

A critical analysis of the article ‘Educational aspirations among UK Young Teenagers: Exploring the role of gender, class and ethnicity’ (Berrington, Roberts and Tammes, 2016).

1.Introduction

By the time they start comprehensive school, most children have evolved meaningful ideas about their futures and whether they are likely to apply to universities. Despite having reduced in recent years, major socioeconomic gaps in participation in higher education (HE) in the United Kingdom (UK) still exist. Numerous research, especially traditional economic studies, have shown that young individuals from socially disadvantaged homes are less likely to pursue higher education since they have collected less information and skills over the course of their lives (human capital). This has shown the importance of socioeconomic status on decisions about HE (Declercq and Verboven, 2014). The intersectional effects of gender, class, and ethnicity on the progression to higher education have proven to be complex, making it difficult to understand the differences in HE participation (Department for Education, 2017).

This research uses an established positivist paradigm to illustrate there are many interconnected impacts on young people. To better understand the roles that several factors play in young people's aspirations for HE, this research article focuses on quantitative research by using surveys and questionnaires with multiple-choice answers. This study expands on earlier research by examining the intersections of different factors and the effects they have on teenagers' aspirations for higher education in the UK. For example, the (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014) inquiry into the 'Underachievement in Education by White Working-Class Children' found that there were greater concerns for the lack of aspirations held particularly by white, working-class boys. Instead of concentrating on the impact of just one component, this study examined the effects that gender, class, and ethnicity all had on a child's aspiration.

Higher education entry by background

Proportion of 18 year olds in England with a place in UK higher education, by UCAS' multiple equality measure, 2006-2017

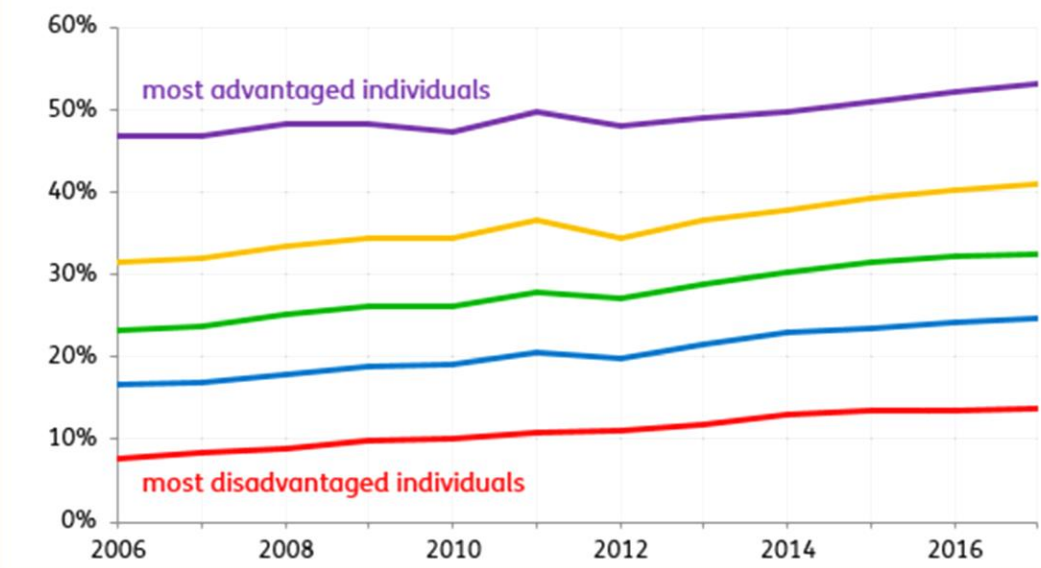


Figure 5.1 (UCAS, 2017).

4.Ethics

Ethics are ideas about what is morally right or wrong. Researchers should make sure that risks and harm are kept to a minimum and that children and young people are protected (Alderson and Morrow, 2011). There are ethical guidelines set which should be applied in any educational research (British Educational Research Association, 2018). These guidelines are in place so that the research remains integral and that the way the researchers conduct themselves is seen as ethical, justified, and sound.

Consent vs assent Consent refers to the permission given by parents/appropriate adults for the child to participate whereas assent is the agreement given by the child/young person to participate in the research. Importantly, despite having no legal standing, the assent of children and young people is required in addition to parental agreement since it is acknowledged as an essential component of research ethics involving minors.

In any research, participants will be asked to give informed consent to confirm that they have understood the information about the study and that they agree to voluntarily participate in the research project, based on the information provided (Robert-Holmes, 2014, p.49). The participants in this research are split into two groups: those over the age of 16 and those aged between 10-15 years. According to NSPCC (2022), any person under the age of 18 is a child. It is essential that the child and the gatekeepers are given full information about the research, that they freely volunteer to participate and that they are made aware that they can withdraw at any time from the research.

There is truly little information on the ethics of this study, however, it is stated that consent was given by parents in 76% of cases and so it can be assumed that parental consent was obtained, and the research was carried out ethically in that sense. Explanations and questions must use audience-appropriate language to ensure that the research's meaning is not hidden behind technical jargon. According to Alderson (2012), research without assent could deny children the right to make truly informed decisions and so challenges whether the children who have taken part in the questionnaires of this study have really understood the purpose of it and whether their answers are truly reflective of their aspirations. Contrary to this, some argue that assent is complex and recommend a much-needed individualized approach, considering the children's age, cognitive ability, and parents views into account (Oulton *et al*, 2016).

2.Background

Uncovering the authors' credentials is vital in ensuring the article is credible (McGeough and Rudick, 2017). This article has proven to be written by three authors who are all professors in their respective fields of study, Peter Tammes, a quantitative researcher who has a background in sociology, and Ann Berrington, a professor of demography and social statistics. Their experience further validates their credibility as authors because it demonstrates that they have knowledge of the subject area and can carry out research effectively. Furthermore, this peer-reviewed journal will have been scrutinized by other experts in the field, increasing the authors' credibility and solidifying the reliability of their research.

