



Educational aspirations among UK young teenagers: exploring the role of gender, class and ethnicity

This paper presents an overview of teenagers' aspirations for higher levels of education during the recent economic recession. We analyse the responses of 4899 young people aged 10 to 15, who participated in the UK Household Longitudinal Study in 2009-10. The timing of the survey is especially significant given the political emphasis on raising aspirations as a means to stimulate the economy. We consider the impact of gender, parental occupational class, parental educational background, family structure and parental attitudes towards education upon teenagers' educational aspirations, and use multiple regression analyses to consider whether their effects are consistent across ethnic groups. Until now, only limited nationally representative data on young people's aspirations have been available, especially in respect of ethnic differences. This research aims to fill that gap. It was undertaken as part of a wider study into the aspirations for living and learning among young people in the UK.

Key Points

- Two thirds of all young teenagers express a positive aspiration to go to college / university.
- Boys are less likely than girls to aspire to go to college / university across all ethnic groups.
- We find significant differences in aspirations according to ethnicity. White teenagers consistently report the lowest aspirations, and Indian and Black teenagers report the highest level.
- Ethnic differences remain even when parental characteristics are taken into account.
- Teenagers living in families where neither parent is employed have the lowest aspirations for college / university, although for boys this group is very similar to boys from routine class backgrounds.
- Living with a parent who has a degree is particularly associated with positive aspirations for boys.
- Teenagers whose parents view A-levels / Highers as important are more likely to have higher educational aspirations.
- Family structure does not make a difference, except those living with two natural or adoptive parents are more likely to aspire to go to college / university than those living with no parents.

Introduction

One key indicator of young people's aspirations for education is their reported desire to continue education post-16. Raising these aspirations has remained a specific concern for policy makers across the political spectrum. Low aspirations have been referred to as a cause of the UK's contemporary social and economic ills, with a policy remedy being to raise these aspirations, especially the aspirations of young people from poorer households and ethnic minorities. But just how low are young people's aspirations and how do they vary by ethnicity?

The study

Administrative data has often been effectively used to analyse attainment differences, but nationally representative data on young people's aspirations have been scarce, especially in respect of ethnic differences. Drawing on a wider ESRC study into the aspirations for living and learning among young people in the UK, we analyse the responses of 4899 young people aged 10 to 15 who participated in the UK Household Longitudinal Study, to present an up-to-date picture of teenagers' aspirations for higher levels of education during the recent economic recession. This research sets out to answer three questions. First, do boys' and girls' aspirations to go to college or university differ by ethnicity? Second, are ethnic differences in aspiration reduced after controlling for parental characteristics (specifically; parental occupational class, parental educational background, family structure and parental attitudes)? Third, does the association between parental background characteristics and educational aspirations differ by ethnicity?

Main findings

Young teens' aspirations for college / university are relatively high, but differ by gender and also by ethnicity

Overall, 66% of 10-15 year olds stated a positive aspiration for college / university after finishing school. Given that less than half of young people apply for higher education by age 19 (e.g. 44% in

England according to UCAS, 2013), rather than being low, as implied in Government rhetoric, individuals' aspirations for education remain relatively high. There is a pronounced and statistically significant gender gap in aspirations for higher levels of education. 58% of boys compared to 74% of girls aspired to continue in full-time education in 2009-10.

A smaller percentage of White teenagers (57% boys and 74% girls) hold an aspiration for higher levels of education compared to all other ethnic groups (Table 1). Aspirations are highest for Black (77% boys and 86% girls) and Indian young people (79% boys and 85% girls). A smaller percentage of boys have aspirations to go to college / university relative to girls within all ethnic groups (Table 1). While the difference between White boys and White girls is large (around 17 percentage points) and statistically significant, this is not the case for the difference between girls and boys in the minority ethnic groups where the gaps are much smaller (between 4 and 8 percentage points).

