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Are we still ‘raising aspirations’? The complex relationship between aspiration and widening participation practices in English Higher Education Institutions.

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Abstract

Widening participation in England has been framed around two primary needs; raising attainment and raising aspiration. Whilst aspiration is complex, policy definitions often frame it in narrow economic terms and see access to higher education as primarily about developing a workforce. The underlying logic being that to improve social mobility that individuals need to 'aim higher'. Pre-entry work with under-represented groups therefore has tended to adopt a deficit of aspiration approach. There has been extensive critique of the deficit model yet 'raising aspirations' still endures in both national and institutional policy. Drawing on sixteen semi-structured interviews with widening participation practitioners in England, this paper considers the alignment between policy and practice. It explores the more complex and nuanced view of aspiration held by practitioners and how this more closely aligns with the theory of possible selves. This paper argues that there are two key issues; a disjuncture between policy and practice and a gap in understanding of the structural issues associated with aspiration. The paper argues that the solution involves a radical rethink of policy that returns to a focus on helping individuals to realise their own individual aspirations and more clearly acknowledges the structural constraints shaping the formation, vocalisation and realisation of aspirations.

Keywords

Widening participation, higher education, access to education, raising aspiration, possible selves

Introduction

Widening access to and success in higher education is a global issue (Atherton et al., 2016). Within English higher education policy, it has played an increasingly prominent role following the massification of higher education in 1992 and subsequently in 2001 when the government set a target of fifty percent of eighteen-year olds to enter higher education by 2010. This expansion therefore had widening of access at its core. However, when tuition fees were introduced there was a concern that this would deter students from lower income backgrounds. Therefore in England, the ability to charge the maximum tuition fees is contingent on having an approved plan detailing how each institution will invest in widening access and participation work (OFFA, 2015). In many cases, this work is focused through specific teams of professional services staff who are employed in a role focused on pre-entry widening participation (WP) outreach work. These WP practitioners can be involved with anything from event planning, to delivery of interventions, training of students, administration and impact evaluation. The pre-entry projects they run have in recent years often focussed upon ‘raising aspirations’, in response to a government driven policy agenda. The 2016 letter issued by government ministers to the Office for Fair Access, clearly highlighted the role of universities in ‘raising aspirations’ towards university, especially from primary age (Johnson, 2016). The increasing focus on aspirations in policy was rooted in an economic argument that originated in a post-war need to tap into the nation’s potential in a changing economic climate which required a skilled workforce (Spohrer, 2011). This focus of aspiration as the route to economic improvement remained a thread through the 1960s and the initial expansion of higher education. However, the political discourse of aspiration has

been critiqued by academics for locating the solution (and therefore the problem) in individuals rather than the structure of society (e.g. Allen & Hollingworth, 2013; Archer et al., 2014; Baker, 2016; Mendick et al., 2018; St. Clair et al., 2013). Aspiration has therefore been constructed through policy as an ‘individual quality which is not static and can be influenced by policy interventions’ (Spohrer, 2011, p. 59). This quality is framed in terms of economic aspiration and the desire to find well paid employment. The premise being that individuals with innate potential to succeed are primarily limited by a deficit of aspiration, ignoring the extensive structural issues which constrain their ability to realise aspirations. This position is evidenced though the National Strategy for Access and Student success (HEFCE & OFFA, 2014) which focused on targeted interventions targeted at individuals and groups as opposed to addressing structural inequality.

The logic of these policies focused on ‘raising aspirations’ was that ‘if aspiration could be ‘raised’, educational achievement and later life success would follow’ (Spohrer, 2011, p. 57). This was predicated on several assumptions. Firstly, that where educational achievement is low there is a lack of aspiration. Secondly, that aspiration is the limiting factor to educational achievement and thirdly, that employment is contingent on educational outcomes. However, this simple reductive model does not account for the complexities surrounding educational attainment. Additionally, a recent DfE report acknowledges the enduring problem of ‘turn[ing] aspiration into reality’ (Department for Education, 2017, p. 9).

This leaves widening participation practitioners in an interesting position as they navigate a policy agenda that is seen as problematic. This paper explores the complexities of this navigation through focusing on practitioner practices. The findings show that whilst the policy framing of widening participation often invokes the notion of ‘raising aspirations’,

practitioners demonstrate considerable variation on how they conceptualise and operationalise this, often eschewing rather than perpetuating a deficit model of aspiration. Instead, the work they do becomes oriented to helping individuals *realise* aspirations or raise their *expectations*. This paper adds a distinct contribution to the literature with an in depth understanding of how the term ‘raising aspirations’ is interpreted and enacted arguing that possible selves theory can be helpful to make sense of this. In doing so, it also highlights potential ways to address the misconceptions relating to aspiration that may be limiting the effectiveness of policy. Whilst the implications of this study will resonate most with those operating in more heavily marketised higher education such as Anglo western countries - the U.K, the U.S and Australia, the issues surrounding alignment between individual aspirations and aspirations which become privileged in policy discourses will resonate in wider international contexts.

