

The problem with 'raising aspiration' strategies: social mobility requires more than personal ambitions



The perceived lack of aspiration among young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds is used as a convenient explanation for the stagnating levels of social mobility. As a result, the 'raising of aspirations' has become the focus of government strategy over the past 20 years. [Konstanze Spohrer](#) explains why this has the effect of portraying educational success and opportunity as a matter of attitudinal change.

'Aspiration' has been a buzzword in political rhetoric for the last two decades. In the 2000s, New Labour rediscovered the expression '[poverty of aspiration](#)' – whose origin has been [attributed](#) to Labour politician Ernest Bevin – in order to explain lower educational outcomes among white working-class youth. At the same time, the Labour government initiated a range of projects in order to 'raise aspirations', most prominently the AimHigher programme which aimed at making university a more attractive choice for those from underrepresented groups.

While the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government [discontinued central funding for these initiatives](#), devolving responsibility to the local level, the notion of 'aspiration' has remained popular. As Prime Minister, David Cameron had called for Britain to become an '[Aspiration Nation](#)' – a country in which individual ambition is prized highly and social mobility contributes to securing success in a globally competitive economy.

The idea of lack of 'aspiration' has been a convenient explanation for the persisting gap in educational outcomes for young people from different socio-economic background and for the stagnating levels of social mobility. As a number of commentators have [pointed out](#), this diagnosis puts forward a 'deficit view' of particular groups, such as the idea that working-class culture and aspirations are inherently inferior. It has been argued that the expression 'poverty of aspiration' blames individuals for injustices which are caused by structural inequalities in the labour market, housing, and education, and which have been exacerbated by austerity measures since 2010.

Aspiration as requirement for the 'responsible' citizen

Arguably, the preoccupation with aspiration fits into a neoliberal mantra of individual responsibility. The idea of individual responsibility is, of course, also rooted in the reality of rising levels of poverty and precarious living circumstances resulting from decades of economic liberalisation and the erosion of social protection and welfare provision. 'Aspiration' – in the sense of the will and ceaseless effort – to 'better oneself' – becomes a key characteristic of the ideal, 'deserving' neoliberal citizen.

In [our research](#), we examined this link between neoliberal forms of government aspiration and the individual. We were interested what the focus on aspiration means for how a population is governed – what the philosopher Michel Foucault calls '[governmentality](#)' – and the impact on those young people whose aspirations are meant to be raised. Analysing policy documents, published between 2003 and 2011 we asked how particular groups of (young) people are described, how they are encouraged to transform themselves, and who they are encouraged to become.

Targeting the attitudes of young working-class people

The policy documents analysed embrace the logic that Britain's economic success requires harnessing the talent of those sections in society whose potential is currently 'untapped'. In order to achieve this, educational outcomes, in particular among working-class young people, need to be improved, which, again, requires higher individual aspiration. Conversely, aspiration promises to be a remedy for a range of societal problems that hinder economic prosperity, such as intergenerational poverty and unemployment; crime; and negative attitudes towards education. The documents analysed identify a lack of aspiration in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities and their inhabitants who are described as isolated, immobile, restricted in their horizons, and resistant to change. The documents portray the young people who grow up in these communities as 'potentially successful' in terms of educational achievement, but held back by multiple 'barriers', in particular attitudinal and cultural ones, such as low aspiration, motivation, and confidence.

The documents identify several strategies in order to help young people overcome the attitudinal and cultural restrictions that obstruct their educational and societal advancement. Most of these initiatives focus on encouraging young people to apply for university or pursue professional careers, supported by better information, guidance, and inspiration through university visits or mentors. Some projects go further and aim to achieve [attitudinal and behavioural change](#) in young people aiming to develop young people's future orientation ('ambition' or 'optimism'); their self-concept ('self-esteem' or 'confidence'); and their motivation ('persistence' or 'resilience').

Drawing together these findings, we argue that aspiration does not tackle social disadvantage in itself, but finds the remedy in preparing young people to cope with and overcome structural disadvantage. The neoliberal demand to become adaptable and open to 'change' is exacerbated for disadvantaged people who are expected to work on themselves in order to improve their dispositions and attitudes. There is a marked expectation on young people from disadvantaged communities to be 'mobile' – both geographically, socially and, as a prerequisite, in terms of their attitudes and behaviours. As such, young people from these disadvantaged communities are seen as agents in their lives, but at the same time, they also bear the burden of social change.

Raising aspiration and new ways of governing

The portrait of an aspirational citizen in political rhetoric and interventions resonates with [wider neoliberal conceptions](#) of the flexible, entrepreneurial individual. Raising aspiration strategies can be seen as an example of the tendency in contemporary societies to govern through expecting people to govern themselves, for example by trying to change attitudes and desires. Psychological knowledge and techniques are becoming more important in policymaking, evident for example in the application of 'nudge' and in the promotion of happiness and wellbeing techniques in [spheres of public life](#).

While we can observe a general intensification of self-governance, our analysis shows that a distinction is made between those who can be trusted to exercise their freedom appropriately and those who need to be more tightly governed. For young people from less well-off backgrounds, social mobility through higher levels of education is presented as a promise but also as a duty. The message to young people is that unless they embrace 'higher aspirations' they will be condemned to a life in poverty. As a consequence, the responsibility of tackling poverty and disadvantage is shifted from political and economic actors to young people.

While 'raising aspiration' may be experienced as empowering by some, it is also a potential burden. For young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, achieving educational success and social mobility requires more than higher ambitions. Unless we see a redistribution of economic and educational resources, we perpetuate what Laurent Berlant has called '[cruel optimism](#)': promoting fantasies of upward social mobility without providing the actual possibilities to achieve them. Furthermore, there is a need to rethink the narrow conception of aspiration as individualised economic success and support young people in developing a range of visions for what it means to lead a good life.

Note: the above draws on the author's [published work](#) in *The Journal of Education Policy*.

About the Author



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