Table 1: Proportion of young teenagers with positive aspiration for college / university by gender and ethnic group

Gender	Ethnicity	Percentage	95% Confidence Interval		Unweighted N
			Lower	Upper	
Male	White	57.3	54.8	59.9	1620
	Black	77.4	67.4	85.1	135
	Indian	78.5	68.7	85.9	87
	Pakistani	69.8	60.4	86.0	78
	Bangladeshi	75.3	60.4	86.0	76
	Other/mixed	65.8	57.5	73.3	166
Female	White	74.1	71.9	76.3	1597
	Black	85.6	79.4	90.2	184
	Indian	85.3	73.6	92.4	75
	Pakistani	74.4	62.7	83.4	99
	Bangladeshi	81.7	67.1	90.8	85
	Other/mixed	73.1	63.7	80.7	153

Source: author's analyses of UKHLS, 2009/10

Aspirations differ according to parental occupational class

Figure 1 shows a decline in educational aspirations when comparing those from managerial and

professional, intermediate and routine occupational class backgrounds in both boys and girls. However, aspirations remain higher for girls than for boys from every background, for example, for those from routine occupational backgrounds, just 50% of boys have positive educational aspirations, compared with 69% of girls. In addition, Figure 1 suggests that the parental occupational class gradient of aspirations is slightly steeper for boys (ranging from 67% to 50%) than for girls (ranging from 80% to 69%). Respondents in households where neither parent was employed have the lowest ambitions for college / university (48% boys and 63% girls), although for boys this group is very similar to boys from routine class backgrounds.

Aspirations differ according to parental education

For boys, having at least one parent with a degree is strongly associated with high educational aspirations, with 74% reporting positive aspirations (Figure 2). Aspirations are lower in all other categories, ranging from 59% for parent(s) with A-level qualifications to 44% for those with no qualifications. For girls, there is a less steep educational differential: 83% of girls from degree-educated households hold positive aspirations, compared with 63% girls who co-reside with parent(s) who have no qualifications.

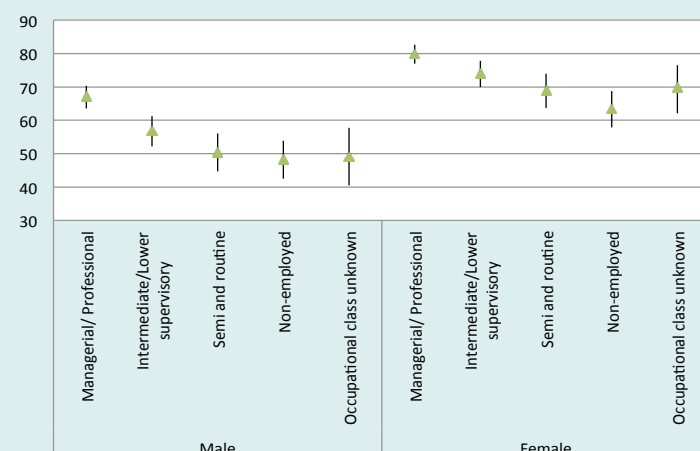
Differences in aspiration according to family structure are relatively small

Within gender, the percentage aspiring to go on to college / university is relatively similar according to family structure. Teenagers living in a two parent family where one parent is a step-parent have slightly lower aspirations (53% of boys and 68% girls) than teenagers living with two natural or adoptive parents (61% boys and 76% girls), but the differences are not statistically significant. The main and only statistically significant difference is between those living with two parents and those living with no parents.