Possible Selves

Whilst policy has been driven by a deficit of aspirations approach, an alternative way of thinking about future orientations is through the theory of possible selves. Developed by Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius (1986), this theory includes a focus on how individuals create like-to-be and like-to-avoid selves in their head. However, not all those selves are seen as probable with Markus and Nurius emphasising the role of social comparison in shaping them. This framing by Markus and Nurius primarily centres on the role of the individual in the formation of these possible selves. More recent theorisation of possible selves has shifted the focus more towards a sociological framing (Clegg, 2019; Harrison, 2018; Henderson, 2019; Stevenson, 2019). These framings acknowledge that systemic inequalities also play a key role in framings of the probable (Henderson, 2019) and constrain the range of like-to-be selves (Harrison, 2018).

These more sociological interpretations are especially productive when considering pre-entry widening participation. In her exploration of possible selves, Henderson (2019) already foreshadowed the possible resonance between the concept and HE outreach. In a widening participation context, possible selves provides a way to theorise the role of both structures and agency that underpin individual decision making (Clegg, 2019). This acknowledgement of the role of sociocultural context and structures as constraints on action is important. Like-to-be and like-to-avoid selves are drawn from what Harrison (2018, p. 11) terms a 'palette'. This palette is shaped by what is seen as probable and therefore how policy and practice legitimise certain futures impacts upon the available palette. Harrison frames these aspirations in terms of 'legitimate and comfortable' (p.5) aspirations. This framing resonates with Clegg (2019) who argues that the future is socially and politically framed as the construction of what is probable is often beyond the control of the individual. These legitimate aspirations are shaped by policy and discourses of what is an appropriate future to aspire to in addition to structural factors such as the labour market or geography for example. This paper therefore draws upon a sociological framing of possible selves to theorise the role widening participation practitioners play in challenging or reinforcing these probable selves. Further, it will use this to offer a way to understand practices that goes beyond the deficit model of aspiration that plagues policy.

The problems of a narrow framing of aspiration

Within government policy, aspiration for a career is often conflated with aspirations for participation in higher education. This is unsurprising given that most aspirations framed as socially desirable are dependent on being a graduate. Yet the range of like-to-be selves are often based on wider concerns which do not always align with graduate careers. The Dearing

report, a paper at the heart of much WP policy suggested that higher education should be ‘...responsive to the aspirations and distinctive abilities of individuals’ (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997, p. 101). However, this responsiveness to individuals’ aspirations instead morphed into policy that sought to align individual aspirations with what higher education institutions have to offer. Where individual aspirations were not for HE, they were instead positioned in deficit and in need of ‘raising’.

Despite policy narratives constructing the student as a ‘future worker’ (Brooks, 2017, p. 13), the types of work that interest individuals is highly personal and is likely to be influenced by wider personal aspirations which may constrain possible future options. These can be constrained by local labour markets, desire for geographical mobility and close relationships including caring responsibilities. Therefore not all like-to-be selves are seen as probable.

When interventions focus upon a narrow range of desirable aspirations this can create tensions. In exploring one initiative tasked with ‘raising aspirations’ for 13 and 14 year olds, Slack (2010) demonstrated how the adults developing interventions can fail to engage young people through ignoring the aspirations of those participating in the activities. This could equally be argued about a focus on particular careers at the expense of others. Moreover, these framings by adults can serve to legitimise or delegitimise the like-to-be selves of the participants.

Aspirations are not universal but are personal, shaped by individual concerns about what matters in life. Analysis of 2003 PISA¹ data (Dupriez et al., 2012) found students from lower socio-economic groups in all countries had lower aspirations towards higher education.

Within their analysis, Dupriez and colleagues argue that schools play a key role in shaping

¹ Programme for International student assessment <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>

‘higher’ aspirations. However by framing aspirations for higher education as ‘higher’ aspirations this assumes a universal hierarchy of aspiration. This conflation of participation in higher education and idealised aspirations is problematic. Despite this, it extends to much of the discourse surrounding aspiration. Given the targets set in 2001 by New Labour to raise the higher education participation rate to 50% this is logical. This policy was underpinned by many factors: the graduate salary premium (Walker & Zhu, 2013), the under representation of certain groups in professions (Milburn, 2009) and the geographical cold spots in higher education participation (HEFCE, 2018). Masked by this is the often-unspoken use of credentials from elite institutions not as an indicator of skills but of position and class (Bradley & Waller, 2018). Therefore, this notion of raising aspirations for certain types of universities can be seen as being related to ensuring that students have the greatest number of opportunities open to them. However, this can result in a focus on pushing people towards futures framed by narrow conceptions of what success is. Therefore, to suggest the rest of the population have low aspirations because they do not progress to higher education is a very reductive view of aspiration and dismisses a huge range of like-to-be selves that do not fit the idealised conceptions of aspiration in policy. It also negates the fact that successful careers, whilst supported by qualifications, are not wholly contingent on them.

