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Can we put the ‘poverty of aspiration’ myth to bed now?

This briefing paper uses responses from parents and children in the birth cohort study *Growing Up in Scotland*¹ to dispel the myth of the ‘poverty of aspiration’ widely used in education and policy circles in Scotland and beyond.

Background

Children’s less successful progress in education is often blamed on their, and/or their parents’, poor aspirationsⁱⁱ. This has become known as the ‘poverty of aspiration’. Aspirations have become a key educational policy driver in Scotland and the rest of the UK and are seen as critical levers for closing the attainment gap between children and young people of high and low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Yet the existing evidence claims that children living in poverty **do** have high aspirations for themselves, although the jobs they aspire to are often of the gendered variety familiar to them within the context of their knowledge and experience, such as hairdressers or mechanicsⁱⁱⁱ. That is to say that *‘aspirations expressed by young people reflect the expectations and constraints inherent within their setting, rather than a free choice of desired outcome’*^{iv}. The evidence shows that children do not start off with low expectations. When they are younger they have the same hopes and dreams as all children, however, their confidence in their ability to attain their aspirations becomes diminished over time^v. Aspirations, even in communities struggling with poverty, are very high – the missing element is the knowledge of how to make these aspirations real and obtainable^{vi}.

Parents living in poverty also have high aspirations for their children but feel unable to engage with their child’s learning in the home and feel inadequate in their knowledge and experience to help their children^{vii}. There is no crisis in aspirations but rather difficulty for poor parents ‘to sustain those aspirations over time or turn them into reality’^{viii}. Yet, it is not only politicians that suggest parents have low aspirations for their children^{ix}. Teachers too cite low aspirations on the part of parents for children’s poorer educational attainment^{vii}. This has an effect on how teachers and school staff engage with children and parents living in poverty.

Key points

- The poverty of aspiration is a myth that transfers responsibility for aspirations and achievement from governments and schools to parents and children.
- School is important to, and for, children living in poverty.
- All parents want the best for their child(ren) but lower income parents are less likely to know what is possible or how to achieve it.
- Lower income parents are less likely to know how to support their child’s education.

¹<http://growingupinScotland.org.uk/about-gus/> (Accessed 20 October 2017)

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The problem with the ‘poverty of aspiration’ as a concept is not only that the research evidence does not support it, but also that it passes the responsibility for a presumed lack of aspirations onto parents and children. In so doing it shifts responsibility away from local and central government, and schools to children from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Attempting to close the attainment gap by raising aspirations is unlikely to succeed because it is based on false assumptions about low aspirations. As Spohrer^{xii} notes, *‘The debate on ‘aspiration’ constructs young people from disadvantaged backgrounds as deficient, conflates economic and social equality discourses and individualises structural problems’*. The real challenge for disadvantaged young people is overcoming the barriers to education, which include teachers’ poor perceptions of their aspirations and abilities, in order to both learn about and achieve aspirations.

A major barrier to education for poorer children lies in the culture of education itself. Problems are more likely to arise at school for poorer children not only because their parents are less likely to be either well off financially or well educated themselves, but also because *‘the form of participation that is required of them at school doesn’t closely match the one that is required of them at home and in their immediate surroundings’*^{xiii}. Educated middle class parents, in contrast, tend to be better off, better educated and *‘require of their children at home a form of participation that matches more closely what is expected of children at school’*^{xiv}. This means that compared to their better off peers, poorer children *‘tend to be at a disadvantage when they get to school where they first have to learn all about a new form of learning, which is called education’*^{xv}. The literature emphasises that it is the structural elements of poverty, and the middle-class culture of education, that presents a barrier to children’s education and not a deficiency in parents’ or children’s aspirations.

The study

This briefing paper is based on research using approximately 3,500 responses from Growing Up in Scotland (GUS). GUS is a multiple cohort longitudinal study, with several discrete groups of children being followed over time.

