Raising Educational and Occupational Aspirations: Encouraging Family Conversation

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the importance of conversations at home about the educational qualifications and aspirations of family members and how these may impact on post-16 choices. It presents previously unpublished data gathered in an 11–16 school situated in a post-industrial community in the south Wales valleys. Pupils in Year 11 were asked on several occasions to find out about the educational qualifications of household members – it is the responses to these questions that became the focus of this paper. In conclusion, the need to consider the support and information provided to pupils and their families at key transitional points in their educational careers is emphasised in light of continued debates about underachievement in Welsh schools.

Key words: aspirations, education, qualifications, pathways

Introduction

There has been a resurgence in research and policy design which has focused on the links that may exist between educational attainment and aspirations, attitudes and behaviours. It is well documented that children growing up in less advantaged areas usually have lower levels of educational attainment and participation in post-16 education. Underperformance in Welsh secondary schools was high on the agenda in 2016 because of the

moral panic around PISA, with – for the fourth consecutive time – Welsh students performing worse than their counterparts in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland in science, reading and maths (OECD, 2016; OECD, 2013; OECD, 2010; OECD, 2007).

Policy context

Improving the life chances of children and young people in Wales is a key priority for the Welsh Government. In fact, since the devolution settle-ment and the establishment of the National Assembly in Wales in 1999, there has been a plethora of policy and strategy documents relating to children and young people designed to achieve this aim. Policies such as *Extending Entitlement* (WAG, 2002a), *Reaching Higher* (WAG, 2002b) and *Rights to Action* (WAG, 2004a) have all sought to increase pupil choice through greater collaboration, provide an inclusive and aspirational learning experience that breaks down barriers to learning for all to experi-ence the joys and rewards of lifelong learning.

Literature review

In order to understand why some parents are reluctant to get involved with their children's schooling, researchers have spent a considerable amount of time trying to identify and understand these barriers (Gilby et al., 2008; Harris and Goodall, 2008; Crozier, 1999; Pugsley, 1998). Gilby et al. (2008) found that one in eight parents lacked confidence in helping their child or approaching teachers at school. This finding was linked to parents' own education and those parents with low self-esteem, in terms of their own abilities, appeared to want support when guiding children through the post-16 period of their education. Only 20 per cent of parents said that they had not discussed option choices with their children, girls were more likely than boys to discuss their option choices with an adult and most children would prefer to discuss their options with their mother. This lack of communication was most typical in families with lower incomes and low parental qualifications (Gilby et al., 2008; Reay et al., 2009). By con-trast, parents who felt that they had done well educationally were more likely to feel confident helping their child at all ages (Gilby et al., 2008). However, Ball et al. (2000), Reay et al. (2009) and Cummings et al. (2012)

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found that many families lacked sufficient knowledge about further and higher education and consequently could not advise their children. Pugsley (1998) demonstrated the consequences of this lack of knowledge with a discussion about several pupils currently studying in a sixth form and further education college who had chosen the 'wrong' subjects and submitted applications to study at university too late. Similarly, Gorard et al. (2012) have called for further research to ascertain causal influences between parental involvement and young people's participation in post-compulsory education.

A number of research studies have stressed the importance of family involvement with a child's education and the positive effects it could have on their academic aspirations, achievements and later occupational attainments (Ball et al., 2000; Goodman and Gregg, 2010; Kintrea et al., 2011). Ball et al. (2000) found in their research on post-16 choices of pupils in London regions that parents were the main advice-givers with regards discussion about post-16 destinations. When members of the dyad take an active interest in each other, the dyad becomes more powerful and the members become more influential on each other's development (Vondracek et al., 1986; Schoon and Parsons, 2002). Goodman and Gregg (2010: 7), writing more recently found that:

> young people are more likely to do well at their GCSEs if their parents think it likely that the young person will go on to higher education (HE), spend time sharing family meals and outings, quarrel with their child relatively infrequently, and devote material resources towards education including private tuition, and computer and internet access.

