

Aspiration as a cruel attachment?

**Young people's futures and
vocabularies of inequality in an age
of austerity**

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CelebYouth.org



With Heather Mendick and Laura Harvey

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Qualitative research

148 young people (yr 10 and 12) in English schools



Context

- 20% of young people aged 16-24 are unemployed (ONS 2013)
- No. of years required for low to middle income youth to save for deposit = from 3 years in 1983 to 22 years 2013 (Resolution Foundation 2013)
- Loss of 'decent work': projected decline in middle-skilled 'white collar', stable jobs (Resolution Foundation 2013)
- Young people 'bearing the brunt' of tough welfare sanctions (YMCA, 2013)

The effects of austerity and the crisis are unequally felt...

“Structural constraints continue to exert an unequal impact on young people’s lives. Class, gender, embodiment and sexuality continue to affect labour market opportunities” (McDowell, 2012: 587)

Aspiration nation?



*‘The mission for this government is to build an **aspiration nation**. . . . It’s what’s always made our hearts beat faster – aspiration; **people rising from the bottom to the top** . . . Line one, rule one of being a Conservative is that it’s not where you’ve come from that counts, **it’s where you’re going**. . . . We just get behind people who want to get on in life. The doers. The risk takers. The young people who dream of their **first pay-cheque, their first car, their first home** – and are ready and **willing to work hard** to get those things. We are the party of the **want to be better-off**, those **who strive to make a better life for themselves and their families**”*

*"What I want to see is a more socially mobile Britain, where no matter where you come from, you can get to the top in television, the judiciary, armed services, politics, You’ve got to **get out there and find people, win them over, get them to raise aspirations and get them to think** that they can get all the way to the top”*

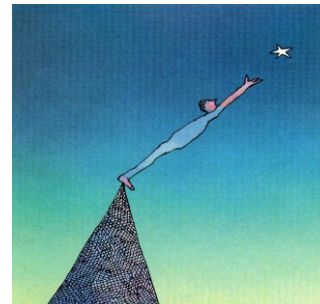
Low aspirations, 'feckless youth' and 'enemies of promise'

"Kids believe that their stepping stone to massive money is **The X Factor**. Luck is great, but most of life is hard work" (Iain Duncan Smith, 2011)

"Britain's teens need to **learn about work ethic** from immigrants" (Boris Johnson, 2013)

"Schools are failing to encourage **children to 'reach for the stars'**... most young people would regard going into investment banking as almost leaving the country, because it's **a different world...**" (David Laws MP, 2010)

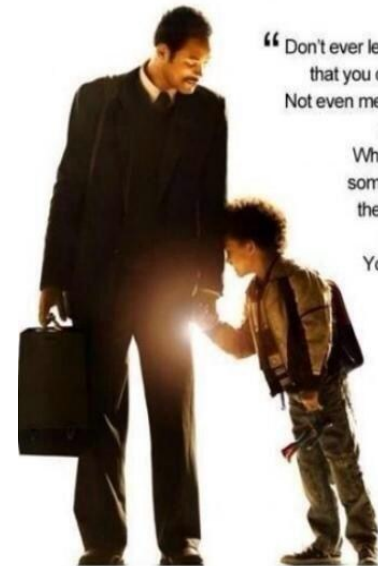
"What makes the setting of higher expectations more difficult is the **culture of excuses and low aspirations** which some in the education establishment still defend... The new **Enemies of Promise** are a set of politically motivated individuals ... actively trying to prevent millions of our poorest children getting the education they need (Michael Gove, June 2013)



Celebrity culture: utopias of self sufficiency

“Neoliberalism has been engaged in constructing new entrepreneurial identities... in celebrity culture [we detect] fantasies of success ... the endless refashioning of the ‘self’ ... and utopias of self-sufficiency.” (Hall et al, 2013: p19)

“Where I excel is ridiculous, sickening work ethic. While the others guy’s sleeping, I’m working... I’m not afraid to die on a treadmill. You might be more talented than me, smarter than me, but if we get on the treadmill, [either] you’re getting off first or I’m gonna die....Whatever goal you want to reach, whatever you want to do in life, your success originates from your attitude”



“Don’t ever let someone tell you that you can’t do something. Not even me. You got a dream, you gotta protect it. When people can’t do something themselves, they’re gonna tell you that you can’t do it. You want something, go get it. Period.”
- Will Smith
(The Pursuit of Happiness, film)

'Don't stop believing': Aspiration as a cruel attachment?