Parents’ responses to questions on the aspirations they hold for their children and their confidence in their ability to influence their children’s schooling were analysed. Children’s experiences of education for different lengths of time lived in poverty were also explored

GUS measurement of poverty over time

Household income is measured at each year of the survey. Families are classed as experiencing poverty if their income is less than 60% of median household income (equivalised to take account of family size). A measure of poverty over time was developed by grouping households into four poverty typologies: no poverty, transient poverty (one year of poverty in four), recurrent poverty (two years of poverty or of moving in and out of poverty) and persistent poverty (three years of consecutive poverty out of any four)^{xvi}.

Statistical techniques were used to explore questions about poverty over time and each of the parent’s and child’s answers about education and aspirations. This made it possible to test for differences based on poverty experience. These are shown in the graphs. The text following the graphs gives the results of fuller statistical models (binary and ordinal logistic regression models – full models not shown) reported as ‘odds ratios’².

Children’s experiences of school

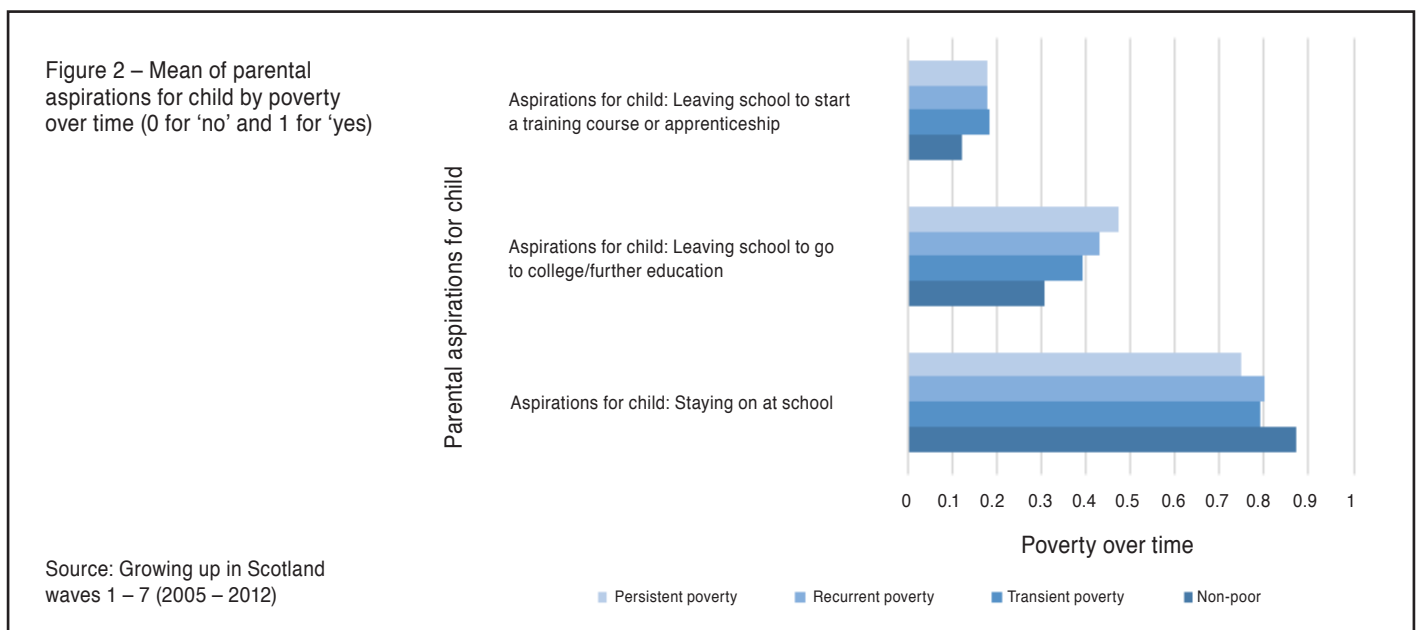
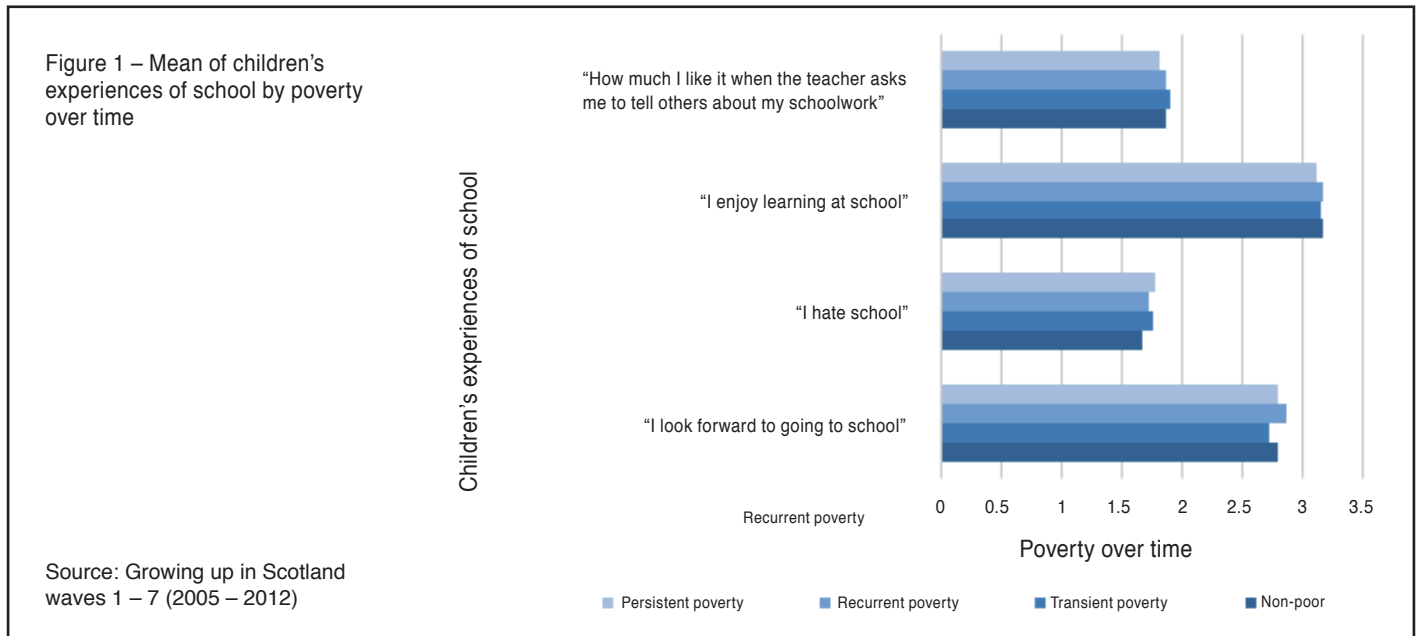
When the children are aged 7/8 years old, they are asked to respond directly to four statements regarding their experiences of school. The possible answers can be translated into number between 1 and 3 or 1 and 4, as described after the statements below:

1. “I look forward to going to school” (four point scale – high is positive)
2. “I hate school” (four point scale – low is positive)
3. “I enjoy learning at school” (four point scale – high is positive)
4. “How much I like it when the teacher asks me to tell others about my schoolwork” (three point scale – **low is positive**)

Figure 1 gives the average number (means) of the four statements that children responded to by their category of poverty over time.

²To interpret odds ratios: if the ratio is 1 there is no difference between the groups under study (here poverty group); if the odds ratio is greater than 1 then there is an increased likelihood for one of the groups under study; if the odds ratio is less than 1 there is a decreased likelihood. For example an odds ratio of 2 means something is twice as likely, an odds ratio of 0.5 means something is half as likely.

