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Higher Education and Aspiration

Tamsin Bowers-Brown, Nicola Ingram, Ciaran Burke

The concept of aspiration is seductive. In relation to education it is hard to argue against the desirability for all young people to have high aspirations for their future, including educational and related life goals. The argument in favour of raising and maintaining high aspirations posits the idea that regardless of individual structural conditions, material circumstances, or starting location, education can provide the same opportunities for all to succeed if they only have a desire to do so. On a surface level, this may seem like a reasonable position, and certainly it is one that has gained purchase within public and policy imaginaries across a range of international contexts. In many countries, the idea of raising aspirations has become the axiomatic solution to educational inequalities proffered by policy-makers, and accepted by educational institutions (Tarabini and Ingram 2018). This special issue highlights the rise and significance of aspirations in educational policy globally, yet provides an important sociological critique of the discourses surrounding the concept and its effects. The seductiveness of the very idea of aspiration obfuscates its darker side, which is the promotion of a discourse that locates educational success and failure in an individual's (in)capacity to imagine a suitable future, and in their motivation to achieve it. When success is construed as a matter of choice reduced to imagination and 'daring to dream', the importance of the structural issues plaguing global education systems and societies are conveniently discounted. Failure to succeed is simply presented as failure to aspire, and consideration of the need to challenge societal conditions is precluded.

While 'aspiration' has become a ubiquitous term within educational policy in multiple contexts internationally (Harrison & Waller 2018; Gale & Parker, 2015; Sphorer, 2011), it is often confined to discussions of school aged children and the perception that they need to raise their aspirations both in terms of future employment goals and, relatedly, their goals for participation in higher education (Abrahams 2018; Allen, 2016; Grim *et al*, 2019). The perceived locus of aspiration deficit is, therefore, primary and secondary education, while higher education is offered as the solution. The underlying assumption of this is that increased participation in HE is the desired outcome of aspiration as well as its measure. In this way aspiration becomes wedded to widening participation policy with a narrow focus on outreach work, application processes, and university access (Rainford, 2017). There is very little research within Higher Education research that considers aspiration per se as a fundamental construct in terms of university experience and graduate outcomes. Some work acknowledges and refers to aspiration in discussing higher education inequalities (Stich 2012; Burke 2015; Bathmaker *et al* 2016) but rarely is aspiration the central tenet of analysis. This special issue, therefore, makes an important contribution to sociological understandings of aspiration by exploring its rising significance within higher education. Moreover, it offers important sociological critiques of aspiration discourses globally. Collectively, the body of work curated here, exposes the problems with accepting the idea of aspiration as an innocuous function of the education system.

Bearing in mind the need to interrupt discursive constructions of aspiration as something positive, and working-class students as having an aspiration deficit, this special issue opens with an article focussed on equity and widening participation by Matt Lumb and Penny Jane Burke. Through deep analytical reflection the article traces a process of questioning and reframing accepted discourse on the needs and learning orientations of widening participation students engaged in university outreach programmes within the Australian context. It is written from the perspective of an outreach officer/PhD student and

provides a refreshingly open account of a journey of reflexivity in which accepted wisdom about aspiration as something positive is turned on its head. Lumb and Burke expose the unintentional consequences of policies that ironically reproduce the very inequalities they aim to address, which they describe as ‘discursive manoeuvres’. They offer a sociological challenge to the reader to consider their own co-implication in the recycling of inequalities in institutions, a message that has relevance across international HE landscapes.

Further unintentional consequences of the discourse of aspiration are emphasised in Derron Wallace’s article, which highlights the way that aspiration is used as a means to secure legitimacy, yet ultimately leads to a reinforcement of inequalities. Wallace outlines how Black immigrant and second generation students in the USA use aspirations to legitimise their identity and position, in response to the discourse of the “good migrant”, which bestows value on those who buy into aspiration rhetoric. In an attempt to counteract racist assumptions about Black minority groups in the USA, aligning oneself with approved aspirations, such as going to university, affords a legitimacy and a moral worthiness for individuals in the eyes of others. Additionally, articulating certain aspirations provides the opportunity for distinction and allowed Wallace’s respondents to create symbolic distance between themselves and the racialised assumptions that were attached to African Americans. A key issue is that meeting “aspiration expectations” to gain acceptance/legitimacy reinforces rather than challenges racialised stereotypes. Here Wallace problematises the concept of aspirations as a doxic order which requires alterations in individual attitudes and actions but not in the structural or material context in which individuals find themselves. While increasing aspirations may impact positively on some individuals its impact on access to higher education and the inequalities embedded in the structure is far from positive.

