

**Youths' career aspirations and socioeconomic outcomes in  
adulthood: A literature review**

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## **I. Introduction**

A number of social theorists have contended that towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western societies entered a stage of social, economic and technological development in which previously-held notions of certainty about social status, custom, collective identities, and so on, began to break down, and life became increasingly characterised by scepticism, ambiguity and uncertainty, (e.g. Beck 1992; Bauman, 2000). It has been argued that self-identity itself has become a fragmented and uncertain project, and that forms of uncertainty are especially relevant for young people approaching or undergoing the transition to adulthood, which is marked by status ambiguity and anxiety (e.g. Coleman, 1993; Denscombe, 2001).

One of the most important sources of uncertainty for young people comes from changes in the youth labour market, which affect the prospects of their transitions from school to work and towards financial independence. These changes and their effects on young people's transitions have been global in their impact. As Stewart (2004) points out, in 1993 69 million young people were unemployed worldwide; a decade later, this figure was 88 million. Young people have thus come to make up half of the world's unemployed despite comprising only 18% of the population. The increasing uncertainties of the youth labour market have meant that young people's traditionally stable and relatively predictable transitions to work have become much more varied, complex, lengthy and uncertain (Steward, 2004). Educational attainment is becoming ever more important as a key factor shaping young people's life chances, the trajectory of their transitions and their participation in the labour market (e.g. Bynner, Joshi & Tsatsas, 2000; OECD, 2005a).

It might reasonably be speculated that these changes will have a subjective impact on the type and degree of risks and uncertainties young people themselves experience and on their aspirations and attitudes towards work (e.g. Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Lowe & Krahn, 2000). However, whilst a good deal of research has examined the effects of labour market restructuring on the transitions that young people make and their experiences of them (e.g. MacDonald & Marsh, 2001; Lawy, 2002), there has been little research that has explored directly the connection between young people's own sense of uncertainty and their aspirations for their future economic outcomes. Similarly, whilst there has been research into the effects of educational attainment on shaping young people's aspirations and their transitions to work (e.g. Schoons & Parsons, 2002), there is little that explores directly the question of the effects of mismatches between young people's professional aspirations and their educational expectations.

This review will attempt to sort through some of the confusion in these areas and examine the direct and indirect research evidence relating to them in the UK context.

## **II. The effects of uncertainty on young people's aspirations**

### *Labour market uncertainty*

It is now well-established that there has been a significant shift in the school-to-work trajectories of young people's lives over the last three decades in the UK and elsewhere (e.g. Fergusson et al., 2000; Bynner, 2001; Lawy, 2002; Schoon, 2004, etc.). Shifting economic conditions and changes to the characteristics of the youth

training and labour markets have made the transition from school to work much more uncertain and unpredictable for many (e.g. Pollock, 1997; Bynner & Parsons, 2000; Cohen & Ainley, 2000).

Three decades ago, youth transitions were said to be marked by their ‘age-related predictability’ (Cohen & Ainley, 2000) – only a third stayed on in education in the mid-1970s, and the remainder were largely able to secure full-time employment with relative ease (Fergusson et al., 2000; Bynner, 2001). Researchers now suggest that the general life trajectory then centred around leaving school, finding employment, and early patterns of partnership, marriage, setting up home and child-rearing (e.g. Cohen & Ainley, 2000). It should be noted that the degree to which “age-related predictability” actually existed in previous decades has also been contested. In particular, Goodwin and O’Connor’s (2005) re-examination of data from a research project carried out in Leicester in the early 1960s reveals that during this time as well there was often considerable individual-level complexity to young people’s transitions even if this was masked by broader “macro” or structural trends (see also Ashton, 2007).

Whilst it would thus not do to overstate the now commonly-expressed narrative which contrasts new uncertainty with older certainties, it must be acknowledged that the general background against which school-to-work transitions take place is now markedly different in character for the majority of young people. Forces of globalisations have impacted very strongly on the youth labour markets of many countries, mediated through national labour market conditions and institutional structures governing education, training and industrial relations. Youth labour markets are more susceptible to the changes that these forces bring than adult ones, and their effects have been keenly felt (Ashton, 2007). Particularly, wide-reaching economic and technological changes and the collapse of the traditional youth labour market in Britain have led to the erosion of the traditionally successful vocational route into full-time and long-term employment (Bynner, 2001; Bynner et al., 2002).