Despite meeting the needs and desire for a fulfilling life, the range of aspirations expressed by young people may not match the ‘high’ aspirations of policy discourses (Spohrer, 2016). There have been numerous studies both involving large scale quantitative work (e.g. Anders, 2017; Archer et al., 2014; Khattab, 2015; Polesel et al., 2017) and smaller scale qualitative studies (e.g. Allen & Hollingworth, 2013; Baker, 2016; Reay, 1998; St. Clair et al., 2013) that debunk the notion of a deficit of aspiration, both in terms of desire for a positive occupational destination and for participation in higher education. However, Allen and Hollingworth

(2013) highlight the inter-relation of class and place and found that aspirations can be constrained by labour market opportunities forming objectively limited horizons for aspiration, i.e. constraining the probable. Policy has positioned an 'ideal' aspiration as one that is distinctly middle-class and mobile (Loveday, 2015), but this may not match the desires of individuals. Whilst pupils in a study based in Cornwall had high occupational aspirations, this was taken with the assumption they would move out of the area and that the local job market was not compatible with these aspirations (Boyask et al., 2014). Those who planned to remain in the local area were framed as having low aspirations due to 'limited horizons' (p.29). I argue, that this labelling of an aspiration to live out a life locally as one that is low adopts a highly reductive view of aspiration and completely ignores the like-to-be selves of those individuals.

One of the many problems of the 'raising aspirations' discourse is the predication on becoming middle class to succeed (Boliver, 2017). As Spohrer (2016) found in a study with teenagers and teachers in Scotland, the dominant framing of success was one of middle-class professional aspirations, with other jobs positioned as less desirable. Given the deprivation of that local area, the opportunities for such employment were limited. This individualisation of success and social mobility is one of the central issues of policy and assumes not only the desire on the part of the individual to make this move but ignores material constraints.

Similarly, Slack (2003) has argued, raising aspirations without ensuring opportunities are available is morally unfair. Through a lens of possible selves, this equates to encouraging the formation of like-to-be selves that are not probable. Furthermore, policy also paints a picture of social mobility that is without harm whereas in reality it can lead to possible internal psychological conflicts (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013) or feeling like a 'fish out of water' (Reay et al., 2010, p. 1106). By engaging in higher education, individuals are promised

access to an imagined life that they may not be able to realise, and yet their own natal context has been framed as one which is not desirable, leaving them feeling like they do not belong in either world. This is a morally unfair position that marginalises the individual's psychological needs and is likely to cause them to see like-to-be selves that meet their aspirations as improbable or unsayable (Henderson, 2019) based on social norms. That is to say that the internally held aspirations are not able to be realised due to structural barriers or do not match those that are legitimated in the socio-cultural context and therefore are not vocalised.

Aspirations or expectations?

Interrelated to the notion of 'raising aspiration' is the notion of expectation. A study with widening participation managers found that whilst over fifty percent of the managers in the study felt their institutions were successful at raising aspirations for higher education. However, that claim was closely linked to the fact that they saw increased applications to their institutions (Harrison & Waller, 2018). Harrison and Waller argued that this assumes that the aspiration the institution is equipped to realise is the same as the individual aspirations of the participants. This is a different framing of aspiration, not to a particular career or higher education more generally, but to a specific institution. Furthermore, it is predicated on an assumption that these individuals might not have progressed to higher education anyway, presuming a deficit of expectation that these young people will transition to university. Studies such as Khattab (2015) have highlighted that both aspirations and expectations as key to understanding academic achievement, finding that aspirations alone did not determine whether students would apply to university and thus challenges the assertions made by those managers.

Despite the paucity of evidence for low-aspirations, it could be argued that the best place to identify ‘low aspirations’ would be in non-participants in higher education. Archer and Hutchings (2000) study of 109 non-HE participants from working-class backgrounds highlighted the complexity of aspiring to higher education. This research found a deficit in confidence as opposed to in aspiration. This confidence deficit related to both individuals’ capabilities and of their faith in university to offer a positive impact upon their lives. This resonates with Mendick et al. (2018) analysis which found that intrinsic factors such as enjoyment and belonging were more important to the young people than extrinsic factors, such as pay, in their aspiration formation. These complexities also closely resonate with the idea of like-to-be and like-to-avoid selves and the way in which these can be constrained by structural factors such as the labour market to give a sense of what is probable. These issues are all ones that the narrow framing of aspiration within policy fails to account for.