Inequity in structure also extends to higher education institutions that have been subject to marketization. Widening access to Higher Education has become a policy goal across many countries globally and, in many cases, has led to educational expansion. The consequences of this expansion differs by context, as systems adjust to the demands of the market. In their article on first generation students in Sao Paulo, Charles Klein and Milena Carmo outline the case of Brazil where higher education expansion over the last three decades has been extreme. They report that between 1980 and 2016 there was a 304% rise in the number of students enrolled in the country’s civic universities and during the same period there was a 623% rise in the number of students enrolled in private institutions. The increase in private universities and for-profit education has relied on increasing aspirations among lower class groups, who traditionally did not benefit from higher education. Educational expansion through the creation of new markets relies on promoting aspirations in those who are not traditionally found within the system (Robertson and Komljenovic 2006). However, as Klein and Carmo indicate, educational expansion through increased aspiration, motivation and opportunity to participate in higher education does not necessarily impact on levelling the playing field when it comes to inequalities. In fact, in the Brazilian case we can see a situation where increased participation has come about through a type of system differentiation that leaves the lower classes and marginalised groups with a more expensive yet less valued degree. The article nonetheless shows the complexities of marketization and for-profit education as the participants are on a socially mobile trajectory that is set to improve their standard of living. Alongside the expansion of higher education, the graduate labour market has expanded to receive the increase. However, the sustainability of the expansion is questionable. The highly differentiated higher education system of Brazil demonstrates that on the one hand the prospects for lower income families has increased but the positions of the elite remain unchallenged as they maintain their advantage through attending the public universities.

The next two papers explore the English context of decision making and application to higher education and demonstrate how policy discourses over the past 10 years have wrongly attributed a lack of upward social mobility to the young people who they deem to be lacking in aspiration. Whilst Zoe Baker tells the stories of two participants whose aspirations are thwarted by the material consequences of their circumstances, Elizabeth Houghton demonstrates how only a particular kind of applicant is valued by the universities application system (UCAS). Both the process of decision making and of application exclude and stand as barriers to participation in higher education. Houghton and Baker both detail how pre-entry processes to higher education are classed and therefore quash rather than support the idea of 'raising aspiration'; the material requirements of getting into higher education stand as a barrier, reducing once imagined possibilities to the probability of social reproduction or self-adaptation.

Education carries the mantle as the primary enabler of upward social mobility and therefore the springboard to social mobility has disproportionality fallen on schools and universities. Aspiration is one element of a framework of meritocracy that sees self-work and 'raising aspiration' as the key to unlocking untapped potential. The irony demonstrated in these papers and by others (Sphorer 2016; Mendick *et al*, 2018), is that the aspirations that young people from disadvantaged socio-economic groups hold become unobtainable, not because of an individual deficit or a 'lack of aspiration', as the policy discourse espouses, but rather in part because of the lack of coherent policy making which consciously disassociates the relationship between aspiration and material poverty. As Baker argues with clarity, the conflation of meritocracy and economic agendas related to employability compound the 'shift in responsibility' from societal to individual accountability. Individual accountability appears to be threefold: it stems from government discourse around social mobility and aspiration; an emphasis on narratives which reify the individual success of those who achieve in spite of their starting position (Kulz refers to these narratives as the 'emotionally seductive tales of mobility that conflate neoliberal aspiration with social justice' (Kulz, 2017: 90); and thirdly the complicity of those who are subjected to the processes because there is no alternative to 'playing the game' (Bowers-Brown, 2016).

The importance of understanding the rules of the game is paramount to the application process. Houghton demonstrates how the processes fit in to a broader picture of marketization which sees the student as contributing to university metrics through their ability to demonstrate how they can align their experiences to graduate attributes or the skills that will make them economically successful graduates. Increasing emphasis on the role of Universities to produce graduates who will be economically successful has reinstated debates around the value and purpose of higher education. A recent review of higher education funding in the United Kingdom made recommendations 'intended to encourage universities to bear down on 'low value' degrees and to incentivise them to increase the provision of courses better aligned with the economy's needs' (Augur, 2019:10). Houghton's research demonstrates how this begins with a model of university application that expects applicants to present a version of themselves which they believe will meet the requirements of the admissions tutor.

