

## Can we put the 'poverty of aspiration' myth to bed now?

Dr Morag Treanor  
University of Stirling  
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### Can we put the 'poverty of aspiration' myth to bed now?

**Abstract**  
The 'poverty of aspiration' myth is a common trope in public discourse, suggesting that some children are poor because they lack the aspiration to succeed. This paper examines the origins and implications of this myth, arguing that it is a harmful and inaccurate way of understanding child poverty. It explores the ways in which this myth is used to blame children and their families for their poverty, and how it can lead to a deficit view of aspirations, holding young people and their parents 'responsible' for their 'lack of' ambition. The paper also discusses the ways in which this myth can be challenged, and how a more holistic and structural approach to child poverty is needed.

**Keywords**  
child poverty, aspirations, deficit view, structural approach

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## Background

- Aspirations have become a key educational policy driver in the UK and are seen as one of the critical levers for improving educational attainment and raising skills.
- children and their parents are seen as lacking ambition
- leads to a deficit view of aspirations, holding young people and their parents 'responsible' for their 'lack of' ambition.
- but aspirations expressed by young people and their parents reflect the expectations and constraints inherent within their setting, rather than a free choice of desired outcome.

Rafiq Chari & Amanda Benjamin (2013) Performing desires: the dilemma of aspirations and educational attainment, British Educational Research Journal, 41(4), 505-537

## GORDON BROWN

So my argument, and my starting point today, is it is time for Britain to leave behind once and for all this culture of pessimism, any acquiescence in defeatism, any acceptance of low aspirations that holds us back. Poverty of aspiration is as damaging as poverty of opportunity and it is time to replace a culture of low expectations for too many with a culture of high standards for all.

## TONY BLAIR

There's poverty is, not just about poverty of income, but poverty of aspiration, of opportunity, of prospects of advancement. We must not in any way let up on the action we take to deal directly with child poverty. But at the same time, we have to recognise that for some families, their problems are more multiple, more deep and more pervasive than simply low income. The barriers to opportunity are about their social and human capital as much as financial. Universal services are not reaching them. And thus it follows that pre-fabricated services cannot answer to individual needs.

## Despite excellent work on child poverty by the Scottish Government, myths persist...

Alex Cole-Hamilton (LD)

Naturally, the bill commands the support of the Liberal Democrats. I am heartily glad that that support is shared across the Parliament. There is now a recognition in this chamber that our efforts to tackle the scourge of child poverty must go far beyond just the financial health of our nation's families. I refer to the range of other forms of poverty that give in many ways as pervasive as financial poverty, and which might have an profound an impact on life outcomes. There is poverty of aspiration, whereby children grow up in families that have experienced generations of unemployment and economic inactivity and do not see social mobility for themselves; poverty of attachment, particularly among the 15,000 children in our care system who will find it difficult to form lasting adult relationships due to childhood trauma and loss; and poverty of health, whereby poor housing, health inequalities and depression diminish the outcomes and life expectancy.

Michelle Ballantyne (C)

Alex Cole-Hamilton hit the right note when he talked about the other impacts of poverty. The poverty of attachment is something that I have seen through my professional life, and I certainly acknowledge that the poverty of aspiration needs to be addressed. We also highlighted the importance of community planning and the need to ensure that looked after and accommodated children have a voice in the process.

Ruth Maguire (SNP)

Ruth Maguire:   
Can the member understand how offensive the term 'poverty of aspiration' is to people who simply do not have enough money?

Scottish Parliament 8 November 2017. Official report of the Stage 3 debate on the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill (Online). Edinburgh: Scottish Parliament. Available: <http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentary/business/reports.aspx?cs=113726c10385>. [Accessed 6 December 2017].

## Poverty of aspirations

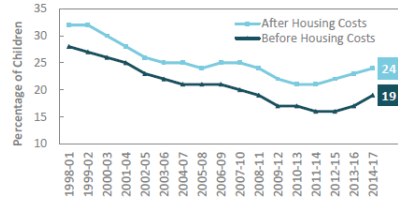
- Children living in poverty **do** have high aspirations for themselves, although the jobs they aspire to are often of the gendered variety familiar to them within the context of their knowledge and experience, such as hairdressers or mechanics.
- That is to say that 'aspirations expressed by young people reflect the expectations and constraints inherent within their setting, rather than a free choice of desired outcome'.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

### Teachers and the poverty of aspiration

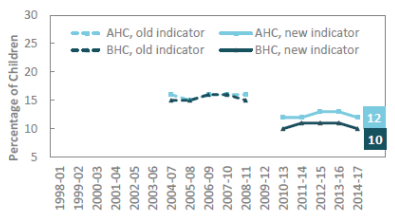
- Teachers and student teachers often found to have little understanding of the link between child poverty and educational attainment, which lead to their falling back on negative stereotypes of children and parents living in poverty (Thompson et al, 2016: 220).
- Often teachers do not understand enough about existential poverty to get beyond a pathologising discourse of families, parents and children as feckless and undeserving (Singh et al. 2013)
- Negative stereotypes about impoverished children based on deficit assumptions can perpetuate inequality (Cummings et al., 2012).