The record rises in youth unemployment that resulted from these changes mean that young people today face a great deal more uncertainty regarding their transition outcomes (Schoon, 2004). Successful labour market entry is now more likely to be predicated upon investment in post-compulsory education and vocational training, with the concomitant deferment of partnership formation, marriage, setting up home and child-rearing (Bynner, 2001). The one-third of young people staying on in post-compulsory education in the mid-1970s was nearer 80 percent 20 years later, and a range of new career paths centred around vocational courses appears to be in place (Fergusson et al., 2000). Whilst higher-achieving young people are usually able to negotiate this path with comparatively little difficulty, those who are lower-achieving or from poorer socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to experience disproportionately more uncertainty and risk (Bynner et al, 2002; Furlong & Cartmel, 2004).

A number of complex and wide-ranging effects of this shift in labour market conditions have been identified in relation to the ways that young people understand and approach their various transitions to adulthood and form self-identities with respect to education, employment, peer groups, locality, family, and so on (see Yates, 2007). In relation to this review, there are a few questions it is relevant to address

about how this increasing structural uncertainty affects youth transitions. Firstly, there is the question of how this uncertainty affects the types of transitions young people are able or likely to make, and thus on the distal context in which their aspirations are formed and in which they will be realised. Secondly, there is the more direct question of the effects of structural uncertainty on young people's own aspirations for their future outcomes. Finally, there is the question of how uncertain young people themselves are about their aspirations and how this individual uncertainty affects their future outcomes.

*Effects of labour market uncertainty on youth transitions in Britain*

Research using the British birth cohort studies has, indeed, indicated that changes in the characteristics of the labour market have been particularly challenging for young people from low-income households. There has been observed a 'substantial labour market "penalty" associated with childhood poverty' (Bynner et al., 2002; p.70) that is transmitted inter-generationally, and there especially tend to be profound uncertainties and precariousness in youth transitions in Britain's more socio-economically marginalised post-industrial areas (e.g. Johnston et al., 2000; MacDonald & Marsh, 2001). Transitions are increasingly often characterised by fragmentation, uncertainty and movement in and out of various options, especially for the poorest-off and those with lower levels of human or social capital (e.g. Bynner & Parsons, 2000; Fenton & Dermot, 2006).

Johnston et al.'s (2000) study of one 'disadvantaged locality' in the north-east of England illustrates the impact of these changes. Whilst this area experienced near full employment as recently as the mid-1960s, in 2000 jobless figures for two deprived wards in the area were as high 38% and 47%. Whilst in 1974 more than half of school leavers in the area moved into work, by 1998 this figure was only 6%, and around 15% became NEET.

Despite the increased importance of post-16 education and training in successfully negotiating transitions to work in the new youth labour markets, such investment in education or training can also be increasingly precarious and fraught with uncertainty. Bynner et al. (2002) note a decline in the proportion of those young people staying on in education or training who successfully entered long-term employment from the cohort in the 1958 NCDS to the 1970 BCS, and other research suggests that 'about a third of those starting a full-time post-16 course leave early or fail the relevant examinations' (Fergusson et al., 2000; p.284).

The changing nature of the labour, education and training markets has individualised the transition from school to work (Pollock, 1997), and created pressures for new forms of participation for many young people who might be 'ill-informed... or unable to identify or pursue a preferred option' (Fergusson et al., 2000; p.290). A number of such young people might be considered to be what Furlong and Cartmel (1997) called 'reluctant conscripts to post-compulsory education' (p.17) in the face of these pressures. As Lawy (2002) also notes, young people from all backgrounds are now expected to make good choices in new spheres and relating to new life trajectories 'even though they may not feel either equipped or ready to do so' (p.420).