It is well documented that social class and family background have a crucial effect on the educational and occupational aspirations of a child (Halsey, Heath and Ridge, 1980; Douglas, 1964). This concern is also raised in the Leitch Review (2006: 22) which considered the link between parental aspirations for their children and attainment:

> The Review has found that inequalities in aspiration by adults drive inequalities in attainment for their children at school. This creates a cycle of disadvantage that locks generations of the same family into persistent poverty...This cycle needs to be broken by raising the aspirations of parents and children and standards in all schools.

Some research has suggested that lower socio-economic status itself does not transfer into lower aspirations (Goodman and Gregg, 2010; Kintrea et al., 2011; St. Clair and Benjamin, 2011; Gorard et al., 2012; Cummings et

al., 2012). However, Gilby et al. (2008) and Gutman and Akerman (2008) found that SES was a key differentiator when considering the educational aspirations of children and their parents, with those in better-off house-holds more likely to want to continue studying and attend university. Similarly, Egan (2010: 75) concluded that the influence of class on achieve-ment is probably three times more powerful than ethnicity and gender.

Using data from four separate large-scale sources, namely the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) and the British Cohort Study (BCS), Goodman and Gregg (2010) were able to consider ways that affluence and disadvantage influenced children's educational attainment between the ages of 3 and 16. They found that:

> parental aspirations and attitudes to education varied significantly by socio-economic position, with 81% of the richest mothers saying they hoped their 9-year-old would go to university, compared with only 37% of the poorest mothers. Such adverse attitudes to education of disadvantaged mothers are one of the single most important factors associated with lower educational attainment at age 11. This factor alone is associated with 6% of the attainment total gap between the richest and poorest children at age 11, even after accounting for differences in prior ability. (2010: 7)

Other researchers have been able to assert the hypothesis that parents from privileged backgrounds have higher aspirations for their children, provide greater access to financial resources, offer more educational opportunities, occupational knowledge and role models than less privileged parents (Vondracek et al., 1986; Schoon and Parsons, 2002; Gilby et al., 2008; Gutman and Akerman, 2008). Aspirations are not simply individual pref-erences but 'form parts of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive from larger cultural norms' (Appadurai, 2004: 67). The degree to which they can be successfully enacted depends on people's relative access to social, cultural and economic resources (Sellar et al., 2009). Therefore, consideration of how pupils' educational and occupational aspirations are formed and interact with their environment, at school, in a community and at home is essential. Whatever careers are considered, pupils need suf-ficient information to help them understand the main roles and responsibilities of these jobs, what qualifications are required to achieve a job in this area so that access routes are fully understood and pupils' aspira-tions can 'stay on track' (Cummings et al., 2012).

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According to Appadurai (2004: 12) the capacity to aspire, which is based on an economic model, is not evenly distributed in society. All people have aspirations, but the degree to which they can be successfully enacted depends on people's relative access to social, cultural and economic resources. Appadurai explained that people from more affluent societies are more likely to be aware of and familiar with the links between their fundamental aspirations and the available commodities (2004: 11). People from more deprived communities have fewer opportunities to experience relating aspirations to commodities. Moreover, they have fewer opportunities to experience how a choice of a commodity influences their fundamental well–being. This limited capacity to form conjectures and refutations about the future is a hallmark of poverty. In a connected society, for example, it is 'more possible' to achieve aspirations, while in a polarised society, there are no 'linkages' between the rich and the poor, thus rendering it more difficult for poor people to achieve their aspirations. Aspirations are seldom simply 'lacking', but are differently constituted according to the normative contexts in which they are formed and are differently enacted depending on the means available to different groups (Sellar et al., 2009: 3).