### Let's look at child poverty in Scotland...

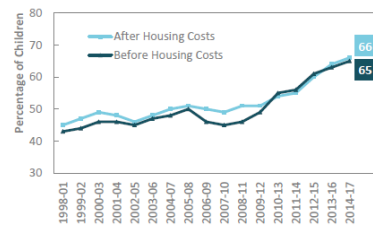
Ch15. Relative poverty rate for children



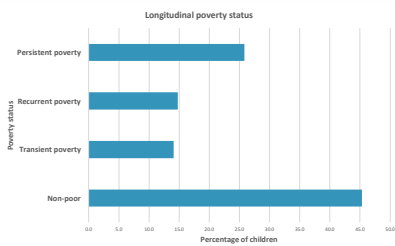
Ch17. Children in combined material deprivation and low income



Ch18. In-work poverty for children



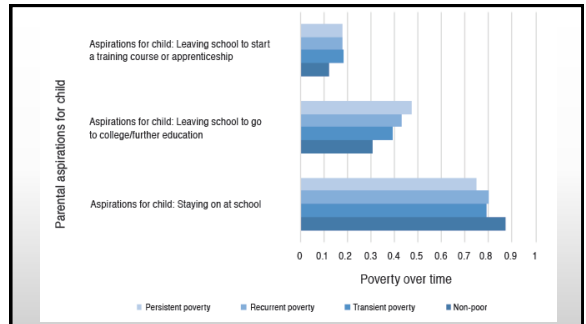
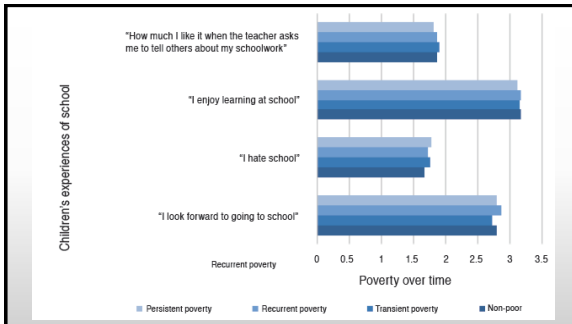
What these statistics do not convey...



Source: Growing Up in Scotland sweeps 1-7  
Weighted by longitudinal weight from sweep 7

### What's the message?

- Note that only 45% of children in Scotland **have not** experienced at least one year of poverty in all seven years of data.
- Poverty is **dynamic**
- There is not a fixed population of people living in poverty
- Annual, cross-sectional snapshots can't tell you that
- But the new experimental statistics on persistent poverty that the Scottish Government are trialling are not cross-sectional so they could do more than they are.



### Parents' experience of their children's education

- For every type of poverty, parents are **less** likely to believe that they can positively influence their child's achievement at school compared to parents with no experience of poverty.
- 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.
- All children are talking about the things they have learned at school with parents irrespective of their experience of poverty.

### Poverty of aspirations

- 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 and parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds.
- However, teachers are also disadvantaged by not understanding the causes of poverty, its effects on children and on their education, and by believing that the poverty of aspirations is a fact.
- Teachers perpetuate the myth but are tasked with solving the problem as it is (wrongly) understood.

### Coming at the problem from the wrong angle

- Schools and policy-makers are putting effort into 'raising aspirations' to increase achievement among disadvantaged pupils.
- Focusing on 'raising' aspirations unlikely to narrow the educational attainment gap
- It is based on false assumptions about low aspirations.
- The real challenge for disadvantaged young people is sustaining and achieving their aspirations.
- The challenge for parents is how to understand and support their children's aspirations.
- The challenge for teachers is how to understand the causes and consequences of poverty, and then how to support and sustain aspirations.
- It's about knowledge, experiences, support and relationships.

### Key messages

- School is important to, and for, children living in poverty
- Parents living in poverty value school and want to help
- The 'Poverty of Aspiration' is a myth
- Parents all want the best for their child
- Parents living in poverty less likely to know what that looks like or how to achieve it
- Parents living in poverty less likely to know how to help their child
- Teachers on the whole would like to help but are trying to change the wrong thing, often through misunderstandings of poverty itself.

# 1 in 5 Child Poverty Conference: Tackling Stigma and Inequality

## Friday 27<sup>th</sup> April

*“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.”*

### Recommendations

- Policymakers having 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.
- Support parents and children to understand the opportunities available to them and give them the knowledge necessary to achieve them
- 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
- Dismantle the local and structural barriers to high aspirations.

### ‘Flipping the thinking’ JFK-style



*“And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.”*

John F. Kennedy Inauguration speech, 20 January 1961

A teacher once asked me, “how do I teach those children (living in poverty) to value their education?” and I asked her, “what do you do to show those children you value them so that they want to take up your offer of an education?” Instead of expecting stressed children to understand the long-term value of education how do we flip the thinking so that educators understand and value all children in their classroom irrespective...?

- **Question 1 - what do you do to show those children you value them so that they want to take up your offer of an education (or other service)?**

Work is being done in schools (and elsewhere) to reduce and eliminate poverty-related stigma and shame. I think of this as the cessation of a negative behaviour; in other words, it’s a neutral act. How do we flip this to turn it into the presence of a positive; in other words, a positive act? Rather than reduce or eliminate stigma, how do we actively promote dignity and respect for those who manage to come to school each day despite the barriers that poverty puts in their way?

- **Question 2 - How can you promote dignity and respect for those who manage to come to school each day despite the barriers that poverty puts in their way?**

- **Question 1 - what do you do to show those children you value them so that they want to take up your offer of an education (or other service)?**

- **Question 2 - How can you promote dignity and respect for those who manage to come to school each day despite the barriers that poverty puts in their way?**