EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS: HOW ENGLISH SCHOOLS CAN WORK WITH PARENTS TO KEEP THEM ON TRACK

Loic Menzies

Schools and policy-makers in England put a lot of effort into 'raising aspirations' to increase achievement among disadvantaged pupils. However, this is based on false assumptions about low aspirations – the real challenge for disadvantaged young people is achieving their aspirations.

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Background

In England, a child's socio-economic status is the best predictor of their educational attainment. In 2011, 27 per cent fewer pupils on Free School Meals achieved five A*-C GCSEs compared to all other pupils (DfE, 2011). This disproportionate lack of qualifications among disadvantaged young people has a substantial impact on every aspect of their future, from employment and pay (Paull and Patel, 2012) to health and happiness (OECD, 2006; Page, 2008).

Breaking the link between poverty and poor educational outcomes has been a priority for successive governments. However, while there has been some 'narrowing' of the attainment gap, it is a long way from disappearing. Since the 2010 general election, policy-makers have introduced additional measures to close this gap. These include publishing school-level gap-data and prioritising monitoring of different groups' performance during Ofsted inspections, as well as financial incentives such as the pupil premium.

In order to close this gap, mechanisms linking poverty and educational outcomes need to be identified and addressed. Policy-makers and educationalists have often focused on 'aspirations', on the grounds that if children and young people aim high they will achieve highly (Cabinet Office, 2011; DfE, 2010). Built into this view is an assumed 'aspiration gap' but recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) questioned this assumption (Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012).

This *Viewpoint* argues that the problem for pupils is not 'where am I going?' but 'how do I get there?' Schools should focus on keeping pupils' aspirations on track. Working with parents (meaning parents or guardians) is a highly effective way of doing so.

This *Viewpoint* combines JRF research findings with wider research, policy reports and examples of school practice.
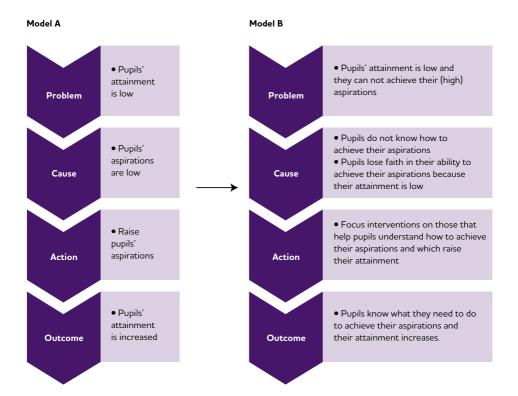
Key points

- Disadvantaged pupils often have high aspirations. However, they may not know *how* to achieve them and may struggle to maintain them.

- Disadvantaged parents and their social networks can lack the experience and knowledge to help their children. Engaging parents to help them understand what their children's aspirations involve and what will help achieve them is an effective way of raising attainment. Engagement is most effective when:

  - It is collaborative, builds strong relationships and focuses on learning.

  - Schools meet parents on their own terms by tapping into their needs and interests, creating environments that feel comfortable to them and involving other members of their community.

- Where other interventions are used, they should focus on keeping pupils' aspirations on track rather than just 'inspiring' them. Such strategies might include:

  - High-quality careers advice, work experience and work-related learning.

  - Skilled, learning-focused mentoring.

Introduction

The recent focus by English policy-makers on raising aspirations as a solution to educational disadvantage places disproportionate emphasis on changing what young people aim for, rather than their capacity to achieve it. This is highlighted in JRF research which shows that parents and pupils from every socio-economic background have high aspirations and that 'the real difficulty for many children was in knowing how to fulfil their ambitions' (Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012). We therefore need to shift from 'Model A' to 'Model B' (Figure 1, below).

Research by JRF has shown that there is strong evidence for interventions which help young people to find their way towards realising their aspirations and which focus on parental engagement.

Figure 1: Raising attainment through *understanding* aspirations

Model A

Problem	• Pupils' attainment is low
Cause	• Pupils' aspirations are low
Action	• Raise pupils' aspirations
Outcome	• Pupils' attainment is increased

Model B

Problem	• Pupils' attainment is low and they can not achieve their (high) aspirations
Cause	• Pupils do not know how to achieve their aspirations • Pupils lose faith in their ability to achieve their aspirations because their attainment is low
Action	• Focus interventions on those that help pupils understand how to achieve their aspirations and which raise their attainment
Outcome	• Pupils know what they need to do to achieve their aspirations and their attainment increases.

Focus on 'how?'

In 2012, responsibility for face-to-face careers advice in England shifted to schools. At the same time, external careers advisory services were cut while 'Work Related Learning' was removed at Key Stage 4. It has been argued that 'young people need informed and detailed help to take the pathways that are likely to lead to fulfilment of the longer-term ambitions' (Kintrea *et al.*, 2011) and that work experience can be valuable. Schools should therefore be cautious in their response to curriculum changes and compensate for cuts to external services.
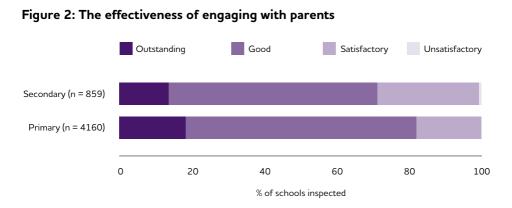
Careers advice and work-related learning need to be provided from an earlier age. Many young people only receive careers advice when choosing their A-levels. This is too late. Choices made early on in pupils' education can have significant consequences: if a pupil wants to be a doctor but does not know that medicine requires high grades in Maths *and* Science there is a risk they will take GCSE Maths early and be contented with a C grade, only later to realise this limits their freedom to achieve their previously high aspirations. It is particularly important to help pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds understand their choices because their family and social networks are less likely to include people from the backgrounds they aspire to. This reduced 'social capital' limits pupils' access to the information and opportunities they need to achieve their aspirations.