The focus of this research sets out to certify that there is not just one factor that affects the aspirations that young people hold toward higher levels of education, instead, there are many factors that contribute, particularly gender, class, and ethnicity. The message is apparent in that it dissects the factors individually, defining the issues and supporting them with policies and evidence. "Educational aspiration" is defined clearly as the reflection of a person's goals or desires to reach a particular level of education and in this case, their hopes to go on to HE (Gorard *et al.*, 2012). The level of detail in this research regarding definitions makes the hypothesis clear.

5.Findings

This study highlights the importance of evaluating the different variables which affect the aspirations of young people. The study has found that gender, class, and ethnicity all impact educational aspirations and that they all interlink. Overall, boys were much less likely to aspire to higher education (58%) compared to girls (74%). Significantly, 66% of all participants between the age of 10 and 15 hoped to go to college/university, concluding that young people's aspirations for higher education remain high. The results of this study support the UK government's concerns about the low numbers of white, working-class males applying to higher education, as these characteristics have an additive influence on this group's goals in this area. This is also supported by research carried out by Stahl (2015) whose data found that working-class boys contend with "reconceptualizing power while maintaining and reaffirming a working-class identity" whilst trying to represent themselves as valuable. It was concluded that work held greater value than post-compulsory education in the opinions of these boys studied.

The significant differences in higher educational aspirations by gender, ethnicity and class are highlighted when comparing boys from working class backgrounds with girls from middle-class backgrounds and teenagers from non-white ethnic backgrounds. The results are consistent with studies observing similar trends of rising HE participation among teenagers from the Black Caribbean (Crawford & Greaves 2015). According to studies supporting the ethnic capital effect (Modood and Khattab, 2015), ethnic minority parents had stronger aspirations for their children's education, which in turn made those children more likely to be enthusiastic about school and further education. Again, the authors support their results with relevant sources that also claim that parental involvement in children's schooling can raise those children's goals. The importance of providing direct examples of other similar research is paramount and has been successfully done in this article, highlighting the author's understanding of the topic as they have thoroughly researched the issues.

Ultimately, there are limitations within this study and the authors recognize this within the article. Despite the large sample size, they acknowledge that the sample sizes among certain minority ethnic groups of teenagers is relatively small. An ethnic boost was put in place to allow for exploration of whether the relationship between teenager's educational aspirations differ between ethnicities. With most responding participants being white (3217 out of 4899), it cannot be fully reflective of society. According to (Font and Mendez, 2013, p.18), all social surveys face the problem of high non-response rates, and this is particularly evident with ethnic minorities. They argue this because a person from an ethnic minority background may not trust the survey, particularly if they have faced racism or are limited by their ability to speak English. The response rate could be higher if the questionnaires were translated into 'minority' languages. Yet, this would be expensive to carry out and impractical in that the UK is so diverse, that there are many languages spoken, so it would be near impossible to say that all 'ethnic languages' had been accounted for.

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6.Discussion

This paper undoubtedly extends and updates existing research on educational aspirations among young people. The title sets this out clearly and the tone appropriate for the research discussed. As quantitative researchers, the authors have not used emotion-provoking language in the title or anywhere throughout the article as they remain unbiased and objective throughout. Despite a lengthy introduction, there are in-depth definitions included and historical context sprinkled throughout. Contextualizing the issues sets the tone of the research's purpose and foreshadows any real impact and value it will have for this area of study.

The discussion of the paper is relevant and is supported by a range of literature. Relevant theory and policy have been referenced throughout, most of it being current (for the year 2016), assuring reviewers that an extensive literature review was undertaken when the article was written. The discussion is valuable as it rounds off what the findings are and how they relate to the objective of the research. However, for the survey to provide more evidence on educational aspirations and highlight any initiatives that could be in place to promote social mobility, there should be information collected on aspirations but also expectations. The authors acknowledge that aspirations do not always translate into expectations or participation. Therefore, there could be information missed which would suggest that there are more/fewer young people partaking in or expected to go to university than there are people wanting to go.

The use of questionnaires has produced quantitative data which is extremely limited in understanding the attitudes of young people as the results are based on numerical responses and so there is less of an insight into the thoughts and motivations of the people you study. However, the researchers have looked at different viewpoints and considered different frameworks when conducting this research. The adaptation of the developmental-context concept meant that the whole research project could be based on the objective that there are numerous, interconnected impacts on an individual's life, and this has been investigated in relation to aspiration. The analytical approach used in the research method allowed the authors to break down a complex subject into smaller parts, to better understand it and the intersection of all three factors.

7.Conclusion

Explanations for educational aspirations among UK teenagers based on gender, class or ethnicity do not explain the nuances in the data and interaction between these variables. In conclusion, all three variables are important influences on a young person's aspirations: especially in college and university. The researchers have successfully shown that by secondary school age, most children have decided whether they would like to go to university. The study has also highlighted the real influence that parental attitudes have on a child and the effect this has on their ambitions. Using relevant theory, policy, and sources, the article is well-supported and has remained objective throughout. Despite not being revolutionary in its findings, the research has solidified past work by identifying reoccurring patterns in similar research projects. It is important for research like this to be explored further and constantly developed. This would make it possible for the government to launch initiatives to better recognize the factors that can prevent children from achieving their educational goals. The UK is ever-changing and diversifying and so the future of higher educational aspirations will develop too: reflecting societal views. There is sufficient legislation and policies in place to protect children and young people in research projects and it is vital that more research on this subject is continued. Despite diversities and inequalities, the fact that young people's aspirations for higher education remain high is something to celebrate.

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