Appadurai likens the capacity to aspire as a navigational capacity in that it provides a range of pathways that leads to future success. To move in the right direction in life one needs to be equipped with the correct navigational aids to follow the pathways to success. The map landscape metaphor is used by other researchers who have compared pupils' educational experiences as journeys and pathways (Bok, 2010; Ball, Maguire and MacRae, 2000; Watt and Paterson, 2000). The Welsh Government's publications highlighting the new 14–19 learning agenda has the title *Learning Pathways* (WAG, 2004b, 2006). In order to move along the pathway, pupils need to know what decisions to make, this knowledge will stem from experience and advice (Ball et al., 2000). The notion of an aspirational map, particularly when it relates to education, can be conceived in ways that resonate with Bourdieu's concept of 'field' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). The social, cultural and economical factors at play in the navigation of the educational 'field' or 'map' can strengthen or render more brittle the navigational capacities of young people and their families (Bok, 2010). For example, if pupils successfully navigate their school years, this will strengthen their capacity to aspire to further and higher education, because, according to Appadurai (2004: 69): 'the capacity to aspire, like any complex cultural capacity, thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture and refutation'.

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If pupils are to develop their capacity to aspire, their families and other people within their local communities must have experience navigating maps to follow the correct pathways. Strand and Winston's work (2008: 264) highlights the importance of Appadurai's theory, when considering what they term as 'home educational aspirations', the level of expectation among parents and extended family groupings. Although their work supported other research that has highlighted the effects that parents and the extended family can have on children's aspirations (Harris and Goodall, 2008; Schoon and Parsons, 2002), Strand and Winston (2008: 26) also highlighted the need for schools to 'fill the gaps' where families did not encourage high aspirations:

> if the capacity to aspire is essentially a cultural capacity, then it will require more than an additional strand of skills within the national strategy; rather, schools will need to reassess themselves as cultural institutions and find ways to connect their normative values of aspiration with the lived curriculum of their pupils.

Sellar et al. (2009) also considered the concept of aspiration as a cultural capacity. They stressed the need to rethink and develop policies and practices that sought to 'provide resources and experiences that strengthen the capacity of less wealthy and powerful groups to pursue their aspirations' (2009: 3). These factors were studied in one Welsh school, using the methods described below.

Methods

This study adopted a mixed methods approach for several reasons, not only because of the complementarity of data and the triangulation opportunities (Bryman, 2006; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). First, the research design sought to gather views from a number of pupils via an online questionnaire to form a theory and then to explore key themes highlighted by that data analysis via more intense and focused work with smaller groups of pupils. Secondly, aspirations are influenced and shaped by social experience and lived realities (Mason, 2006; Gutman and Akerman, 2008; Turok et al., 2009). To understand and explore the multidimensional and multifaceted (Vondracek et al., 1986) effects on an individual's outlook, one needs to adopt a mixed methods approach to allow for more rigorous triangulation and help build up a fuller picture of the phenomenon under study (Bryman, 2006). This approach also allowed for a more reflective response to the data

collected (Bryman, 2012) and helped to validate and analyse data in a number of different ways. In the current study, data were collected primarily in three ways: online questionnaires, focus groups and interview (Table 1):

**Table 1. A breakdown of the dates, methods and
pupils involved in each part of the research**

Method	Whom	Date
Year 7 time capsule★	52 pupils (31 male/21 female)	July 2007
Questionnaire survey 1	152 pupils (68 male/84 female)	October 2010
Questionnaire survey 2	137 pupils (62 male/75 female)	July 2011
Single sex focus groups	9 male/7 female	28 September 2012
Interview	Head teacher at Green Valley School	December 2012

★ All the pupils in Year Six in July 2007, during a 'transition day', were asked to write down their dream jobs, as we wanted to bury this information in a time capsule which would be dug up before pupils left Green Valley School in July 2012.