It has also been suggested that there is significant cultural resistance to post-16 training options, especially by families which would traditionally have depended on a

young person's early employment as a source of income (Bynner, 2001). Modern training options are apt to be seen as providing poor quality training (Furlong & Cartmel, 2004) or even to be seen as 'slave labour' or a means for employers to "try out" young employees and retain only the best in an increasingly competitive labour market (Bynner, 2001; Fergusson et al., 2002).

There is some research evidence to suggest that the complexities and pressures to undertake new forms of post-16 participation are not well understood by many young people or their families, and this creates new forms of uncertainty that affects young people's transitions. As Pollock (1997) points out, changes in the labour market have led to an increase in the individualisation of transitions in and through employment for young people. Successful transition will thus rely upon young people themselves having the knowledge and skills to negotiate increasingly diverse pathways through education, training and employment. However, research by Rennison, Maguire, Middleton and Ashworth (2005) demonstrates some of the challenges associated with the breakdown of traditionally stable and socialised transition pathways. Their research, based on over 20,000 young people and their parents spread over 16- and 17-year-old cohorts in 1999 and 2000, demonstrated that nearly half of the parents interviewed felt that they did not know enough about the current qualifications system to be able to give proper advice to their children. This is a significant point, since their research also shows that parents are important influencers on young people's post-16 choices. Young people in their research were more likely to make a successful post-16 transition when their own and their parents' aspirations for their destination matched:

Where parents and their children were in agreement, only 6.3 per cent of young people entered the NEET group... In comparison, the rate was over three times higher (19.9 per cent) where there was disagreement between young people and their parents  
(Rennison et al, 2005; p.69)

Lack of certainty about the merits of newer options by parents is thus a potential challenge in itself for young people's future outcomes.

Taylor's (1992) research, although now somewhat dated, also relates to this issue. Her research was based on over 1300 surveys and almost 400 interviews with year-11 pupils in 1989 and 1990. About three-fifths of the young people interviewed were judged to have a 'poor understanding' of the available youth training options, and 60% 'said that they felt not very well or not at all informed' about opportunities that were available for them locally (Taylor, 1992; 324). Although this did not appear to translate directly into uncertainty of aspiration for young people regarding their preferred post-16 destinations (17% of those initially surveyed were uncertain about their preferred destination, but only 4% of those followed-up for interview remained uncertain two months later), it was noted that few of those young people who were aiming to enter the labour market at age 16 did so with any long-term prospects thought out, and they were often 'vague' about the availability of courses that might support their vocational route or the nature of training and qualifications that they might be able to attain or where they might lead.

Fergusson et al.'s (2000) research illustrates in more depth the degree of the effect of some of these factors and the change, complexity and uncertainty relating to young people's life trajectories. Theirs was a four-year partly longitudinal study exploring the aspirations and understandings of 800 16-, 17- and 18-year-old young people in

one south Midlands town. Almost a third of their respondents did not reach their destination of choice after their final year of compulsory schooling, almost a third of those planning to begin further education were unsuccessful, and only 18 percent of those wishing to begin full-time employment were able to do so. Also, 78 percent of their sample who were in full-time education were there by default or were ill-informed, or both, almost a third of their participants did not settle in their first destination after school, and almost 10 percent moved destination repeatedly, up to six times in total. Of particular note was the ‘circularity’ of much of this movement, with no visible progress being made towards preferred options in most cases of repeated relocation (Fergusson et al., 2000).

Fergusson and his co-researchers thus argue that their research demonstrates that a growing number of young people seem to be engaged not in linear and deliberate transitions towards their intended outcomes, but rather in a form of uncertain ‘drift’ or ‘structured aimlessness’ characterised by ‘a series of multiple trajectories.’

It seems then, that when discussing aspirational uncertainty amongst young people there are important factors to consider relating to the wider-ranging structural uncertainties in the youth education, training and labour markets. Increasing numbers of young people are facing uncertain combinations of education, short-term work, unemployment, government schemes, self-employment, part-time employment and training (Pollock, 1997; Evans & Furlong, 1997; Fergusson et al, 2000). They are also increasingly likely to be ill-informed and uncertain about options that are open to them, and to become engaged in uncertain “drift” rather than traditional linear transitions to long-term employment. Whilst these factors clearly affect the types of transitions that young people can make, and shape the context in which they will form and pursue aspirations, there is also the question of how these uncertainties more directly affect young people’s own aspirations and outcomes. This review will now consider evidence relating to this question.