Lauren Berlant and Austerity: 'Cruel Optimism' (2011)

Attachment to the 'fraying fantasies of the good life' (upward mobility, meritocracy, social equality) despite living in conditions that thwart and undermine its realisation



Becoming intelligible in bleak times means telling oneself as 'aspirational'

But what are the risks of *not* producing oneself as 'aspirational'? Of sitting with 'hopelessness'

- **Subjective:** Perceived as 'lacking', 'deficient', 'stagnated'?
- **Material:** Exclusion? Criminalisation (e.g. riots, student protests)?

Anonymous

Working class, British Algerian, 16-years, inner city school, parents unemployed, aspirations for a career in science.

On achieving your dreams:

*'I see a lot of people that, they are not as, they're not the famous people in the world but because they are like, **their determination for work is like amazing**, they have like got PhD.... Like my uncle. I think in life it doesn't matter how much you know and **it doesn't matter how clever you are ...but if you've got the determination then you'll do it**'*

Disqualified discourses and unspeakable inequalities

“It’s a topic that people don’t talk about. Discrimination... its like ‘ah I cant believe you used that word!” (Faheem)

“With only individualized explanations to hand, class [and other forms of] inequality produces ‘ugly feelings’ (Ngai in Skeggs and Loveday, 2012) that can’t be attached to the right object – ‘to the injustices that produced the affect’. Rather, without a conceptual frame of inequality, these experiences of exclusion and discrimination may be internalised and experienced as shame, self-doubt and lack. Or they may be projected onto phantom others (‘the ‘undeserving poor’, ‘the tasteless’) (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013)”. (Allen 2013)

Internalising class injustice: Shame, mis-fit and lack in ‘shiny spaces’

Mel: White working class; First generation HE; work experience in London design agency

*“I didn’t really enjoy it...the feelings I got from people didn’t settle me.... **You feel that you’re lower than them...** Oh God like it’s funny, the [agency director’s] mum used to phone every lunchtime, “is Rupert there?” or whatever his name was. It was those kinds of names.... the way they talked, **you know like really ‘proper’** ...it just throws you off a little bit **the vibes you get off people....**”*

*“I guess I just **didn’t have tough enough skin...** You realise where you fit in **and where you don’t...**which is why I’m going to look in different places”*

Our role? Critical pedagogues or kill joys

Sabeen:

Working class, 15 years old, British Asian, Muslim, mother part-time carer, aspirations to work in law to 'defend people'



After we turned the recorder off, I asked Sabeen if she had any questions for me. Sabeen hesitated and then asked me whether I thought racism exists. I felt uneasy but said something along the lines of that I didn't think it had 'gone away' and that I thought it was problematic when people say it doesn't exist because then it makes it hard to challenge. I still don't know if I gave the right answer – in speaking 'honestly', did I help or am I just the killjoy, stamping on her optimism? (Fieldnotes , July 2013)

Imagining an alternative future: reclaiming aspiration?

Ruth Levitas: Utopia as a 'speculative sociology of the future'

'Utopia is not a delusional insistence on the realization of a categorical other. It is a reasoned counterfactual critique of the present, intending change...an expression of a desire for a better way of living' (2012: 336)

Reading aspiration via a 'hermeneutics of faith' (Ricoeur):

1. a critique of the present: asking what and who flourishes and who / what is excluded.
2. an architectural project of imagining alternative scenarios for the future which are more inhabitable

What would an alternative 'aspiration' project look like which makes young lives more liveable?