The second part of the questionnaire, which is the focus of this paper, sought to find out what qualifications family members had achieved and if this could have any effect on pupils' future choices. The majority of the questions were closed and required pupils to choose from a range of answers. This approach was chosen to keep the process of responding as simple as possible (Bryman, 2012) and to avoid any ambiguities. Pupils could choose 'other' as a response to these questions and this allowed them sufficient space to expand their answers; this ensured that all pupils were able to answer the questions as accurately as possible and did not feel constrained by the options supplied (Converse and Presser, 1986). Finally, in order to keep the response rate as high as possible, the software required that every question was answered before the survey was submitted.

After analysing the two questionnaire surveys that were distributed in October 2010 and July 2011 and undertaking pupil focus groups, I asked to meet with the head teacher at Green Valley School to share initial findings. We had an in-depth conversation about the effects on pupils' aspirations, with regards the fact that we are an 11–16 school and all our pupils have to 'find' post-16 options.

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Ethical considerations

Following BERA's (2011) revised ethical guidelines, pseudonyms have been used for geographical places, the school, staff and pupils who participated in this study. Before commencing work, ethical approval was sought from the Ethics Research Committee, based in the Social Sciences Department at Cardiff University. During the proposal, consideration was made towards seeking appropriate permission from parents so that their children could be questioned during the empirical part of this project. To explain the reasons behind the research I spoke with all the pupils in a school assembly and distributed leaflets and letters to them describing my work. I contacted the pupils' parents by post at the same time (September 2010), providing information about the research and gave parents and pupils a period of two weeks to return the opt-out letter if they did not wish to take part in the research or ask for further information. I stressed that pupils were not obliged to take part in this research and explained an 'opt out' form could be completed at any point during the project, either verbally or in writing. I explained that any information gathered would be anonymised, even the name of the school. The opportunity to opt out was chosen by seven pupils who withdrew completely (i.e. did not want to complete the questionnaire or take part in the focus groups) and two pupils did not wish to participate in the focus groups.

School setting

The empirical research for this study was undertaken in one secondary school called pseudonymously Green Valley School. Green Valley School is a mixed 11–16 school maintained by the Local Education Authority (LEA) and situated in the south Wales valleys, in a county called pseudonymously Berllan. Pupils in the school come from the full range of economic and social backgrounds, but as it is in an area of high social deprivation a significant number of pupils are living in Communities First[1] areas and are experiencing social and financial disadvantage. There are 935 pupils on roll at Green Valley and the school's intake covers the whole ability range. Sixty pupils (6.4 per cent) have statements of special educational needs (SEN) and a further 189 (20.2 per cent) have been identified as needing some support. The number of pupils entitled to free school meals (FSM) is 215 (22.9 per cent), which is above the Welsh national average of 17.4 per cent.

Similar to the head teacher commentaries requested in the Newsom Report (1963), the head teacher at Green Valley School provided some information about the school and local area. His comments clearly show the social, cultural and financial challenges faced by the whole neighbourhood and how these effects are felt across generations of the same families. His comments resonate with many of the head teacher commentaries in the now 50-year-old Newsom Report. There is a clear awareness also of the importance that working-class families place on locality and familiarity (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995; Reay and Ball, 1998) and how this could inhibit aspirations.

> The term 'deprived area' covers a multitude of perceptions based on relativity and definition. Green Valley School serves an area where over 25 per cent of pupils are entitled to FSM, but where a further significant percentage are from homes where incomes are relatively low. There is no significant professional parental presence in the catchment area.
>
> The main challenge is the lack of aspiration amongst a significant section of the community. This is often based on a poor educational experience on the part of the parents (poor being defined as either academically unsuccessful and/or disengaged from a process that appeared irrelevant). This is **not** the generation of parents who could have achieved but never had the chance due to economic pressure and a low school leaving age – this generation of parents is post-ROSLA (Raising of School Leaving Age) and post-welfare state … they had a chance! The problem of low expectation from education is compounded by the poor state of the economy in the area. The bulk of the jobs, where they can be found, are relatively low paid. The number of high-skilled, well-paid jobs is at a premium. This creates an issue of motivation i.e. what's the point of qualifications … the jobs aren't there?
>
> Another problem in the South Wales valleys is the mutually supportive comfort zone that acts as an aspirational barrier. Most of our young people are happy in an environment that can still boast the influence of extended family kinship. For the boys (and indeed some girls) there is the influence of the rugby tradition which provides both a sporting and social outlet. Many would ask themselves 'why leave?' – the home life for many is supportive and comfortable. Consequently, this makes motivating our young people with the vision of a university life or life in a good job beyond their immediate surroundings. (Green Valley School, head teacher's commentary (December 2012))

