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Can Community-Based Interventions on Aspirations Raise Young People's Attainment?

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Against the background of the 'Inspiring Communities' programme to raise 'community-level' educational aspirations in England, this article considers whether the existing evidence about place and aspirations suggests that it will be beneficial.

We address three questions: Do neighbourhoods have an influence on educational attainment? Are 'community level' aspirations a mechanism by which neighbourhoods affect individual aspirations? Is there evidence that aspirations are lower in poor neighbourhoods?

The article suggests that the available evidence does not lead to firm conclusions; a key problem is that few studies have measured aspirations at a neighbourhood level. It suggests that limited spending on a pilot is a reasonable response. However, aspirations are shaped by a wide range of other influences. This suggests that any interventions on 'community' aspirations' should be conjoined with other programmes to support schools and to address inequalities between neighbourhoods.

Introduction

The New Labour government in England 1997–2010 was concerned with narrowing gaps between poor neighbourhoods and others on a wide range of indicators including educational attainment, and also with closing attainment gaps between schools and between individuals from low-income backgrounds and their peers. This prompted investment in the most disadvantaged schools and additional inputs for disadvantaged learners and their families, as well as by laying a stronger foundation for young children through the Sure Start programme (Lupton *et al.*, 2009).

During 2008, a consensus seemed to build up across Westminster departments that 'aspirations may be a key lever in improving a number of outcomes including educational participation and education'.[1] This followed the identification of aspirations as a policy focus by Gordon Brown on his becoming Prime Minister in 2007 (Brown, 2007). The Social Exclusion Taskforce (SET), working in partnership with the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG), then commissioned a review of evidence on aspirations in disadvantaged communities, in which the authors participated.

The findings from the review (SET, 2008) provided background for the social mobility white paper *New Opportunities: Fair Chances for the Future* (Cabinet Office, 2009). This document announced measures to increase young people's aspirations via a new

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programme known as 'Inspiring Communities' (see Department for Communities and Local Government *et al.*, 2009). This will spend £450,000 over two years to each of fifteen deprived neighbourhoods containing 5,000–10,000 people. The target group is 11–14-year olds and the intended outcomes are increased attainment at Key Stages 3 and 4, as well as a narrowing of attainment gaps between children on Free School Meals and others. Plans will be locally developed, but with the aims of broadening horizons, providing advice and inspiring young people, raising parents' aspirations and self-confidence and also developing social networks within and outside the community, drawing on community talents to support young people. The key feature of the programme is its emphasis on joining up interventions aimed at children, parents and the community, with the clear implication that not only do young people have lower aspirations in disadvantaged communities, but that low aspirations are shared by parents and other adults. The application pack for prospective projects stressed the importance of partnership working, including aligning initiatives and pooling budgets, as well empowering citizens and the community to address their own low aspirations.

The successful projects were announced in 2009 and their delivery is now under way. They cover England from Cumbria to Kent and the activities funded are extremely varied; most projects have several different elements and no two projects are alike. At this stage, they cannot be evaluated; indeed part of their rationale is to build an evidence base on neighbourhood-based approaches. At the time of writing, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition elected in May 2010 had not announced its plans for Inspiring Communities.

In this article, we review whether existing knowledge gives reason to think that neighbourhood-based interventions to tackle aspirations will be a fruitful way to close the achievement gap between children from low-income families and others, when they are living in the poorest neighbourhoods. There is a relationship between young people's aspirations and their educational attainment (see Gutman and Akerman, 2008; Khoo and Ainley, 2005; Strand, 2010). The purpose of the article is not to advance knowledge of that relationship but to ask whether neighbourhoods (and neighbourhood-based interventions) are likely to make any difference. We review what the literature tells us on three questions:

- Do neighbourhoods have an effect on educational attainment?
- Are 'community-level' aspirations a mechanism by which neighbourhoods affect educational attainment?
- Is there empirical evidence that aspirations are lower in disadvantaged neighbourhoods?