Methods

The study from which this paper is drawn was designed to explore the gaps between widening participation policy and practice in higher education institutions in England (Rainford, 2019). It adopted a comparative approach, to explore differences between elite and selective universities. In 1992, the English higher education sector experienced a mass expansion of higher education following the 1992 *Further and Higher Education Act* and despite over twenty-five years passing, there are still distinct differences between those universities that gained their university status following this act (referred to as post-92) and those whose history as a university pre-date this (referred to as pre-92). Broadly, pre-92 institutions tend to have higher entry requirements and selectivity over who gains entry compared to post-92 institutions which tend to recruit from a wider pool of applicants. The study sought to allow for a sample that covered institutions spanning the whole of England to

account for local differences in student demographics. Ten institutions comprised of five pairs of pre and post-92 institutions located in the same city were selected. One city was selected from each of five different regions of England (North East, North West, Midlands, South and South West). This selection was intended to offer a wide geographical coverage whilst also allowing for direct comparisons between two different settings with the same geographical challenges in relation to accessing higher education. However, the limitations of matching pairs of pre and post-92 institutions means the coverage is limited to urban settings. This meant that some issues relating to rural student populations in particular may have been beyond the reach of the study. Where there was a choice between cities in the same region, pragmatic considerations relating to potential access for phase two were made.

To compare both policy and practice, the study adopted a two-phase approach, the first phase being a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of ten institutions 2016-17 access agreements; the institutional access and participation policy documents. Adapted from Fairclough (2003) CDA approach, this analysis focused on exploring the lexical choices, assumptions and legitimations used within these documents. This process of analysis also allowed for other recurring themes within the documents to be foregrounded inductively. One of these themes was aspiration which then became a focus of the phase two interviews (Rainford, 2019). The second phase was intended to explore how these issues within policies were experienced in practice. Sixteen semi-structured interviews with widening participation practitioners working primarily in pre-entry outreach focused roles were conducted. Out of these, twelve practitioners were recruited through institutions from phase one (Appendix. 1). Due to access constraints, the remaining four participants were recruited through an open call on a mailing list of widening participation practitioners. The interviews were conducted between April 2017 and January 2018.

The study adhered to the British Educational Research Association guidelines on ethical research (BERA 2011) and ethical approval for the study was granted by Staffordshire University Faculty of Business, Education and Law Faculty ethics committee. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms and are only identified by the type of institution they work in to ensure confidentiality. The interviews included discussion of practitioner's educational and personal histories, and their work. They also explored emergent themes from the discourse analysis including how individuals are targeted for pre-entry outreach work and aspiration. Aspiration, the focus of this paper, was explored using a LEGO based method to rank different jobs where participants talked about their conceptions of careers (Rainford, 2019, 2020) and was followed two specific follow up questions: 'Does this mean in some ways you feel there are good and bad careers?' and 'Can you tell me what raising aspirations means to you?'. The interviews were transcribed and analysed line by line for themes, grouping these where there was commonality. A visual mapping technique (Rainford, 2019:290) was then used to identify links and connections between the themes and issues within the data to and form a coding schedule. This was then used to code the data in NVivo and allow for analysis of the interviews as a whole.

'Raising aspirations': Comparing what is said and done

In analysing institutional policy documents, there was variation in the way in which 'raising aspiration' was framed by the institutions. Pre-92 institutions commonly aligned high aspirations with application to selective institutions. When 'raising aspirations' was used by post-92s, it was more focused on raising awareness of higher education generally. Despite these clear differences in policy, individual practitioners' conceptions of 'raising aspirations' did not seem to have any correlation with the type of institution they worked in. Nor did they align with the practitioner types theorised elsewhere (Rainford, 2021). In fact, within the

overall sample of practitioners, most (12) struggled to define what it meant to ‘raise aspirations’ and many rejected the concept. For Mel (post-92), she felt:

[...] It's the expectation that if you are a WP kid you have no aspirations and that's not true. I think some young people have aspirations, but they don't know how to realise them, so they don't have the awareness. Some people have very high aspirations, but they don't have the attainment that would mean that they could realise those aspirations immediately.

Similarly, Sophie (pre-92) alluded to there being a problem in claiming a need to ‘raise aspirations’; she thought that ‘they come with those aspirations. I don't think they'd be applying to the programme if they weren't aspiring to come’. In contrast, some practitioners did feel that ‘raising aspirations’ was something they could define and this was often framed as ‘being aware you can go for the big stuff’ (Hannah, pre-92) or ‘Opening doors in people's minds’ (Lucy, pre-92). Like the rest of the definitions however, these readings suggested that aspiration may not be the issue that they were describing but expectations or awareness. All of these positions seem to be about helping individuals develop an expanded sense of what might be probable in order to give them a wider ‘palette’ (Harrison, 2018 p.11) to draw their like-to-be selves from as opposed to imposing hierarchical notions of ‘high’ and ‘low’ aspiration. The issues practitioners discussed that limited what was seen as probable were attributable to three somewhat interlinked issues; information provision, expectations, and confidence to realise aspirations.

Awareness and information

Many practitioners in pre-92 institutions saw raising awareness or providing information as central to what ‘raising aspirations’ meant to them:

it's just making sure that someone realises that there aren't barriers, especially to higher education, and it's making sure that they've got all the support and the information that they need to you know aspire to come to university.