#### *Effects of labour market uncertainty on young people’s aspirations and outcomes*

Lowe and Krahn (2000) attempted to answer the question of how increases in uncertainty and risk in youth labour markets affects young people’s own aspirations. Their research is thus relevant to this discussion despite the fact that it draws on evidence from a North American context. Their research interviewed 983 high-school seniors in Canada in 1985 about their educational and employment plans, and followed this up with another sample of 747 students in 1996. If increasing insecurity and uncertainty in the youth labour market impacted upon the aspirations that young people form for their future outcomes, it should be reflected in a difference between these two cohorts interviewed during times of very different labour market conditions. The data from this research, however, indicated that attitudes towards work and education remained largely the same across both cohorts, although the later-born cohort showed a slightly higher desire for job security. There was also evident an ‘upward drift’ in occupational aspirations, as the latter cohort showed a much stronger desire for professional occupations (Lowe & Krahn, 2000). Although a slightly higher proportion of the 1996 cohort were uncertain about their aspirations, this remained a low proportion (8.8% compared to 6.6% in the 1985 cohort), despite significant changes in the labour market that they were about to enter.

These findings have been reflected to some extent in the UK context in the research of Schoon (2007) and McKendrick, Scott & Sinclair (2007). Schoon's (2007) study of NCDS and BCS70 data showed that cohort members born in 1970 were more likely than those born in 1958 to have aspirations for a professional job requiring degree-level qualifications. This reflects the fact that changes in the labour market meant that the career opportunities for those born in 1958 were less dependent on education and academic attainment than for those born 12 years later. However, Schoon (2007) also found that aspirations remained 'associated with social background' such that young people from working-class families were still less likely than those from more privileged backgrounds to aspire to professional careers, and young people still appeared to 'orient themselves to social class reference groups, and [to be] guided by their parent's aspirations for them' (98). Also, McKendrick et al's (2007) research, based on surveys of 307 young people at two schools in Drumchapel, found that even in this economically very depressed area with high levels of unemployment and NEET young people, their respondents still largely aspired to – and expected to attain – jobs of at least moderate social standing. Moreover, they also believed that they already possessed desirable skills that would enhance their employment prospects (McKendrick et al., 2007).

Bynner and Parsons (2000) also used NCDS and BCS70 data to explore shifts in young people's attitudes and values relating to work from a time when identity was strongly connected to a commitment to a particular occupation and one in which young people faced more uncertain and difficult transitions in and out of employment, unemployment, training and education. This study operationalised the concept of a 'work ethic' for survey respondents, derived from answers to two questions relating to the desirability of employment. Whilst both cohorts showed a lessening of the work ethic for the most highly-qualified (based, it is hypothesised, on post-materialistic ideals and the pursuit of expressive self-fulfilment), the 1970 cohort shows a significantly higher overall commitment to work. However, a new U-shaped distribution is evident in which those with fewest qualifications and the unemployed (as well as the highest-qualified) also begin to exhibit a reduced work ethic. There is thus a greater commitment to employment generally amongst the later-born cohort, but a much starker polarisation of this commitment between those who attain good qualifications and those who do not and between the employed and the unemployed – and unemployed young men in the 1970 cohort had lower work ethic scores than their counterparts in the 1958 cohort (Bynner & Parsons, 2000). Bynner and Parson (2000) argue that these results could be taken to indicate that the increasing uncertainties in the youth labour market and in youth transitions are leading to an increasing degree of alienation from employment by the least well-off and the lowest attaining young people in the later cohort.