Neighbourhood effects on educational attainment

A first question is whether neighbourhood has any effect on educational outcomes. Is the attainment of some children advanced, and of others held back, by the characteristics of the neighbourhoods in which they live? This is part of a larger question about the influence of neighbourhoods and communities on life chances, in particular whether disadvantaged neighbourhoods impose additional disadvantages on their already disadvantaged residents. As a general question, it has been the subject of a lively international research enquiry that is not fully resolved. There has been a large number of empirical studies that have focused variously on outcomes for individuals, such as income,

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employment, occupation, sexual activity, fertility, health, criminality and children's development as well as education, and there are many surveys of the literature (e.g. Jencks and Mayer, 1990; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sampson, 2001; Sampson *et al*., 2002; Ellen and Turner, 2003; Blasius *et al*., 2007). Although there are alternative conceptualisations which suggest that community in poor neighbourhoods may be beneficial to poor residents (e.g. Cheshire *et al*., 2008) and some competing evidence of the importance of neighbourhoods (e.g. Bolster *et al*., 2007), so far, conclusions lean towards the view that although 'neighbourhood effects' are real and have an influence on life chances, the distinctive influence of neighbourhood is not as important as other influences, particularly family background.

There is still relatively little evidence, though, on associations between neighbourhood and educational attainment, especially in the UK. Overall, quantitative evidence tends to suggest that there is a neighbourhood effect on attainment, over and above the effect of individual and household characteristics, but that this is relatively small.

Young children

There is some evidence of neighbourhood effects on young children. McCulloch and Joshi (2000), using UK data, show neighbourhood effects on test scores for children aged four to five, but not for older children. In the USA, Brooks-Gunn *et al*. (1993) found neighbourhood effects on development outcomes at age three. These findings are interesting because children of this age will have had little exposure to formal education, nor had much exposure to the neighbourhood. This suggests that effects are working indirectly through parents and raises the question about at whom interventions should be targeted. It also means that neighbourhood effects at older ages may be under-estimated if we are looking for effects over and above the baseline of early years attainment.

Older children and young people

For older children and young people, there is also some evidence of neighbourhood effects. There is quantitative evidence from the US and Australia of neighbourhood effects on school drop-out rates (Brooks-Gunn *et al*., 1993; Rosenbaum, 1995; Overman, 2002). Rosenbaum also found neighbourhood effects on college participation rates.

For the UK, Gibbons (2002), using data from the National Child Development Study (NCDS) (1958 birth cohort), found neighbourhood effects on 'A-level' attainment. Children from the top 10 per cent most educationally advantaged neighbourhoods were between five and seven percentage points more likely to get 'A-levels' than children from similar family backgrounds living in neighbourhoods ranked in the bottom 10 per cent. These effects did not operate purely through the quality and mix of local secondary schools. Garner and Raudenbush (1991), using Scottish data from the 1980s, found neighbourhood effects on achievement at age sixteen, with a change in neighbourhood deprivation from the 90th to the 10th percentile being associated with a change in attainment equivalent to about two 'O'-level grade passes, after controlling for variations in schooling. Using Australian data, Jensen and Seltzer (2000) found that mean incomes, unemployment, educational attainment and the percentage employed in professional

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occupations in a neighbourhood had statistical associations with young people's decisions to stay on in education.

Galster *et al*. (2007) using US income data matched with census tracts examined neighbourhood poverty and its impacts on the likelihood of graduating from high school and graduating from college. They found that neighbourhood poverty reduced the likelihood of graduating from high school by 14 percentage points (15 per cent of the mean) and that of graduating from college by 10 percentage points (70 per cent of the mean), controlling for other factors. They conclude also that neighbourhood poverty was a stronger influence than several other contextual factors, if not stronger than parents' incomes and educational achievements.

Bell (2003) used GCSE results from the early 2000s, and found an association between neighbourhood poverty levels and GCSE outcomes, conditional on prior attainment at Key Stage 3, and including data from OFSTED on teaching quality. This study did not include individual and family variables, so cannot be used in the same way to demonstrate additional neighbourhood effects. Its main finding is a strong relationship between neighbourhood poverty and teacher quality: the poorer the area, the worse the teaching – so part of the apparent neighbourhood effect was in fact a school effect.