Boys' and girls' own educational aspirations differ by parental attitudes towards education

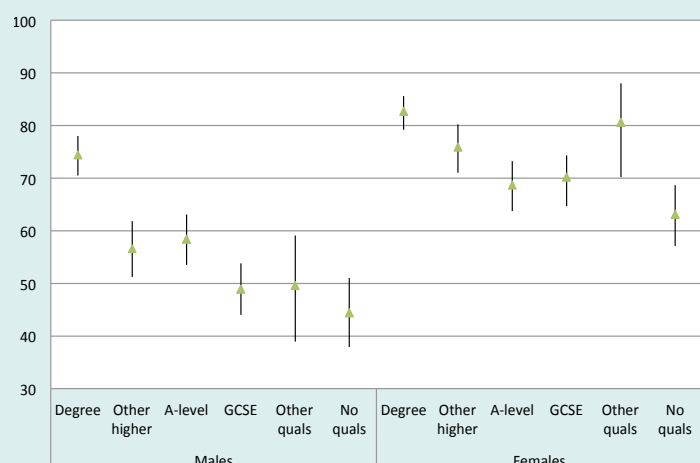
A strong linear relationship is observed in respect of parental attitudes (Figure 3): 77% of girls whose parent(s) deem completing A-levels / Highers 'very

Figure 1: Positive aspiration for college / university among 10-15 year olds by gender and highest parental occupational class in household (percent)



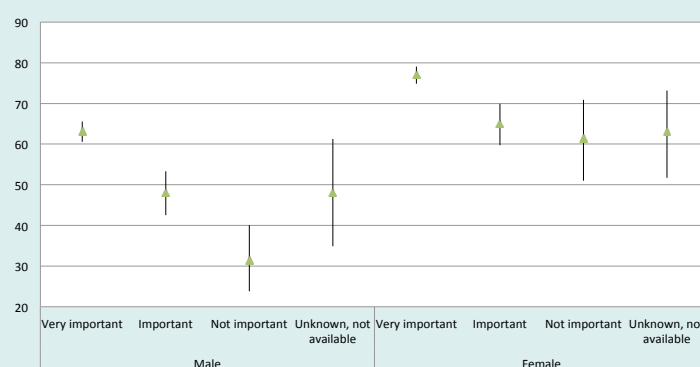
Source: UKHLS, wave 1, 2009/10

Figure 2: Positive aspiration for college / university among 10-15 year olds by gender and current highest parental education level in household (percent)



Source: UKHLS, wave 1, 2009/10

Figure 3: Positive aspiration for college / university among 10-15 year olds by gender and parents attitudes towards A Levels / Highers (percent)



Source: UKHLS, wave 1, 2009/10

important' aspire to go to college / university compared to 65% of girls whose parent(s) felt it was 'important' and 61% of girls whose parent(s) thought A-levels/Highers 'not important'. Among boys, the association is even stronger: each level of parental attitude shows a distinct and statistically significant difference compared to the last (63% for very important; 48% for important; 31% for not important).

Controlling for parental background characteristics does not remove ethnic differences

Ethnic differences in aspiration as described above are largely unaffected when parental background characteristics are controlled (multiple regression analysis not shown here). Furthermore, the impact of parental background factors including occupational class upon educational aspirations is similar for all ethnic groups. Thus we note that White boys from the lowest occupational class and boys from workless households have the lowest aspirations. This is because the three elements – being White, male and working class – combine in an additive fashion to encourage low aspiration. We do not find a particular effect of coming from a lower-class background for White boys.

When we controlled for parental socio-economic characteristics we found that differences in educational aspiration by family type become smaller for the step-parent and no parent group, but the association changes direction for those from single parent families. That is to say, all things being equal, children living with a single parent have the highest odds of aspiring for college/ university.

Policy implications

Given that aspirations for higher education are greater than the percentage of young adults who actually attend higher education, our findings lend support to the idea that young adults' aspirations per se are not a problem – more the realisation of these aspirations. This said, differentials according to gender, class and ethnicity remain to be explained. The findings raise questions as to how best Government policies can translate the high aspirations seen among Black and Asian teenagers into success in higher education. Finally, our finding that differences in aspiration according to family structure disappear once parental class, education and attitudes are controlled, problematizes current emphases given to the central role of 'family stability' as a key indicator of social justice.

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