The head teacher's comments are generally supported by the findings presented in this section. Results of four questions are presented below which focused on pupils' (in Year 10 and 11) knowledge of household members' educational qualifications.

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Results and discussion

A group of 152 pupils in Green Valley School were asked to find out the answers to the following four questions before completing an online survey. The responses to these questions are considered in this section.

• Has anybody in your household studied or is still studying in a further education college/sixth form?
• Has anybody in your household studied or is still studying in university?
• What is the highest qualification held by somebody in your household?
• Who holds the highest qualification in your household?

When pupils were asked about the educational backgrounds of the people who lived in their household, 49 per cent (n=75/152) of pupils in October 2010 and 58 per cent (n=80/137) in July 2011 said they knew a family member in their household who had studied, or was currently studying in a further education college or sixth form. These percentages correspond with the 2010 Annual Local Labour Force Survey[2] which recorded that 46.4 per cent of working adults in Berllan were qualified to NQF level 3 or above and compares with the Welsh average of 51.5 per cent. A cross tabulation analysis of responses by gender did reveal that more girls than boys knew somebody who had studied in college. Repeating the same questions in July 2011 did not yield a higher percentage of pupils being able

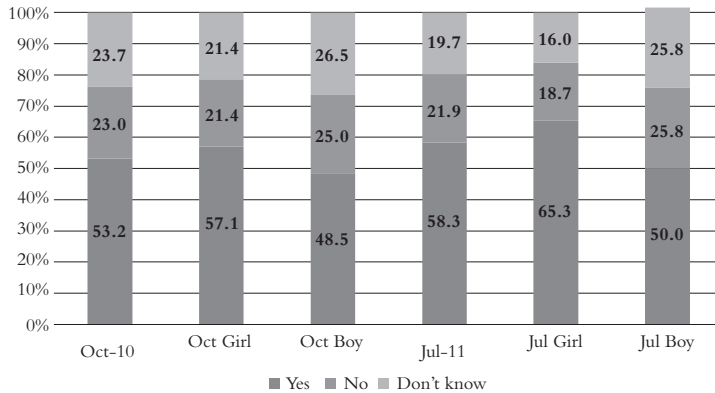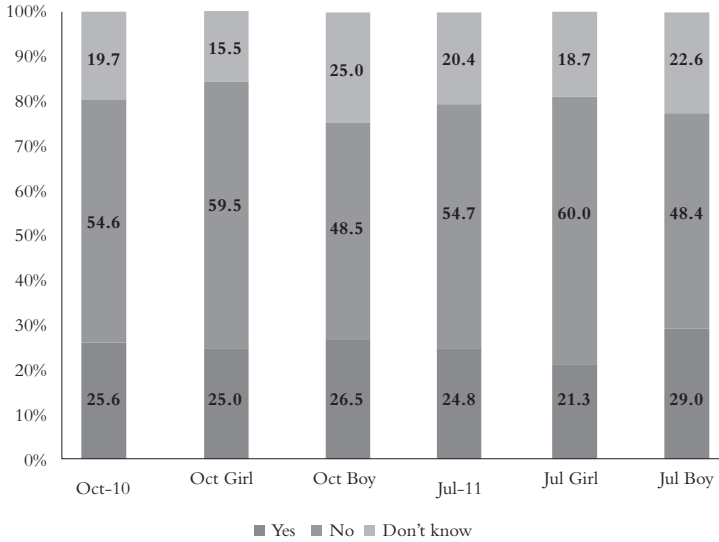**Figure 1. Has anybody in your household studied or is currently studying in a further education college or sixth form?**