Sophie (pre-92)

The tendency for those practitioners in pre-92 institutions to foreground the role of information in raising aspirations, suggested a narrower definition of what it meant to raise aspiration than found in other research (Harrison & Waller, 2018). It also speaks to the notion that 'raising aspiration' as a concept was the driving force behind regulation of WP. Samantha (pre-92) and Andrea (pre-92) specifically highlighted their focus upon encouraging progression to Russell group institutions. Whilst the notion of 'diversifying and informing aspirations' (Archer et al., 2014, p. 79) is something prior research has argued for, this seems to be a focus on narrowing, as opposed to diversifying aspiration. Again, pre-empting what optimal possible selves should be for their participants. This ignores the like-to-be selves of those individuals and the sense of what is probable given structural constraints they may face

Confidence to realise aspirations

In contrast, other practitioners saw their role as not only providing information but helping raise the confidence of the individuals they worked with in their ability to realise their aspirations. In describing what 'raising aspirations' meant, Rebecca (pre-92) suggested that 'it's kinda making people feel more confident in themselves.' This theme of confidence ran through responses and speaks to the notion of individuals being confident that their like-to-be selves are achievable and thus worth the effort to try to realise. This was echoed in another interview where Alice (post-92) talked about 'pushing yourself harder' and Samantha (pre-92) about 'helping young people believe that they can progress to something that previously

they didn't believe'. The notion of confidence was often predicated with the idea that individuals came with aspirations but were not confident they were achievable, aligning with Archer and Hutchings (2000) previous findings on non-HE participation. In their research they found young people from working-class backgrounds felt higher education was risky with uncertain returns. This uncertainty can be seen as a lack of confidence in the value higher education will add to their lives. Thus like-to-be selves contingent of HE participation are likely not to be framed as probable.

If an individual is not confident in their ability to follow a certain path, or for that path to offer them a positive future then it is unlikely to be a possible self they will actively consider. As Emily (pre-92) stated:

It's more like realising aspirations. It's something that I prefer to think about in that way so that if you've got an aspiration great, we can help you achieve that and if you're not sure what to do, we can make sure that you are looking at all the options available to you to allow you to think that it could be a possible outcome for you.

One interpretation is that Emily sees her role as providing information. However, information alone does not help individuals see something as a possible outcome. Therefore what she is highlighting goes beyond this as she is also foregrounding her role in helping individuals to develop confidence that these options are attainable within their individual sociocultural contexts.

Other practitioners also used similar terms such as 'illuminating aspirations' (Rob, post-92) but all were underpinned by the assumption that individuals already had some form of aspiration. Whilst work to support aspirations is important and Archer et al. (2014) have

argued for the ‘value in preventing the ‘closing down of aspirations’ (2014 p.78), this realisation of aspiration is describing something distinct from the need to ‘raise aspirations’ framed in policy. It is not about replacing the like-to-be selves of an individual with idealised aspirations from policy but is about helping individuals expand their sense of what is probable. Unlike a deficit model, this approach focuses on the individuals wants and desires as opposed to external conceptions of desirable aspirations.

Raising expectations

Confidence to realise aspirations can also be shaped by the expectations of parents, teachers, peers and society. The notion of raising expectations featured in nearly all of the responses, whether these were expectations of progression to the Russell Group in the narratives of Samantha and Andrea (both pre-92) or more generally as in Carol’s (post-92) who used a ladder metaphor:

So kind of on the ladder its getting them, wherever they fit whether it's academically, skill based, it's getting them to think about the one above where they are now, so like pushing them that extra.

Whilst a minority view in the study sample, Alice (post -92) also used a frame of raising expectations:

So I guess it means being able to look above and beyond what is immediately around you. So being able to consider careers and opportunities that aren't what other people in your community have done which you're not just going to the local university because everybody else does or because it's the easiest thing to do. You think about what's right for you and if you know that you're not understanding yourself. So if you know you can do really well at school then you know pushing yourself as hard as you

can so you can aim for the best university that will take you that will give you the best possible life chances.

This close tie between aspiration and expectation is supported in the literature (Harrison & Waller, 2018; Khattab, 2015; Polesel et al., 2017). However, as studies related to youth transitions show (e.g. Connolly & Neill, 2001; Macdonald & Marsh, 2005) expectations may be contingent on many other factors in a young person's life. Yet Alice's description seemed to follow quite closely the need to 'raise aspirations' espoused in policy, one distinctly shaped by middle-class values and possibilities. This therefore privileges certain outcomes as more desirable even if specific constraints limit the possibility of these being realised. It seems that where there is a mis-match between the like-to-be self of the participant and an idealised possible self in the mind of the practitioner, that this deficit view is held. This framing ignores the structural barriers that constrain the probability of an imagined like-to-be self. Consequently, without taking this into account it has the potential to negatively impact the individuals they work with by creating unrealisable selves which may have long term impacts on the individual's sense of self-worth.