Another study that illustrates potential issues with young people's attitudes to work in the new labour market is by Worth (2002). Worth (2002) notes that changes to the youth labour market have meant that young people have become increasingly represented in 'flexible' forms of employment, and consequently hold some of the highest feelings of job insecurity. His research examined young people's awareness of and attitudes towards such flexible, non-standard work in selected schools in the South-West of England. A sample of 303 young people from mixed-sex, mixed-ability groups responded to questionnaires to investigate these questions. This research found that a large majority of the young people surveyed 'expressed a clear

acknowledgement of the growth of non-standard work and the decline in the prospect of a job for life, with almost half the sample stating that they expected to have to change jobs several times during their lives' (Worth, 2002; 169). However, despite this awareness, there was overall a general negative outlook towards the prospect of non-standard work, with the lowest attaining pupils being the ones most likely to look negatively on it and to attach high importance to 'standard, secure jobs.'

Additionally, a large majority of the sample believed that investing in education should lead them to permanent employment, 'with 80% indicating that if they had invested a lot in gaining qualifications they would not want temporary work' (Worth, 2002; 173). The sample was also slightly more inclined than not to believe that that 'it would not be worth the investment in education and training if most jobs were insecure' (173-5), with this tendency a lot stronger amongst young females and those who expected to achieve poor GCSE results.

This raises some new issues relating to labour market uncertainty, aspirations and outcomes. Whilst the young people in this research were aware of labour market uncertainties, their aspirations remained focused on standard, secure work. As in the other studies above, a reaction to the growing uncertainties and insecurities in the labour market seems to be to hold aspirations for higher-status and more secure jobs. The finding that the lowest-attaining pupils were the most likely to shun non-standard work and to believe that education is not worthwhile if it cannot guarantee employment security also indicates the potential for problems when young people's aspirations do not take into account the realities of job market or plan effectively for it. Young people who shun education believing it unable to provide future job security and leaving school with few qualifications *and* aspirations for traditional, secure work are likely to encounter some significant problems. This also relates back to Taylor's (1992) research discussed above: although only 4% of her sample remained uncertain about their aspirations at their follow-up interview, few of those intending to enter the labour market at age 16 did so with long-term prospects thought-out, and it is clear that, in these cases at least, holding certain aspirations does not equate to holding well-planned or even realistic goals in the context of an uncertain and insecure labour market.

Returning to Fergussons et al's (2000) research also raises some points to consider about young people's responses to uncertainty and their transition behaviour. Their research demonstrated a circular and often aimless drift that characterised young people's transitions in and out of education, training and work. However, perhaps surprisingly, the young people in question showed few signs of being perturbed or disaffected by experiences of relocation and the instability of their trajectories after compulsory education (Fergusson et al., 2000). Rather, they distanced themselves somewhat from the importance of aspirations focused on a long-term future and placed increasing importance on other forms of activity and identity. The options they aspire to and take up, then, become significant not only for their potential to effect stable long-term transitions, but also for the opportunities they afford for the expression of other forms of engagement and identity. For example, a post-16 education course might not be particularly desired in itself, but it may become relatively desirable in the context of the space it allows, alongside a part-time job, for the social identity of being a student and a consumer identity afforded by (limited) economic activity. Interruptions and relocations in post-16 trajectories can thus be

embraced by young people as opportunities to reposition oneself in the mix of these interrelated identities. As Fergusson et al. (2000) note, these forms of identity are strongly grounded in the present, and, although there was no significant disaffection identified amongst the young people in this research, it is not able to provide any insights into the long-term effects of these new types of identity formation for them.

So, overall young people's responses to increasingly insecure and uncertain labour markets seem largely to centre on holding aspirations for more secure forms of employment, and labour market uncertainty does not seem to translate into aspirational uncertainty. However, Bynner and Parsons' (2000) research suggests that this upwards aspirational drift masks an increasing polarisation in work commitment, with the lower-attaining and those unable to find employment becoming more disaffected and disengaged from a work ethic. It seems also, that despite rising professional aspirations, many young people, especially the lowest-achieving, do not form aspirations that reflect the reality of the new labour markets, long-term planning is often lacking, and a short-termist mind-set might take hold in a significant number.

#### *Effects of young people's aspirational uncertainty on their future outcomes*

The last point to consider in this section of the review is the question of the effects of young people's own uncertainties on their future outcomes. Whilst it has been seen that holding firm aspirations does not necessarily equate to well-thought-out or realistic goals, and that uncertainty remains relatively rare amongst young people, there appears to be very little in the way of research that directly explores the effects of young people's own uncertainties on their future outcomes. Some findings from research on the EMA pilot address this question to some extent, however (Rennison et al., 2005).