Sanbonmatsu *et al*. (2006), in a paper summarising aspects of the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experiment in the USA, found no beneficial influence was obtained by children moving from poor to less poor neighbourhoods on educational outcomes, including reading and maths scores, behaviour, school engagement and school problems, either among children who were pre-schoolers at the time of the move, or among older children. This contrasts with earlier results from the same set of studies, such as Orr *et al*. (2003), who found mild influences. The authors provide various explanations for their null results, including sampling issues, that neighbourhood moves were only accompanied by modest improvements in the schools that were attended, that many of the destinations were only marginally less poor than the origin neighbourhoods and none was truly affluent, and that moving schools proved disruptive to children's education. However, in noting that the MTO experiments do show positive gains in other areas, such as health and criminalisation, they conclude that interventions based purely on neighbourhoods are not going to solve the problems of children growing up in poverty. Another study which has concluded there are no neighbourhood effects on education is Kaupinnen (2004) for Finland.

It is difficult to draw clear conclusions from these data as they were gathered at different places and times using different techniques and different data sets, and reached different views about both the magnitude of neighbourhood effects and whether they are direct or indirect. Nor is it clear on the mechanisms by which neighourhoods impact on education; we are here in a world of associations, not causes. However, we are inclined to the view, along with most others who have reviewed the field (for example, Beauvais and Jenson, 2003), that disadvantaged neighbourhoods are problematic for children and young people's educational achievements.

Community-level aspirations

Evidence of neighbourhood effects on education does not in itself point to the fact that community-level aspirations have a key role in educational outcomes. It is not by any means agreed among researchers which processes of 'neighbourhood effects' are the most

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important, on whom do they impact most strongly and at which stages in the life course (Gibbons, 2002; Beauvais and Jenson, 2003; Galster, 2007a and 2007b). While some empirical literature is unspecific on how place might impact on educational outcomes and simply reports the presence (or not) of statistical associations between education and place, there are three broad sets of hypotheses about neighbourhood effects.

The first is the idea of collective socialisation, that is that the behaviours and attitudes of an individual are directly influenced by those of their neighbours, and that those behaviours and attitudes are in turn directly influential on the individual's attainments in education and the labour market. It is also usually held that the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, which result from collective socialisation in disadvantaged areas, are systematically different to those in more affluent areas and that they inhibit educational attainment and so serve to further extend disadvantage. Most ideas about how neighbourhood effects work start with a view that negative impacts on individuals are most likely to occur where there is a concentration of poverty. However, some stress that disadvantaged groups are intensively marginalised, and thus disadvantaged further when living in close proximity with affluent groups.

There are myriad versions of the collective socialisation theory (see Beauvais and Jenson, 2003; Andersson *et al*., 2007; Galster, 2007a). These variously attribute importance to role models and peers, 'epidemic' effects after a certain threshold of a critical subset of the population has been reached, selective socialisation processes and social networks and information. In this sense the term 'community-level' aspirations is used as a proxy for social network/peer effects.

Aspirations, then, play a central role in these kinds of theories. Along with other types of behaviours and attitudes they are held to be instrumental, standing between individuals and how they acquit themselves in the wider labour market and society (e.g. Wilson, 1987; MacLeod, 1995). However, aspirations have not often been problematised or investigated specifically.

A second hypothesis is that disadvantaged neighbourhoods embody external factors, such as the physical environment and housing forms, that impose direct disadvantages, or that encourage certain types of social behaviour and interaction. These then affect residents' attitudes, including their aspirations. A key issue here is accessibility to local jobs, the extent of spatial mismatch between residential location and job location (Houston, 2005). Local services may just be worse in poor areas (Hastings *et al*., 2005). Exposure to environmental hazards may have knock-on effects on health and behavior and small and inadequate dwellings may encourage young people to associate on the streets and expose them to negative peer effects (Garner and Raudenbush, 1991; Kintrea *et al*., 2010). The level of home ownership in an area may affect the forms of social capital that exist, via differences in residential mobility, financial security and social status (Bramley and Karley, 2005). Externally held narratives of decline or reputations for violence, crime or worklessness may permeate everyday life as young people struggle for recognition and self-esteem in their dealings with the world outside (Howarth, 2002; Thomson, 2002).