In contrast, other practitioners based their understandings of expectation on the ideal that what is realistic for the individual is of central importance:

When I'm working with young people, I always think that you need to make an informed decision. So, if they want to be a builder then that's good because if you stuck them into architecture that might be completely not suitable for them.

Carol (post-92)

These different framings of expectations could be seen to be closely aligned with differing understandings of what equality means. If equality is about ensuring everyone can achieve

their own version of success, then what raising expectations focuses on is different to if equality narrowly focuses on supporting individuals to gain access to elite higher education.

Do practitioners think that there are low aspirations?

Whilst the majority of the participants challenged the deficit discourse, five participants stated within their interviews that some young people do have low aspirations. Though a minority of the practitioners, it is worthy of further exploration as there were several different issues that intersected; the culture in schools, educational disengagement and the assumption of geographical mobility.

‘It’s not cool to have aspirations’

Firstly, Rebecca (post-92) talked about the culture that can form around aspiration in schools, specifically how ‘If you have low aspirations a lot of your friends have them because it’s not cool to have aspirations’. However, the vocalisation of aspiration and existence of an aspiration are distinct issues. As this paper has already highlighted, a possible self that is not seen as socially desirable may be unsayable (Henderson, 2019). Whilst a deficit of aspiration has been repeatedly disproven in survey based studies (e.g. Anders, 2017; Platt & Parsons, 2017) it is clear that some practitioners are still invested in this idea. One explanation could be the disconnect between what is said in anonymous surveys and within groups of peers. This may distort practitioner perceptions of what young people’s aspirations actually are. If an individual sees a tension between their imagined self and the idealised selves set out by WP practitioners or teachers who may be present in these interventions, they might decide to not disclose this. For example, Andrea (pre-92) felt that the fact there was evidence of low aspiration in some of the young people she worked with was due to their inability to articulate future plans.

Whilst these responses can be framed in terms of a lack of ability to separate what people say and what they think, another narrative of low aspirations was given by Rebecca (post-92) who felt that 'some kids just don't feel like university is for them'. This narrow framing of aspirations focused on the primacy of aspirations requiring a university degree. She elaborated with the fact that 'They set their sights almost too low because they don't think they can do it'. This issue is likely to be more complex than a lack of aspiration but appears to refer potentially involve a lack in confidence that university will support their imagined future self. In contrast Rob (post-92) explained that:

Their aspirations might be low compared to what we think they should be, so it's like I want to be a painter decorator. That's great, be the best painter decorator, you should aspire then to be the best painter decorator.

This is a very different interpretation of the same issue, based upon a more nuanced framing of aspiration. It is also reliant on individuals being confident to tell a widening participation practitioner that their like-to-be self is not one which relies on higher education.

Furthermore, this also highlights role of structural factors such as labour markets and perceptions of what is socially desirable play in constraining aspiration.

'We as WP professionals don't actually meet those kids that often'

Lucy (pre-92) and Alice (post-92) also linked the idea of low aspirations with another key issue, disengagement from education. Alice was very clear in the fact she felt that whilst there are low aspirations that:

[...] we as WP professionals don't actually meet those kids that often and that's probably part of the problem because they are being, they're not being brought to us or we aren't going to them. [...] I am a governor of a multi academy trust in [local

area] and through doing that you do meet those students with low aspirations who are school refusers who through various problems at home have switched off already, who either maybe they do see the point of going to school and they don't care or they genuinely don't see the point, who have kind of given up already, and that might not be their fault but they might have low aspirations for themselves.

Alice (post-92)

This assertion was not from experience of having spoken to these young people about their aspirations, but instead was based on a stereotypical framing of educational disengagement related to a deficit of aspiration. Like Travers (2017) research with undergraduates who were asked to reflect on why there may be a deficit of aspiration in their peers , these claims were based on speaking for an 'other'. The realities of aspiration are likely to be more complex as shown in more detailed research with these groups (Higham & Gagnon, 2017). Where future imagined pathways were not predicated on qualifications, educational disengagement was common. This is not necessarily evidence of low aspirations, but more the lack of expectations or opportunities for realising them. It also may be evidence of the lack of belief of the part of the individual that education will positively contribute to their imagined future self. There is little support in the literature for a poverty of aspiration. Therefore, it is likely that these disengaged young people may have had their aspirations frustrated through other factors, especially when considered in terms of opportunities open to them within their local areas (Boyask et al., 2014; Connolly & Neill, 2001).

Whose like-to-be self?

The final practitioner who felt that there were young people with low aspirations was David. This response was the most extensive and is worth further discussion.

I think there's quite a lot of kids with low aspirations. They don't see it. Although, lower aspirations, academically, certainly and it's usually because if you go into a primary school in [deprived area of city] and ask them what they want to be when they grow up, a lot of them will say they want to work in Tesco, not because they've sat down and looked at the options and gone actually that's what suits me, that's my skillset but because that's where their parents are so that's all they know.