The final two articles within this special issue focus on graduate employment outcomes and transitions. It is within the context of an increasingly volatile graduate labour market that Fiona Christie explores how UK graduates construct meaning concerning their early careers as graduates. In this pursuit Christie applies the hybrid concept of *Figured Worlds* from Holland *et al*. (1998) combining Bakhtin, Bourdieu and Vygotsky. Echoing Lowenthal *et al*'s position in the subsequent article, Christie maintains that popular discourses and norms surrounding graduates, stratified by subjects studied and institutions attended, are a powerful influence on how graduates frame their own expectations and

aspirations. Christie unpacks the competing voices of her respondents, illustrating the complexity of perspectives concerning employability. Extending the frustration and symbolic violence respondents from Lowenthal *et al*'s study displayed, Christie provides us with an account of the "idealistic", "tactical", "self-critical" and "context critical" voice to illustrate how her own respondents framed their understanding of their early experiences including expectations and aspirations. Christie then goes on to use the concept of heteroglossia to capture the multiple and contradictory voices individuals have and speak with in the construction of their identity and explanation of their experiences. Christie provides us with a previously under-applied theoretical point of departure to consider the plural and at times competing voices individuals have when making sense of their situation and constructing strategies to navigate a particular space – in this case the early graduate labour market in the UK. The role of the "figure" for Christie gives us the means to consider the aspirations and expectations of those who want to be recognised as a (successful) graduate.

Continuing with graduate employment as a central feature of higher education John Loewenthal, Patrick Alexander & Graham Butt offer an insight into the way in which the global elite are navigating the increasingly hostile graduate labour market. Stemming from a range of influences including changing labour markets, impact of austerity policy and the 2008 financial crisis, and surging number of graduates, the human capital narrative of access equals success is a reality for fewer and fewer graduates. Based on empirical research in the USA, Loewenthal *et al*'s research focuses on graduates from elite universities in the United States; they demonstrate how students' aspirations are a compound of individual aspirations, parental aspirations, expectations based on high financial investment and broader expectations associated with graduates from high status private American universities. However, this paper unpacks how graduates, who are relatively privileged, are limited in potential trajectories due to the financial investment their degrees entailed, as well as their parental influence/expectations. In the pursuit of meeting these aspirations and in particular parental aspirations, graduates are pursuing trajectories that generate considerable damage to their mental wellbeing. Lowenthal *et al.* lead us back to the concept of cruel optimism (utilised earlier by Houghton), where the aspiration that led both the graduates to attend these globally elite universities, and their parents to make financial sacrifices, have placed them in a symbolically violent position, where they are constrained by indebtedness and individual responsibility. Lowenthal *et al.* outline the impact of financial investment and debt on graduates' aspirations, providing insight into the consequences of private higher education. Specifically, they show not only the intractability of high aspirations but the emotional consequences when these are not met. This provides an interesting contrast to Klein and Carmo's paper where the private institutions of Brazil are reserved for those in lower socio-economic groups and foster and instil realisable, but unequal employment aspirations.

The articles contributing to this special issue clearly demonstrate and disrupt the notion that access, retention and progression through higher education is solely attained as a result of individual aspiration. The relationship between material circumstances and the structural organisation of higher education providers can serve to impede aspiration and indeed mould aspirations that lead to particular ways of being that impact in contradictory ways on conceptions of the self. Taken for granted practices can lead to layers of unforeseen inequality in a system which is held up as a bastion of social justice. Far from higher education being the key to upward social mobility, although it may occasionally serve this purpose, it often constrains and perpetuates rather than mitigates the broader societal inequalities within which it sits. The power of higher education then is in its ability to work reflexively to deconstruct the social structures that impede aspiration and limit the

opportunities of those seeking entrance to its field. Strategic imperatives which advocate a mission of social mobility must also be accompanied by civic engagement opportunities that support a collective, socially just approach to access and participation. Without this, institutions will continue to be entangled in a model that fails to recognise that the realisation of aspirations are not limited by individuals but by the very institutions that purport to be the endgame for those who aspire.

This special issue also includes book reviews by Samantha Schulz & Bev Rogers (The Toxic University: zombie leadership, academic rock stars and neoliberal ideology by John Smyth). Paul H Smith reviews *Knowledge and the study of education: an international exploration* (edited by Geoff Whitty & John Furlong) There are two reviews where the core foci is on the relationship between religion and education (Religion and higher education in Europe and North America, edited by Kristine Aune and Jacqueline Stephenson) Reviewed by Paul V Smith and Religion and Education: Comparative and International perspectives edited by Malini Sivasubramaniam & Ruth Hayoe reviewed by Gary Bouma.

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