Third, neighbourhoods contain, or overlap with, a set of private, public and voluntary sector institutions, and neighbourhood effects may work through them because they provide the scope for various forms of socialisation. In the present discussion, schools are a key local institution, although others such as libraries, learning services, community centres or youth services may also be important. Schools provide a site for social networking and co-learning, which may or may not be beneficial. There has been a long

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debate about whether and, if so, why the social composition or pupil mix within schools makes an independent difference to the educational outcomes of individual young people. Evidence on composition effects within schools is mixed, partly because of difficulties of data and methodology, and the quality of the evidence in this field has been questioned (Gorard, 2006). However, it tends to suggest that pupil mix effects do exist (e.g. Thrupp *et al*., 2002; Dumay and Dupriez, 2008; Kindermann, 2007; Hamnett *et al*., 2007). In thinking about explanations for educational outcomes, it may be difficult to distinguish between school composition effects and neighbourhood effects. Where school systems are tied to places through catchment areas, there are strong associations between the social characteristics of neighbourhoods and those of children in schools (Strand, 1997). Therefore, the policy response may lean as much to ensuring mixed school intakes and providing opportunities for learning among diverse groups as it does to action in the neighbourhood.

Schools are also likely to be influential in other ways. It is now well established that schools in disadvantaged areas are less likely to be well-rated in inspections (OFSTED, 2000). High levels of poverty exert downward pressure on school quality (Lupton, 2005); and teaching often works 'with the grain' of middle-class children, so disadvantaging those who are not (Lupton, 2004). Schools in poor areas also divert time and energy from teaching and learning though more time used up on discipline and parental liaison (Gewirtz, 1998). There may also be a higher staff turnover in more disadvantaged schools and staff may stereotype children's abilities and interests (Bauder, 2001; Dumay and Dupriez, 2008). Poor schools, combined with a negative experience of school, in turn impacts on the neighbourhood in terms of how well prepared local young people are for further and higher education, training and jobs.

To summarise this section, all three hypotheses of how neighbourhood effects work involve some role for aspirations; places affect aspirations, which in turn affect outcomes. However, some emphasise compositional characteristics – the influence of peers – while others emphasise the influence of physical and economic characteristics and the quality of institutions. These are likely to lead to a different emphasis in interventions.

Aspirations in disadvantaged neighbourhoods

We now examine evidence on the extent to which aspirations are lower in disadvantaged communities. There are few studies that have examined this directly, and many of these do not originate in the UK. However, there are many studies that consider the theme of how aspirations vary according to social group, and these can provide some reasonable, if incomplete, insights.

Aspirations appear not to be evenly distributed in society. Feinstein *et al*. (2004) discuss various ways in which parent's 'cognitions' (beliefs, attitudes, aspirations and expectations) may affect children's development, concluding that 'positive cognitions' by parents are associated with higher educational achievement. Importantly for our purposes, they also suggest that there is a correlation between the parents' educational level and having high aspirations for their children, although they note that identifying causal effects is difficult because of complex interactions between the beliefs and aspirations of parents and those of their children. Schoon and Parsons (2002), using NCDS data, conclude that parents' social class is a strong predictor both of aspirations and outcomes in education, a conclusion which is also shared by De Cevita *et al*. (2004) using Canadian data.