David (post-92)

Whilst this narrative seemed to highlight the role of aspiration as the driver of success, it could be questioned how much this interpretation was an oversimplification of the link between aspirations and future career choices. Whilst individuals may have developed a like-to-be self, it may not be probable when considered in relation to structural barriers within their sociocultural context. Aspirations can be frustrated due to lack of local opportunity, other labour market constraints, or through familial and cultural framings of what is seen as a 'desirable' future. If these selves do not seem probable, individuals may not vocalise them. Instead they focus on what is 'legitimate and comfortable' (Harrison, 2018, p. 4). Yet David seemed to take those vocalised views at face value. This mis-match with his conceptions of a 'high aspiration' creating his sense of a 'low aspiration'. As Henderson (2019) has argued, self-censorship based on what is sayable matters in the futures individuals narrate for themselves.

In contrast, Mel (post-92) working in the same institution interpreted her experiences with similar individuals differently:

I think again it's kind of the expectation that if you are a WP kid you have no aspirations that's not true, I think some young people have aspirations, but they don't

know how to realise them, so they don't have the awareness.

This demonstrated a greater understanding of the complex intersection of factors related to aspiration. I would argue that this idea of knowing Mel focuses upon is not about informational awareness but about the varied factors that underpin conceptions of what is probable.

Two practitioners working in the same context have therefore interpreted this issue differently. David's (post-92) rationale for why he feels that low aspirations are an issue offers some insight:

If we didn't have an issue with low aspirations, then you could go into basically a school in a privileged area and a school in a deprived area and the kids would have the same ideas as where they want to go [...]

This reading was quite reductive and ignored some practical and psychological barriers to aspiration. It also failed to acknowledge the structural issue that shape the aspirations individuals are willing to vocalise. Instead of thinking about the individual's needs, his framing was focused on individual's positionality in relation to an ideal aspiration. As Reay et al. (2005) noted from their study on degree choice, some students fall into the category of what they term 'contingent choosers' (p.119) whose choice is more contingent on practical concerns than aspiration. I argue therefore that the practitioners describing low aspirations are conflating a number of issues which do not actually represent a lack of aspiration. In fact they are identifying where like-to-be selves of the individuals they work with do not match idealised visions within policy discourses. This is likely to be even more of an issue where their own experiences have not been constrained by their sociocultural contexts in the same way the individuals they work with might be. When practitioners are not aware of or do not

acknowledge these structural conditions, their sense of what is possible often misses the sense of what is probable. As (Clegg, 2019) has argued, these structural factors play a key role in aspiration formation thus in order to do widening participation in a morally just way, these need to be taken into account.

Discussion

Whilst there is a clear divergence of experiences between practitioners, this does not appear to be shaped primarily by the institution within which they work. Instead, it is a much more embedded relationship contingent on personal experiences and values. Both David and Mel's backgrounds (Appendix 1) seemed to influence their understandings of aspiration. Mel coming from a similar demographic to her target students meant she had a more acute understanding of the impact of the structural barriers to aspiration. In contrast, David's own narrative was more aligned with the geographically and socially mobile model framed as desirable by policy. Therefore, their own experiences seemed to shape how they understood the constraints within which aspiration is formed and the complexity of individuals being able to realise their own like-to-be selves.

'Raising aspirations' is therefore clearly contested as a term with diverse interpretations and operationalisations in practice. This presents two challenges: Firstly, that institutions are still claiming to do something that extensive bodies of research have disproven; fill a deficit of aspiration. Secondly, the variability with which the term is interpreted, with definitions conflating aspiration with application to institutions, awareness of higher education, expectations, and attainment. This means that what is being delivered in practice is often divorced from that espoused in policy. As Sophie (pre-92) stated: 'you wouldn't apply to a programme like ours or to university if you didn't have those aspirations'. This suggests that under a banner of 'raising aspirations', interventions are focused upon different issues and

targeted at young people with existing aspirations. To frame this within the language of possible selves, they are focusing on those for whom university is already within the realm of the probable.

What becomes evident from the data is that practitioner framings of aspiration and their resistance to a deficit model in many cases can circumvent and ameliorate the tension of delivering this work in marketised institutions. If, despite much research to the contrary, practitioners were simply focused on reinforcing this deficit of aspirations approach then we should be concerned at the potential harms the sector may be having upon young people. However, this study shows that the interpretations and explanations of this work were on the whole more nuanced. They often understood the complexity of aspiration formation and the way structural issues can shape what is seen as probable, something which shapes the pallet of like-to-be selves that drawn upon (Harrison, 2018). However, this was not universal and as was shown, five of the practitioners were still invested to some extent in the notion of 'low aspirations'. The continued perpetuation of the need to 'raise aspirations' in HE policy is likely to be the cause of this as many of the views were based more on theoretical and stereotypical assumptions than on the practitioners own experiences.