**Figure 2. Has anybody in your household studied,
or is currently studying at university?**

19.7	15.5	25.0	20.4	18.7	22.6
54.6	59.5	48.5	54.7	60.0	48.4
25.6	25.0	26.5	24.8	21.3	29.0
Oct–10	Oct Girl	Oct Boy	Jul–11	Jul Girl	Jul Boy

■ Yes ■ No ■ Don't know

to answer these questions. A slightly higher percentage of girls are showing awareness of their immediate family member's educational backgrounds in July 2011 with regards those who have studied in post-16 education.

The percentage of pupils aware of somebody in their household having studied or currently studying at university was 25.6 per cent in October 2010 and 24.8 per cent in July 2011. These percentages correspond closely with the 2010 Annual Local Labour Force Survey which recorded 24.9 per cent of working adults in Berllan were qualified to NQF level 4 or above, and is slightly lower than the Welsh average of 30.6 per cent. As Ball et al. (2002: 54) noted, for the majority of working–class young people, not going to university is part of a 'normal biography'.

If we compare the data presented in Figures 1 and 2 with the percentage of pupils who aspire to continue their studies in post-16 education and university, we can begin to ascertain if there is any relationship with families' educational background and pupils' educational aspirations. Figure 1 shows that 58 per cent of pupils (n=80/137) recorded knowing somebody in their household who had studied or was currently studying in

a further education college or sixth form. Of these 80 pupils, 71.3 per cent (n=57/80) aspired to study in post-16 education (46.3 per cent female (n=37) and 25 per cent male (n=20)). Of the 41.6 per cent of pupils (n=57/137) who recorded not knowing anybody in their household who had studied in a further education college or sixth form, 61.4 per cent (n=35/57) of these pupils aspired to stay on to post-16 education (36.8 females (n=21) and 24.6 male (n=14)). Thus, there appears to be a small correlation between pupils' aspirations to continue to post-16 education and their own immediate family members' educational experience of post-16 education.

Figure 2 shows that 24.8 per cent of pupils (n=34/137) in July 2011 recorded knowing somebody in their household who had or was currently studying in university. Of these 34 pupils, 76.5 per cent (n=26/34) aspired to study in further education and 55.9 per cent (n=19/34) (10 males and 9 females) aspired to careers that required a degree (e.g. teacher, doctor). Of the 75.2 per cent of pupils (n=103/137) who recorded not knowing anybody in their house who had or was currently studying in university, 60.2 per cent (n=62/103) of these pupils aspired to study in further education and 36.9 per cent of these pupils (n=38/103) (13 males and 25 females) aspired to careers that required a degree.

To further cross tabulate, ten pupils stated that their mother had a degree and four pupils said that their father had a degree. Of the ten pupils who knew that their mother possessed a graduate qualification, one girl hoped to find work-based training when she left school, four girls hoped to proceed to a further education college and five girls hoped to go to sixth form. Seven of the girls *aspired* to careers that required degrees, but only four of the girls *expected* to work in degree-entry careers. Of the four pupils who knew that their father had a degree, one male and one female hoped to go to sixth form, one boy hoped to go to a further education college and one hoped to find a job when they left school. Two boys *aspired* and *expected* to enter degree-level professions.

The range of qualifications that pupils were able to ascertain that the people living in their household had achieved was fairly broad and depicted varied educational backgrounds. However, Figure 3 shows the most striking answer to this question, namely the high percentage of pupils who reported that they did not know what the highest qualification held by a member of their household was: 50.7 per cent (n=77/152) of pupils in October 2010 and 37.2 per cent of pupils (n=51/137) in July 2011. This issue of not knowing their immediate family member's educational

Figure 3. What is the highest qualification held by somebody in your household?