In examining the trajectories of young people who become NEET, Rennison et al (2005) report that relatively few of them appear to have 'drifted' into this position: 'only 10.5 per cent had expressed no/other preference about their post Year 11 destination' (36). By contrast, about half (48%) of the NEET group had intended to enter work after school, and two-fifths (41.5%) had aspired to continue in full-time education. The breakdowns of the aspirations of the NEET group were, in fact, remarkably similar to those of the group who entered work without training.

Whilst this does not reveal directly or clearly the consequences of uncertain aspirations, and whilst it must be acknowledged that the NEET group is complex and heterogeneous (e.g. Yates & Payne, 2006), it does suggest that there is not a simple relationship between holding uncertain aspirations and drifting into being NEET. Further (rudimentary) analysis of Rennison et al's (2005) figures suggest that only around a quarter of those who expressed uncertainty of aspiration became NEET, the same proportion as those who aspired to work-based training or work without training. By comparison, almost half of those with uncertain aspirations ended up continuing in full-time education, and around 30% entered work either with or without training.

Taking these figures at face-value, and with acknowledgement of their limitations, it would appear that uncertainty of aspiration amongst young people towards the end of their compulsory schooling is not by itself any more detrimental to future outcomes

than aspirations to enter work after Year 11, and around 75% of uncertain young people do, in fact, continue in full-time education or enter work.

### **III. Mis-match in professional aspirations and educational expectations**

The next question to be addressed concerns the effects of mis-matches in young people's professional aspirations and their educational expectations. Again little research appears to exist that clearly and directly answers this question, but a number of studies have explored some aspects of the connection between aspirations and educational expectations in a more general manner. This review will now consider this research evidence and what it can reveal about the relevant research question.

#### *Relationships between educational expectations and aspirations*

A significant piece of research into aspirations and educational attainment comes from Schoon and Parson's (2002) examination of NCDS and BCS70 data. One of their key findings was that educational attainment and aspirations are linked, more so for young people in the latter cohort. There is thus a predictive power associated with academic achievement for the formation of teenage aspirations. By coding occupational aspirations for the responses of both cohorts, they found that for the NCDS cohort 'teenage aspirations and educational attainment are moderately linked' (Schoon & Parons, 2002; 273), but for the BCS70 cohort they are 'strongly correlated.' Schoon and Parons (2002) comment that the increase in strength of correlation between academic achievement and aspirations reflects the fact that academic achievement plays a much more important role for them than their earlier-born counterparts.

Research by Furlong and Biggart (1999) also identifies a connection between expected educational attainment and young people's aspirations. Theirs was a longitudinal study of young people in the four years of compulsory secondary schooling (i.e. aged 13-16) in four different schools in 'contrasting areas of Scotland' (Furlong & Biggart, 1999). The young people completed questionnaires in each year of their schooling, and 1638 questionnaires relating to future occupational aspirations were completed over the four sweeps. In the final sweep of questionnaire completion, the young people 'were asked to predict the results of the Standard Grade examinations for which they were entered' (Furlong & Biggart, 1999; 28). They noted a decline in the status of occupations aspired to in their research sample over the four years of the study, and this decline was much more rapid for males than for females. One of the most likely explanations for this decline, the researchers note is 'a developing awareness among individuals of their academic performance and potential, together with an increasing knowledge of the likely qualification requirements of different occupations' (Furlong & Biggart, 1999; 27-8). This is borne out by comparison of young people of varying levels of predicted attainment. Whilst the aspirations of those who expected to perform well were fairly buoyant, for those whose expected attainment placed them in the lower half of the age cohort showed the sharpest decline in occupational aspirations between the ages of 13 and 16.

Indeed, Furlong and Biggart's (1999) research reveals that for their sample expected educational attainment was highly significant in predicting young people's aspirations. Social class and area of residence were also related to aspirations, but

neither have a *residual* effect on aspirations after controlling for expected educational attainment.