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International studies show that young people's own aspirations are also notably related to social class (Andres *et al*., 1999). They are also sometimes related to ethnicity, with minority students sometimes positioned as having undeveloped aspirations. However, some authors hold that 'low' aspirations are themselves in part a product of the low expectations that teachers often have of minority students (e.g. Fine *et al*., 2004). There is also evidence internationally and from the UK that some minority groups have notably high aspirations; Abrams (2006) describes high aspirations among students of Chinese and Indian origin in London regardless of their backgrounds, which were often modest, living in working-class areas and attending ordinary comprehensive schools. This is also supported by Bhatti (1999), Francis and Archer (2005) and Modood (2005). Strand and Winston (2008), from survey work in five schools in an English inner city find the same, and identify white working-class young people as the group with the lowest aspirations. Strand (2007), using the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), also reports ethnic differences in aspirations and that these made a difference to attainment. Aspirations appear to provide a bolster against the effects of poverty in some ethnic groups.

Some studies of children and families in poverty, however, do not support the idea that disadvantaged people have fundamentally different aspirations, but rather that their expectations, their sense of self-efficacy, their self-esteem, confidence and motivation are affected by their circumstances, leading either to a genuine reduction in aspirations or to an unwillingness to express them. Turok *et al*. (2008) and St Clair and Benjamin (2010), from a study of twelve- to thirteen-year olds in three UK schools, find little or no difference in aspirations among children and their parents from different backgrounds and different neighbourhoods. In a similar vein, McKendrick *et al*. (2007), from a survey among teenagers from a deprived estate, concluded that the teenagers were engaged in their schools and community and were ambitious for their futures. Calder and Cope (2005) found aspirations among disadvantaged young people and a control group were similar, but the former faced multiple barriers to reaching them and 'underachieved'.

The kinds of factors that could cause downshifts in aspirations and expectations include negative cultural expectations about school and studying and familial expectations that young people will contribute financially through rent or housekeeping, which both encourage early school leaving (Evans, 2006). There can be a tension between a desire for social mobility ('finding oneself') and a desire for social support and working-class identity, which means that following through on one's aspirations comes to mean 'losing oneself' (Reay, 2001). There is also the question of young people's experience in schools, which for working-class pupils can be negative (Bowman *et al*., 2000; Reay, 2002; Horgan, 2007). Increasing emphasis on testing, and on grouping by ability, can condition the aspirations and expectations of children from poor backgrounds who enter school at a disadvantage (e.g. Reay and William, 1999).

Considering the role of families, Power's (2007) longitudinal study of poor families found that parents were often highly aspirational, but that parenting hopes were far from becoming realities. Parents had difficulty in sustaining aspirations (and taking the necessary steps to see them through) due to often very difficult personal circumstances, including mental and other health problems, disrupted and conflictual relationships and the day-to-day difficulties of living in challenging neighbourhoods.

Few studies centre on the specific role of place in aspirations. At the city or regional level, areas which have undergone industrial restructuring have seen traditional paths

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to work blocked (Morris, 1995; McDowell, 2000) and the emergence of 'poor work' (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Studies of barriers to employment in deprived areas, taken together, suggest that there are compositional effects arising from the characteristics of the people who are concentrated in such areas, which influence the extent and variability of joblessness (Sanderson, 2006). Of course, many of the people who live in disadvantaged areas are there because they face personal difficulties and health problems which constrain residential choices. It is relatively easy to implicate micro-social process within the household as an element of these compositional effects (Gordon, 1996) and to recognize the phenomenon of 'discouraged workers' (Van Ham *et al*., 2001) in depressed labour markets, and to suppose that aspirations are also depressed (and are in turn influential on outcomes).

There is some evidence for this. Bowman *et al*. (2000) found that experiences of arbitrary and discriminatory employment practices operating within the local labour market in a disadvantaged area could disillusion people about the value of qualifications as a route to employment. Turok *et al*. (2008) found a small correlation between those young people who thought they would be able to get the job that they wanted and the Index of Multiple Deprivation, suggesting that those in the more deprived areas were less certain of their occupational destinations. The young people in Turok *et al*.'s (2008) study who worried about getting jobs also tended to be from the more disadvantaged areas, and it was also clear that the more deprived the area that young people lived in the less they enjoyed studying.