Highest qualification
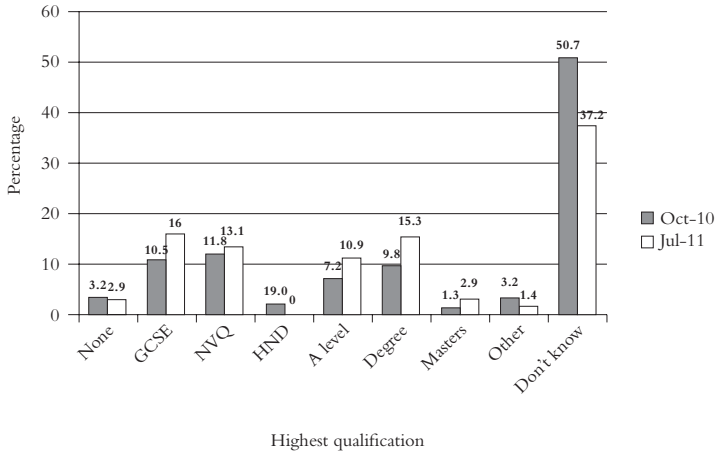
backgrounds can also be seen in response to all the four questions presented to pupils in the questionnaire. Figure 1 shows that 23.7 per cent (n=36/152) of pupils in October 2010 and then 19.7 per cent (n=27/137) of pupils in July 2011 reported not knowing if anybody in their household had studied in further education. Figure 2 shows that 19.7 per cent (n=30/152) of pupils in October 2010 and 20.4 per cent (n=28/137) of pupils in July 2011 reported not knowing if anybody in their household had studied at university. Figure 5 shows that 36.2 per cent (n=55/152) of pupils in October 2010 and then 42.3 per cent (n=58/137) of pupils in July 2011 reported not knowing who held the highest qualification in their household. In order to investigate further the reasons for this supposed lack of knowledge about immediate family members' educational backgrounds, pupils were asked in the second questionnaire in July 2011 to say why they could not answer any of these four questions.

Table 2 records the number and percentage of pupils who responded 'do not know' to these questions and Figure 4 presents their recorded reasons for not knowing. Of the 35 pupils who chose to offer a reason why they could not answer some or all of these four questions, Figure 4 shows that 17 pupils indicated that they had forgotten to ask for the information and 13 pupils claimed they had asked but later had forgotten the answers. There

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Table 2. Pupils' reporting not knowing household members' educational backgrounds by gender.

		October 2010			July 2011		
	n	Male (68)	Female (84)	Total (152)	Male (62)	Female (75)	Total (137)
Question							
Has anybody in your household studied or is still studying in a further education college/ sixth form?	n	18	18	36	15	12	27
	%	26.5	21.4	23.7	24.2	16.0	19.7
Has anybody in your household studied or is still studying in university?	n	17	13	30	14	14	28
	%	25.0	15.5	19.7	22.6	18.7	20.4
What is the highest qualification held by somebody in your household?	n	37	40	77	27	24	51
	%	54.4	47.6	50.7	43.5	32.0	37.2
Who holds the highest qualification in your household?	n		31	55	32	26	58
	%	35.2	36.9	36.2	51.6	34.7	42.3

Figure 4. Why were you unable to answer a question about your household members' educational backgrounds (July 2011)?
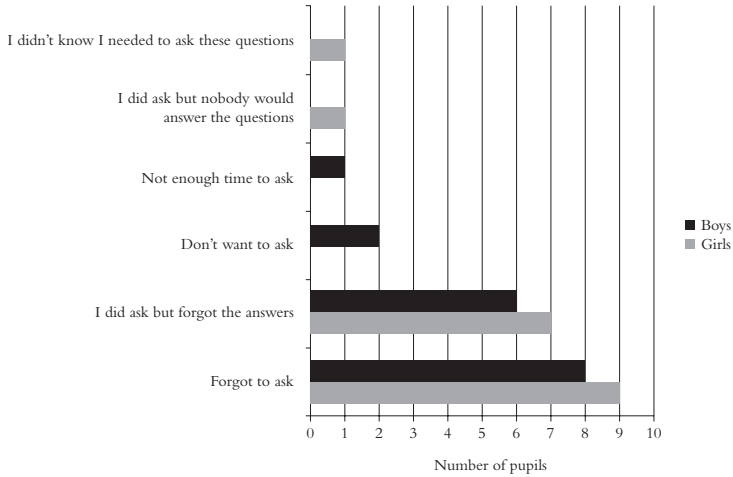