These studies begin to suggest that the relationship between aspiration and educational expectations is one in which young people's aspirations are shaped quite powerfully by their expectations of their educational attainment. This relationship has also been noted in the North American context by Shapka, Domene and Keating (2006). From a study of 218 University-bound adolescents, they concluded that early achievement in mathematics had 'a significant impact on the shape and slope of the aspiration trajectories' (Shapka et al., 2006; 354). Students who experienced poorer grades in maths started out with much lower expectations for their careers, and their aspirations also declined at an acceleration pace as they progressed through their secondary schooling. The researchers speculate that early achievement in maths 'acts as a filter by limiting students' future options' (Shapka et al., 2006; 354) because many post-secondary programmes require certain levels of maths ability. The research shows that this filtering process begins as early as the first year of secondary schooling.

It is also worth considering research by Ahmavaara and Houston (2007) that suggests that not only educational expectations but also young people's theories of their intelligence and the type of school they attend can account for variations in their aspirations. They carried out a study with 856 English secondary school pupils in Years 7 and 10 from two selective and two non-selective schools. Amongst the variables they sought to operationalise was the theory of intelligence held by young people. This makes a distinction between those who hold 'fixed' or 'entity' theories of intelligence and those who hold 'incremental' ones. "Entity" or "fixed" theories hold that intelligence is a fixed entity held by an individual that cannot be changed, whereas "incremental" theories hold that intelligence is a more malleable quality that can be increased through individual effort (Ahmavaara & Houston, 2006).

This research found that young people's theories of their own intelligence has both a direct effect on aspiration, and also interacts with the type of school attended to predict aspiration. This interaction is such that the relationship between intelligence theory and aspirations is very small in non-selective schools, but significant in selective schools. In selective schools, holding an incremental theory of intelligence is associated with higher levels of aspiration (Ahmavaara & Houston, 2006). Ahmavaara and Houston speculate that this could most realistically be interpreted in two ways. First, as an indication that pupils in non-selective schools believe that the malleability or durability of their intelligence will not effect how well they achieve in the future, that they will do relatively poorly no matter what their efforts. Alternatively, it may be that pupils in non-selective schools take on the belief that their intelligence is fixed as an attempt to maintain self-esteem, since poorer achievement will then not reflect on their lack of effort or desire. Whichever of these is correct, this research does seem to indicate that expectations of educational attainment interact with the formation of aspirations in complex ways mediated by and connected to issues of self-esteem, the type of school attended, and theory of intelligence.

*The effects of mis-match in aspirations and educational expectations*

Whilst these research studies indicate that educational expectations (amongst other potential factors) play an important role in shaping young people's aspirations as they move through secondary education, they do not directly address the question of what happens when there is a mis-match between a young person's aspirations and his or her educational expectations.

Furlong and Biggart's (1999) research discussed above suggests that, to some degree at least, where young people hold aspirations that do not match their educational expectations, their aspirations will decline over time as they progress through secondary education and are forced to compromise their elevated aspirations as they reach a clearer realisation of the likely paths available at their level of educational attainment. Some research from the American context also demonstrates this phenomenon of "compromises" in aspirations taking place over time where mis-matched aspirations and educational expectations co-exist during secondary school. Armstrong and Crombie (2000) studied the aspirations and educational expectations of 502 adolescents in Grades 8, 9 and 10 of the American high-school system. Adolescents whose occupational aspirations and educational aspirations matched showed relative stability in their aspirations as they moved through high-school. However, where discrepancies existed between expectations and aspirations, adolescents made significant changes to their aspirations from one school year to the next. These changes 'produced substantial reductions in the magnitude of their mean aspiration– expectation discrepancies the following year, as measured by both gender traditionality and SES' (Armstrong & Crombie, 2000; 94). These students also reassessed their expectations over time where discrepancies existed with their aspirations, thus suggesting that 'both aspirations and expectations are malleable constructs' (Armstrong & Crombie, 2000; 97) that tend to change over time where discrepancies exist.