One of the few studies which links aspirations with local labour markets is that of Furlong and his colleagues (Biggart and Furlong, 1996; Furlong *et al*., 1996; Furlong and Biggart, 1999). They investigated young people's aspirations in schools in four towns in Scotland and concluded that local employment contexts had relatively little impact. Rather, the most important factor in aspiration was how confident they were in their own futures. However, boys (rather than girls) from working class backgrounds attending schools in areas with depressed labour markets tended to a greater extent to exhibit depressed aspirations.

A number of studies, including Green and White (2007 and 2008) and Kintrea *et al*. (2010) have documented the relatively small geographical horizons of young people who live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Young people therefore have limited exposure to wider opportunities, and it is fairly well established that opportunities for young people to go outside their neighbourhood, or to have exposure to other worlds, for example through mentoring, are valuable (e.g. Newburn and Shiner, 2005). Social network theorists (e.g. Wilson, 1987) also suggest that the visibility of a range of different role models within a neighbourhood (achieved by mixing communities) could be influential, although in practice, the evidence suggests that people from different social classes and tenures tend to occupy different social worlds and rarely come into contact (Atkinson and Kintrea, 2000; Allen *et al*., 2005), so the strength of these potential effects is unclear.

Again, it is difficult to make complete sense of the sometimes competing conclusions of these studies. There is a complicated, dynamic process going on that is not just about people having or lacking aspirations. The literature suggests that aspirations are subject to processes of adjustment and trade-offs over time, underlain by cultural conditioning and people's self-identities. Ridge (2002) has argued that children growing up in poverty can exclude themselves 'from within', when they begin to realise that some paths are seen as inappropriate for them or unaffordable. This can manifest as low motivation or aspiration.

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And while aspirations may to some extent differ between individuals and between groups in systematic ways, the bigger differences between groups are likely to be in the gap that opens up between aspirations and expectations. That gap appears to be influenced by a range of factors; they certainly include peer relations and social networks within neighbourhoods, but, on the available evidence, it would be hard to say that these have the central role. Adjustments also take place against a background of the labour market, schools and the wider society.

Conclusions and discussion

We cannot conclude definitively from the available evidence either that aspirations are lower in disadvantaged neighbourhoods or that distinctive drivers in those neighbourhoods have significant effects on young people's aspirations and, through them, their attainment. The latter point is particularly hard to establish. The mechanisms producing neighbourhood effects, especially in relation to the role of aspirations, are neither particularly well theorised nor well tested. However, neither can we conclude that aspirations are not lower in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and that there are no neighbourhood effects. The problem is that few studies have actually measured aspirations at the neighbourhood level. It would appear that high aspirations are associated with higher social class and parental education (De Civita *et al.*, 2004; Andres *et al.*, 1999). Given this, it would not be surprising to find lower aspirations, in aggregate, in more disadvantaged neighbourhoods, even if this has not yet been well demonstrated by survey evidence. On this basis, a limited investment in a pilot scheme, such as Aspiring Communities, would appear to be a reasonable response.

It should be borne in mind, however, that disadvantaged communities in the UK are very diverse; they differ in their economic structure, location, transport and connectivity (Green and White, 2007), historical evolution and identity (Robertson *et al.*, 2008) and current social and demographic mix. As we discuss above, some young people and parents from some ethnic minority groups have particularly high career and educational aspirations, and, in communities where these groups are the majority, an expectation of educational success may prevail, accompanied by a purposive structuring of young people's social relations and leisure time. Interventions need to be targeted at the right neighbourhoods; for the present a bottom-up 'challenge fund' seems a reasonable approach.

Moreover, what appears to be low aspiration may actually be evidence of low esteem, low self-efficacy or low motivation, and while neighbourhoods are sites of the social construction of identities and attitudes, these will still differ widely between individuals. Personal experiences and characteristics, including self-efficacy, gender, age, stage in the life course, social class and ethnicity, are all influential. In thinking about possible interventions around aspirations, this probably means that there would be a benefit to identifying distinctive target groups rather than communities as a whole.