Of the four statements that children responded to there were **no statistically significant differences by the four categories of poverty over time**³. This means that children at this age (7/8 years old) **do not experience different enjoyment of school based on their socioeconomic background**. That is not to say that their ability to participate fully in school, or their ability to make equal use of what is available to them, or indeed their response to or conduct in school will be the same. Rather it shows that in spite of differences perceived by teachers or felt by children in the classroom, children in poverty value school as much as their better off peers.



Parents’ aspirations for their children

Parents were asked ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions about educational aspirations they hold for their children.

Figure 2 gives the means of the three aspirations that parents responded to by their category of poverty over time. The odds ratios from the fuller analysis (not shown) are in the text below the figure.

³Analysis not shown.

There are statistically significant differences in the types of aspirations parents hold for their children according to their experience of poverty. However, there is no ‘lack’ of aspiration per se.

- Parents living in any type of poverty are 1.6 times more likely than parents with no experience of poverty to want their child to start a training course or undertake an apprenticeship on leaving school (Odds ratios: transient poverty 1.6; recurrent poverty 1.6; and persistent poverty 1.6).
- Parents living in any type of poverty are more likely than parents with no experience of poverty to want their child to leave school to go onto further education college (Odds ratios: transient poverty 1.5; recurrent poverty 1.7; and persistent poverty 2.0).
- Parents living in any type of poverty are approximately half as likely than parents with no experience of poverty to want their child to stay on at school beyond age 16 (Odds ratios: transient poverty 0.5; recurrent poverty 0.6; and persistent poverty 0.4).

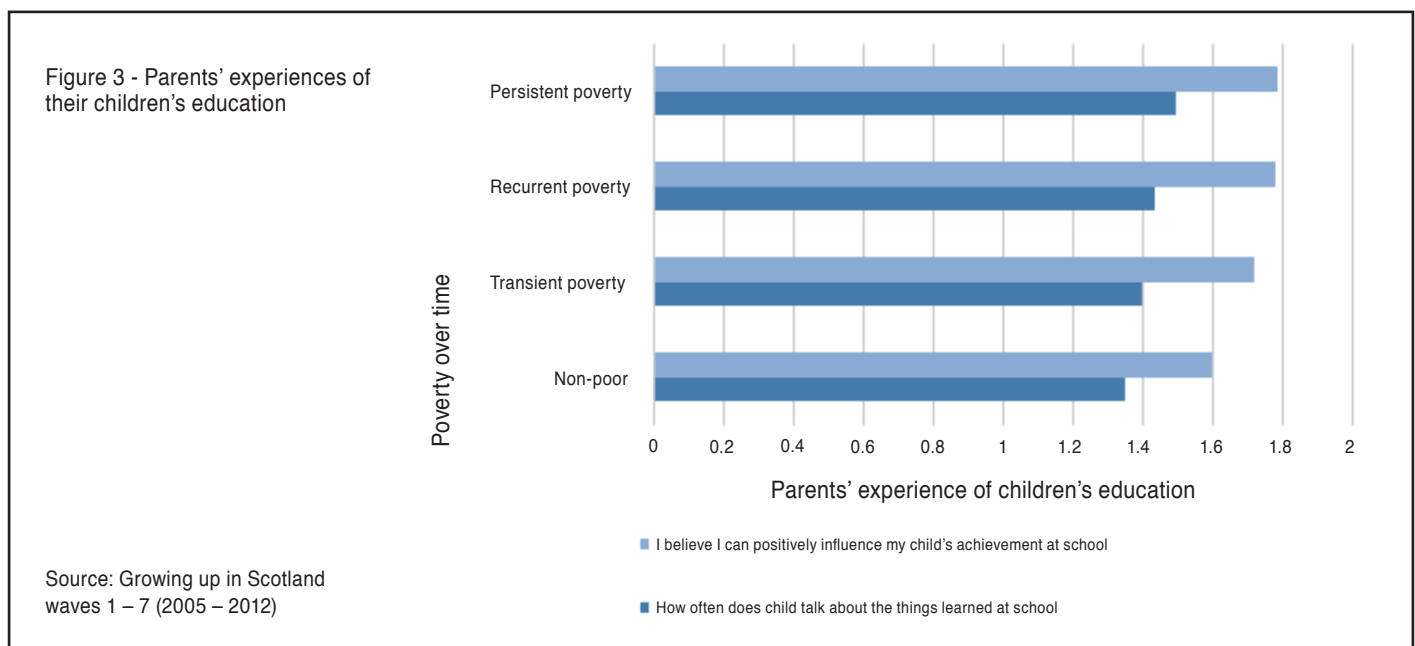
This corresponds to the literature that poorer parents are more likely to aspire to apprenticeships/training/further education and less likely to aspire to higher education for their children. Parents’ aspirations differ by poverty experience, but they are still ‘high’ aspirations, and are a construct of parents’ own knowledge, understanding and experience.