Organisations and social entrepreneurs are often excited about the opportunity to 'transform' disadvantaged young people's lives by providing 'inspirational' mentors. Mentoring can have a positive impact on attainment but there is no evidence this results from changes in aspirations (Cummings *et al.*, 2012). Instead of 'inspiring' pupils and 'raising aspirations' these well-intentioned schemes should concentrate on focused mentoring that nurtures pupils' existing aspirations and helps them to make good choices about learning. This is a much more skilled role than being 'generically inspirational'. Given the demands these schemes place on teachers' time, schools should be selective about which schemes they involve themselves in.

The importance of parents

The preamble to the new Teachers' Standards states that teachers should 'work with parents in the best interests of their pupils' (DfE, 2012). The importance of parental engagement is also recognised in the new Ofsted framework (Ofsted,

2012); it requires inspectors to consider the extent to which the schools' leadership 'engages with parents and carers in supporting pupils' achievement, behaviour and safety and their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.' The 2010/11 Ofsted annual report argued that 'secondary schools that wish to "close the gaps" by ensuring accelerated progress for all need to consider… investment in developing partnerships with parents that enhance parents' ability to support their children's learning' (Ofsted, 2011). Recent school inspections suggest most schools do well in this area, yet there is room for improvement, particularly among secondary schools.

Figure 2: The effectiveness of engaging with parents

JRF research suggests Ofsted is right to draw attention to parental engagement. It found that 'interventions for parents could offer good value for money' (Cummings *et al.*, 2012) and noted that 'a reasonable case that parental involvement is a causal influence on their child's school readiness and subsequent attainment' (Gorard *et al.*, 2012). Indeed, of all the intervention types they studied, Gorard *et al.* argued that 'parental involvement in their child's learning' was the only area with sufficient evidence to suggest a causal model for impact on pupil attainment (Gorard *et al.*, 2012).

The National Foundation for Education Research has also emphasised the importance of parental involvement in its guide to avoiding young people becoming NEET (NFER, 2012). The Sutton Trust's Pupil Premium Toolkit (Higgins *et al.*, 2011) is a little more sceptical, noting that 'developing effective parental involvement to improve their children's attainment is challenging and will need

effective monitoring and evaluation.' Nonetheless, it still suggests parental engagement can lead to an annual gain of three months' learning.

A collaborative approach to build strong relationships

Schools need to engage with parents on their own terms. JRF highlighted a frequent cultural mismatch between parents and schools, and suggested benefits to reducing the clash of cultures parents and pupils sometimes experience. Relying on formal parents' evenings is insufficient; schools should consider their parent community and tap into its interests. Opportunities that appeal to parents vary depending on the community; in some areas parents welcome language and literacy classes. One school in Tower Hamlets has encouraged literacy among pupils by inviting parents to come in to tell stories in their own language. The charity Achievement for All has also helped many schools to plan activities that respond to parents' interests.

Some schools have begun to build relationships with parents in settings other than the school so parents do not have to venture into uncomfortable territory. Facilitators from parents' communities can help with this. Local authorities (LAs) often provide 'family liaison officers' who carry out home visits. Given that thousands of schools in England are leaving LA control, schools should consider using members of their local community to fill this gap.

Some secondary schools try to mirror the structure of primary schools by splitting pupils and teachers into several 'small schools' in which pupils are taught by a small team of teachers. This makes building strong relationships easier.

Focusing on learning

Most parents have a 'high level of commitment to their child's education which is not matched by the capacity to provide effective support' (Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012). Schools should therefore build parents' capacity to support learning. This involves a dialogue about what might be hindering pupils; schools can then provide parents with ways to respond. In many cases, the challenges of language and poor education mean parents cannot assist with homework but they may be able to help by providing a quiet space for pupils to work in or by limiting

the amount of time their children spend playing on the computer or watching television.

Some schools have begun to provide organised programmes for parents on issues like this as part of new pupils' induction. In one school I visited, the headteacher (or another senior teacher) visits each new Year 7 pupil's family at home before they join the school. Parents then read out a commitment to how they will support their child and school. This ensures consistency in school and parent expectations but should be balanced with the need for a collaborative approach. During the Autumn term, each form group takes responsibility for preparing a 'getting to know you meal' attended by parents, teachers and pupils. Other schools require parents to sign all pieces of homework, creating an opportunity for discussion and reinforcing high expectations. It also means parents are more aware of what their children are doing at school. These approaches are clearly more meaningful than the home-school agreements many schools ask parents to sign.

Where pupils aspire to something that is unfamiliar to parents, schools should help parents understand what their children's aspirations involve. For example, most parents – and the pupils themselves – want pupils to attend university (Kintrea *et al.*, 2012). It is more useful to help parents understand what is involved in studying at university than simply promoting it as an aspiration. Schools should therefore talk to parents about the role of independent research and reading around a subject at university so that they can encourage their children to begin doing so at home. One school held a 'Gifted and Talented Evening' with speakers who described their journey to university over drinks and food. Parents were given an information pack with resources to support learning.

Conclusion

The examples given in this *Viewpoint* exemplify the difference between 'raising the aspirations' of disadvantaged pupils and 'keeping them on track'. They highlight the enhanced role parents can play when schools are creative in engaging with them. They need not be expensive interventions, but the evidence suggests they can be highly effective.

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