A second conclusion is that the focus should not assume that people start from a position of lack of aspiration. Some studies suggest that both parents and children in poorer neighbourhoods tend to express high aspirations, at least when children are relatively young (e.g. Turok *et al.*, 2008; St Clair and Benjamin, 2010). Generalised high aspirations (for example, to do well in education) may simply be tempered by expectations that are in tune with people's own experiences, appearing as a low aspiration to others.

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Consistent with this, the evidence we have reviewed shows that there is a variety of mechanisms operating at the local level that impact on the formation and, importantly, on the sustenance of aspirations. These include quality and experiences of schooling, labour market constraints and employment practices, neighbourhood connectivity, environments and reputation, the availability of information and household financial constraints. Given these multiple influences on aspirations, we would suggest both that an exclusive emphasis on social networks and peer processes (which produce 'community level aspirations') would be misplaced and also that tackling aspirations directly as an object of policy is likely prove difficult.

This is not to say that we believe that a policy focus on aspirations is a mistaken attempt to blame the disadvantaged for their own condition and to absolve the state for its responsibilities (see Raco, 2009). But, given historical and contemporary conditions, aspirations may be hard to raise and even harder to sustain. Rather than focusing on whether or not there are aspirations in the community and trying to raise them, a more fruitful approach might be to focus on the mechanisms by which aspirations are eroded. The evidence suggests that some of these are related to local social networks, others to the effect of local resources and institutions.

This means that interventions need to be progressed on a number of fronts simultaneously and probably interactively. Tackling 'community-level aspirations' is unlikely to be successful on a wide scale unless the local schools, environment, labour market and neighbourhood reputation are also improved. Achieving greater equality in the conditions and composition of neighbourhoods, schools and classes is much more fundamental. At the same time that the Inspiring Communities initiative was launched, the Labour government's coordinated efforts to equalise neighbourhood conditions through the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal were fizzling out. Since the election of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government there is even less emphasis on neighbourhood renewal as an activity of government, instead it wants to rely more on voluntary effort. There is also an emphasis on school autonomy by the coalition, and across many fields large public expenditure cuts are planned or expected. These developments are problematic for disadvantaged areas, and it is obviously beyond the Inspiring Communities projects to tackle bigger issues, such as local economic development or school admissions, which provide the context for the formation and the nurturing (or disappointment) of aspirations.

Although it does not seem to make much sense to promote 'community aspirations' on their own, actions could support and be supported by other interventions that tackle institutions or environments. In other words, they could work in tandem. Thus, where a school has been successfully 'turned around', or where there is evidence of investment in a community (rebuilding homes, a new school or the arrival of a new large-scale employer for example), these may provide a hook for work in the community that aims to build a different and more positive set of narratives and aspirations and to support the development of extended ties.

Similarly, programmes that address individual aspirations (for example, the Aimhigher programme to encourage aspiration to higher education) could also be tailored to local contexts and be bolstered by ongoing support, mentoring and guidance, to enable participants to negotiate hurdles like the expectation of a financial contribution to their family, or a lack of confidence in entering unknown territory. Thus, interventions to initiate higher aspirations must, in the relevant community context, also address motivation,

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esteem, efficacy and the genuine constraints that affect these. Since aspirations are held by different people within a community, there may be also mileage in linking programmes aimed at different constituencies, such that the parents of young people participating in Aimhigher or local school-based programmes are also involved and supported on an ongoing basis. A strategic and coordinated approach to raising aspirations in deprived communities would probably help to raise attainment.

Overall, we believe that the evidence reviewed here tends to the conclusion that the focus of any policy innovation around aspirations might be best placed on dismantling the barriers to high aspirations that people living in poor neighbourhoods often experience. It seems unlikely that a focus on raising aspirations in a generic sense across a whole community could be a success, at least not without also considering the context in which these aspirations are shaped. That said, there is hope for interventions that are well-targeted, closely integrated, and which deal with the specific mechanisms by which aspirations become suppressed. It remains to be seen what can be learned from the experience of Inspiring Communities.

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