responses) focused on career support, such as information and help with planning career pathways.

Coded responses to the open question about how institutions had not been supportive were grouped into four broad themes: personal; learning; careers; and general. Again, the personal theme was the most prevalent (44% of Y11 responses and 42% of Y13 responses). Young people's comments suggested that they felt a lack of respect from their institutions, for themselves as individuals, and a lack of agency, for example '*occasionally I feel that my opinions aren't heard or are dismissed and that makes me frustrated and angry which is not the type of person I want to be*'. This aligned with issues around identity, for example '*you are made to be like everyone else and can not have your own identity i.e. hair colour*'.

Learning was also a frequently occurring theme (38% of Y11 responses and 40% of Y13 responses). This included problems around resources, institutional policies (such as '*Keeping us in school when we have no lessons. This is very tedious, teachers clearly do not trust us to go home and study and therefore keep us trapped here like weedy uniformed school children*'), the amount and content of work expected and the institution being too focused on academic success (e.g. '*equating self-worth with grades = fundamentally wrong*').

The lack of career support was mentioned by a minority of participants (8% of Y11 responses and 11% of Y13 responses), for example, '*it hasn't helped me decide what I would like to do for a full time job after education*' and '*the staff don't give much support if you're not going to university, so basically you only get support if you're carrying on with education*'. A small number of participants (10% of Y11 responses and 7% of Y13 responses) gave general answers such as '*not enough help*'.

Our data indicate that personal development and happiness, as well as academic attainment and future career, are important to young people. The role of the school in helping young people to high levels of educational attainment and meet their career goals is relatively uncontested. The question now arises of how schools can ensure the rounded development of young people, meeting all their developmental needs.

Discussion

In keeping with previous literature (e.g. Chowdry et al. 2009), our findings indicate that aspirations were high for this sample of students, in educational and career terms. In a longitudinal study of school pupils in England, Kelly (1989) found that only 8.2% of 17-year olds in the study aspired to professional or managerial positions. Twenty years on, our figures show a much higher proportion of young people (49.5% of Y11 and 62.0% of Y13 students) aspiring to professional or managerial positions and similar proportions (49.5 and 67.8% respectively) wishing to study at university. The Millburn Report (The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009, 16) shows that the proportion of workers in professional and managerial occupations in the UK has increased dramatically in the last 100 years, going from under 10% in 1911 to just under 40% in 2001. Therefore, young people now are no less realistic than they were in the past. Instead, there has been change in the opportunities available, especially with the increase in Higher Education places and the reduction in manual jobs (The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009, 86 and 17). With confounded changes in societal opportunities and state policies targeted at raising aspirations, it is impossible to untangle the impact of policy and these broader factors upon aspirations.

Students in our study viewed education as a facilitator but not a guarantee of future success in terms of their hopes, goals and dreams, and becoming the kind of person they wanted to be. Schools and colleges were recognised as having helped students develop both academically and personally in many cases. Where schools and colleges did not support students to develop in the way that they aspired, the issues often involved respecting them as individuals or poor career planning support.

While young people have high-educational and career aspirations, they also are seeking to balance this with happiness and feelings of fulfilment. Most of the existing literature on young people's aspirations focuses solely on educational and, to a lesser extent, career pathways. The use of an open-ended question about aspirations in this survey revealed the limitations of this approach: if young people are motivated and directed by their aspirations, as Eccles (2009) suggested, then we need to understand more than just the level of education they are seeking and the type of career they would like. A key contribution of this paper, then, is the use of a much more open-ended approach to studying young people's aspirations, allowing us to understand the importance of life satisfaction to young people when they are considering their futures. There has been a tendency in the literature to consider aspirations through a functional lens of an educational and policy system which focuses on qualifications and employment. We argue, however, that education is not just about preparation for employment, but is about preparation for life more broadly: and our methodological stance on aspiration, from the perspective of young people themselves, reflects this.

While this study is useful in that it asks an open question about what students' hopes, goals and dreams are, and has a wide-ranging sample, there are certain methodological limitations. An electronic survey enables a large sample size, but not enough is known about survey implementation in participating institutions. Project advisors were asked for a representative sample of young people in each year group, with tutor groups suggested as a sampling strategy. However, low numbers of responses from some institutions and high numbers from others indicated a range of sampling strategies and we cannot be sure how representative the sample is. Further, surveys were probably completed under a range of conditions: we cannot tell whether peers or teachers were present at the time, which may have biased the results.

Unfortunately this sample is not longitudinal – we do not have destination data for the sample. Other research has looked at the development of aspirations and outcomes over

time (e.g. Shildrick and MacDonald 2007; Yates et al. 2010; Schoon and Polek 2011) but our sample was cross-sectional: we cannot see how the hopes, goals and dreams of these young people change as they progress through education and into employment.

Findings in this study have not been analysed by case institutions. Aspirations are shaped in different ways for different groups of people (e.g. Reay et al. 2005) and evidence from the case studies suggest that schools and the local environment influence career choices in different ways. The careers advisor at a rural 11–16 school in an area where there were few job opportunities, for example, described activity days and career events run for the school by the army; another coastal school emphasised fishing and associated careers. Other institutions placed less emphasis on particular careers and appeared to take a wider, more open approach to career support. Further analysis of the survey data on a case-by-case basis may indicate whether such mechanisms have an impact on young people's aspirations.

Conclusion

As Payne's (2003) pragmatic rationality theory of aspiration entails, today's youth have to adapt their aspirations to the vagaries their likely fortunes. Hayward and Wiliams (2011, 185) pointed out that their destinies are highly influenced by the localised opportunities available and those are unevenly distributed across the country.

At the levels of nations and of individuals, education is about planning for the future. Students in this research were at critical decision points in their educational careers in the academic year 2007/8, just before the global recession. They were choosing their GCSE and A-level subjects, hoping and planning for their futures. David Cameron, in the 2012 Conservative Party Leader conference speech, said that 'the mission for this government is to build an aspiration nation' (The Independent 2012). Our data show that young people have no shortage of aspiration. The context in which these young people find themselves, however, is one of reduced opportunities in an austerity state. Coinciding with the introduction of tuition fees of £9000 in English universities and for English students attending other UK universities, UCAS (2012) statistics showed that applications to university were 7.0% lower in 2012 than in the previous year. Furthermore, over one-fifth of 16–24-year olds are unemployed (Office for National Statistics 2012, 13). This highlights the reduced opportunity for young people in education and employment. However, it is easier for governments to encourage young people to be aspirational than it is for them to generate wider opportunities through economic development. Nonetheless, the message of this research is clear: young people are highly aspirational, but they need opportunity to unleash those aspirations.

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