These studies seem to indicate that where there are mis-matches between young people's educational expectations and their aspirations, they tend to correct themselves over time. However, Furlong and Biggart (1999) note that nevertheless, young people still tend to 'have relatively high aspirations and expectations which are likely to prove difficult to attain' (33). Additionally, none of these studies examines the consequences of situations where aspirations and expectations do remain mis-matched.

Some evidence of the consequence of aspirations and actual academic achievement being mis-matched is provided by Rennison et al's (2005) analysis of the EMA pilot data. They noted a clear relationship between educational achievements in Year 11 and the fulfilment of their aspirations for post-16 destinations. For example, of those who had intended to continue in education but had instead become NEET, almost 30% had not achieved any Year 11 qualifications. This is a very similar finding to that by Fergusson et al (2000), who discovered that almost a third of their respondents did not reach their destination of choice after their final year of compulsory schooling, and almost a third of those planning to begin further education were unsuccessful. Thus, 'at least some young people who had intended to continue their education ended up in the NEET group because they felt that their Year 11 achievement was inadequate' (Rennison et al, 2005; 37).

Overall, ‘two-fifths of young people in the NEET group said that their exam results had not been good enough... to enable them to continue in education’ (Rennison et al, 2005; 42). This seems to be a strong indication that where young people’s academic achievements were ultimately insufficient for them to pursue their preferred option, they were often not aware of the range of possible options that were available to them in post-16 education or training (something that echoes some findings from research discussed earlier), and ended up being NEET.

Whilst this refers to discrepancies between aspirations and educational *achievements* rather than *expectations* at a late stage of secondary education, it does relate to the situation of mis-match between what a young person aspires to and what they are capable of achieving.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

There is very little that addresses the two relevant research questions directly. This is perhaps to be expected given their specific focus. However, there has been a good deal of evidence from various studies that addresses them more indirectly or touches upon issues relevant to them.

Regarding the question of uncertainty of aspirations, there are issues to consider relating to structural uncertainties in the education, training and labour markets, uncertainty relating to poor awareness of the range of options available for education, training and employment, and individual uncertainty relating to indecision about preferred post-16 options.

Research has shown that changes in the labour market have made young people’s transitions from school to work much more uncertain, protracted, insecure and unstable than was the case 30 years ago. In attempting to negotiate this uncertainty, more young people are becoming NEET, and also more are facing pressures for new forms of participation in post-16 markets that they and their families are often ill-informed about and ill-prepared for. These structural uncertainties do not generally seem to translate into increased individual uncertainty of aspiration for most young people. Indeed, aspirations seem to be on an upward trend overall, although there is also evidence of polarisation of aspiration in which those liable to achieve the least educationally and thus to face the greatest uncertainty become alienated and disengaged.

Also, some evidence seems to suggest that such individual uncertainty is not in itself significantly more harmful than aspirations to enter work after Year 11. However, there are some potential negative consequences for young people (and their families) who are uncertain in the sense of being ill-informed about possible options. They may be ill-prepared for the realities of the labour market they are about to enter and the type of jobs that may ultimately be available to them; they may as a result engage in a form of aimless drift in and out of various options that is not perturbing for them in the short-term, but lack long-term planning; and for those who do not achieve sufficiently to fulfil their primary aspirations, uncertainty about the range of other available options may lead them to become NEET.

Regarding the question of mis-match between aspirations and educational expectations, again a number of issues that might initially appear slightly tangential are relevant. For instance, one point to consider is that young people's aspirations appear to be shaped quite powerfully by their educational expectations, and that this process begins early on in the period of secondary schooling (though school type, theory of intelligence and expectations for future success also impact on aspiration formation). Where there is a mis-match between aspiration and education expectation, some evidence suggests that young people alter and compromise both their aspirations and their educational expectations. Despite this process of compromise that occurs through secondary schooling, young people still seem to maintain quite high aspirations and expectations for educational success that are likely to be difficult to attain for many. Whilst there seems to be very little in the way of research concerning outcomes where discrepancies between aspiration and educational expectation do persist, there is some evidence that young people who ultimately achieve at a lower level than that require for their aspirations are at some risk of becoming NEET – especially where they are uncertain of the range of alternative options open to them.

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