Limitations

This study offers insights into some of the taken for granted issues underpinning the very notion of 'aspiration raising' in relation to higher education. The role of practitioners in this work is relatively unresearched. However, a study of this size can only tell us so much. It allows for the foregrounding of issues but it is by no means comprehensive. Firstly, Individual practitioners can, and do act in heterogenous ways therefore we cannot over generalise these issues. Secondly, the focus on urban institutions means that issues related to

aspirations in rural areas especially are likely to have had the attention they need. Thirdly, the focus on practitioners working in urban multi-faculty universities means that more work is needed to see if these issues also apply to more rural contexts and in small specialist providers. Furthermore, practitioners are not static in their institutions. Appendix 1 highlights how some have moved institutions during their careers and some will also work on cross-sector initiatives (see Rainford (2019) for further discussion).

Conclusions

Whilst the nuanced understandings of aspiration from practitioners is evident, the question remains however as to why ‘raising aspiration’ endures in policy despite practitioners’ critical views on it. This paper has demonstrated that varied conceptions of aspiration combined with muddiness in the definition and operationalisation of the notion of ‘raising aspirations’ result in tensions between policy and practice. From the wider study (Rainford, 2019) it was evident that there is often no mechanisms for practitioners to input into either institutional or national policy. This is problematic so far as these are the staff who best understand the realities of the lives of the target groups they work with and yet their knowledge is not being used to develop evidence-informed policy. Instead, practitioners are often working within the constraints of policy framings and having to push at the margins to be able to offer more nuanced support for aspiration. Their ability to do this is more, or less limited depending on their individual experience and understanding of wider social issues (Rainford, 2021). For example, without understanding structural inequality or the realities of local labour markets, the ability to help inform what is probable is limited. Therefore, in order to have any systemic change to widening participation, changes to policy need to occur. This should focus on a significant reframing of aspiration, returning to its roots in the Dearing report of being focused on the individual’s needs and informed by the extant body of research on aspiration.

At the heart of this, the concept of possible selves (Harrison, 2018) and how to use this within WP is likely to be valuable. In particular, more sociological readings of possible selves (e.g. Clegg, 2019; Henderson, 2019) that take into account the structural barriers in developing and realising aspirations are likely to be invaluable. In many ways, the possible selves approach aligns with practitioner understandings as identified in this study even though it is far removed from policy positions. Policymakers also need to acknowledge that aspirations are complex and often involve balancing personal aspirations relating to family and well-being with economic based aspirations. By adopting an informed understanding of aspiration formation, the sector can better support individuals to realise their possible selves. Doing this is not just morally right. It is also likely to have positive implications to retention and success for those who do enter higher education. In working with individuals to realise their individual aspirations as opposed to ‘raising’ them to fit existing pathways we are likely to reduce the mismatch between expectations and realities of realising those aspirations.

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| <i>Research Site</i> | <i>Name</i> | <i>Gender</i> | <i>Age</i> | <i>First in family</i> | <i>Parental occupations</i> | <i>time in post</i> | <i>Previous employment</i> |
|--|-------------|---------------|------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|---|
| <i>Pre-92-A</i> | Beverley | F | 35-39 | Y | Not stated | 9 mths | charity youth sector and careers guidance |
| | Samantha | F | 25-29 | N | Careers Advisor / Telephone Engineer | 2 yrs | FE Teaching and Voluntary Sector |
| | Karen | F | 25-29 | N | Teachers | 18 mths | Teaching Assistant |
| | Lucy | F | 25-29 | N | Teacher / Engineer | 9 mths | Public affairs (pre-92) |
| <i>Pre-92-B</i> | Andrea | F | 40-44 | Y | Not stated | 10+ yrs | Careers service (post-92) |
| | Emily | F | 30-34 | Y | Teacher | 6 yrs | Exam Board |
| | Hannah | F | 25-29 | Y | Not stated | 9 mths | PhD pre-92 |
| | Sophie | F | 25-29 | Y | Teaching Assistant | 4 yrs | Marketing and recruitment (pre-92) |
| <i>Post-92-A</i> | Mel | F | 25-29 | Y | Cleaner / Bin man | 2 yrs | Careers and WP (pre-92) |
| | David | M | 45-49 | N | Not stated | 10+ yrs | FE college + Marketing officer (post-92) |
| | Rebecca | F | 25-29 | N | Doctor | 1 mth | paralegal / WP officer (post-92) |
| | Rob | M | 35-39 | N | Teachers (with PhDs) | 4 mths | WP and recruitment (pre-92) |
| <i>Additional Post-92 Participants</i> | Katie | F | 20-24 | N | Teacher / Nursery Nurse | 1 yr | WP (post-92) |
| | Carol | F | 30-34 | Y | Investment Banker / Housewife | 1 yr | WP (cross sector) |
| | Andrew | M | 35-39 | N | Professor | 4 yrs | Publishing |
| | Alice | F | 25-29 | N | Quantity surveyor / Optician | 2 yrs | WP (pre-92) |