Parents’ experience of their children’s education

Parents were asked to respond to the following two statements:

1. “How often does child talk about the things learned at school” (seven point scale - **low is positive**)
2. “I believe I can positively influence my child’s achievement at school” (five point scale - **low is positive**)

Figure 3 shows the means of the two statements that parents responded to by their category of poverty over time.



For the statement “I believe I can positively influence my child’s achievement at school” all categories of poverty over time are statistically significantly different to ‘no poverty’. For every type of poverty, parents are between 1.4 and 1.8 times **less** likely to believe that they can positively influence their child’s achievement at school compared to parents with no experience of poverty. (Odds ratios: transient poverty 1.4; recurrent poverty 1.7; and persistent poverty 1.8). That is not to say that they believe they cannot, just that they are less likely to believe that they can. This corresponds to the literature that while poorer parents have aspirations for their children they are less confident in their ability to assist them.

For the statement “How often does child talk about the things learned at school” there are no statistically significant differences between the poverty over time categories and ‘no poverty’. This means that all children are talking about things they have learned at school with parents irrespective of their experience of poverty.

Conclusion

Parents living in poverty do not lack aspirations for their children but their aspirations are a construct of what is familiar and known to them. Each of us is a creation of our past and present experiences as well as our acquired skills, knowledge and education. Those of us with no experience of sailing in the Mediterranean do not aspire to yacht ownership on the Côte d'Azur. That does not make us deficient in aspiration; rather, we aspire to what we have experience of, what we know we can influence, and what we believe we can achieve. While the poverty of aspiration myth is allowed to perpetuate and even gain in momentum, it will continue to distract from the ways in which children living in poverty are failed by the education system.

Previous research shows that schools lack knowledge about the causes and consequences of poverty, often conflating the two. The middle class culture of education adds to this lack of understanding to create an inherently inaccessible environment for children living in poverty. The attainment gap will be neither narrowed nor closed so long as policy focuses on children's educational outcomes rather than the factors that affect their outcomes: value, respect, dignity, understanding, inclusion, appreciation, and participation within school.

To close the attainment gap, schools should improve and enhance the everyday experience of school for children living in poverty. This would begin by educating teachers and other school staff on the risks, causes and consequences of poverty, which are often conflated and misconstrued. In Scotland, schools should make careful use of the Pupil Equity Fund, for example for Home/School development/support staff.

Policy implications

- Policy will be strengthened if policy makers have a more sophisticated understanding of how their own views of aspirations and those of others are shaped by their socio-economic circumstances.
- It is important to promote policies which open up knowledge of the whole range of opportunities available to parents and children in poverty including routes into higher education.
- Parents and children need knowledge of both the opportunities and the route to achieving their aspirations.

Practice recommendations

- Support parents and children to understand the opportunities available to them and give them the knowledge necessary to achieve them^{xvii};
- Focus on the mechanisms by which aspirations can diminish over time for young people;
- Focus on keeping young people's aspirations on track rather than just 'inspiring' them^{xviii};
- Dismantle the local and structural barriers to high aspirations.

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