is no discernible difference between pupils' knowledge when gender is considered.

Various reasons could be suggested for the pupils' failure to provide information about their immediate family's educational qualifications. First, some pupils may not have wanted to share this information with the investigator who is a teacher in the school. Secondly, some pupils may not have understood the different qualifications that older generations could have studied for and gained. For example, currently pupils sit GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) examinations at the end of Year 11. However, the O Level (Ordinary Level), also known as the General Certificate of Education (GCE), was introduced in the 1950s; in England and Wales, pupils would have sat this examination or CSEs (Certificates of Secondary Education) until they were replaced in 1988 by the GCSE.

Finally, it could be possible that some family members had forgotten what examinations they had passed or felt embarrassed about their lack of qualifications and did not wish to discuss them with pupils in the study. Gilby et al. (2008: 25) showed that there was a clear link with parents' own achievements, their self-esteem and the support that they could offer their children in respect of post-16 choices:

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**Figure 5. Who holds the highest qualification in your household?**
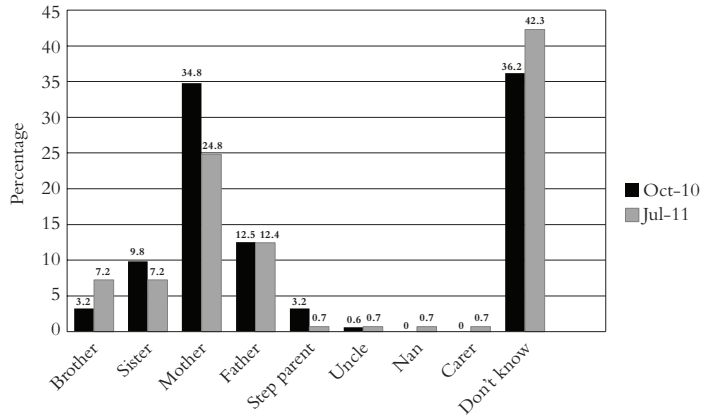
One in eight parents lacked confidence in helping their child or approaching teachers at school … Parents with a low self-esteem in terms of their own abilities appeared to need particular support when guiding children through the post-16 period of their education.

Figure 5 shows that mothers are more likely to hold the highest qualification than fathers (34.8 per cent and 12.5 per cent in October 2010 and 24.8 per cent and 12.4 per cent in July 2011). The gap reduces somewhat when considering brothers and sisters holding the highest qualification (9.8 per cent and 3.2 per cent in October 2010 and 7.2 per cent and 7.2 per cent in July 2011).

Of the four questions put to the pupils in the study about their household members' educational backgrounds, the percentage of pupils who chose the option 'do not know' in response to each of these questions fluctuated between 27.6 per cent and 50.6 per cent in October 2010 and 19.7 per cent and 42.3 per cent in July 2011 (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4). The first impressions of these data would seem to suggest that discussions at home involving family engagement with learning and education are minimal. However, Figure 6 presents a different picture about individual pupils' relationships with their parents in that 84.5 per cent of girls (n=71/84) and 77.9 per cent of boys (n=53/68) stated that they had spoken with a parent/carer to seek advice about what to do when they left school.

The results seem to suggest that boys are slightly more willing than girls to talk with a range of people about their future aspirations. However, we

**Figure 6. Who have you spoken with to get advice about
what to do when you leave school (October 2010)?**
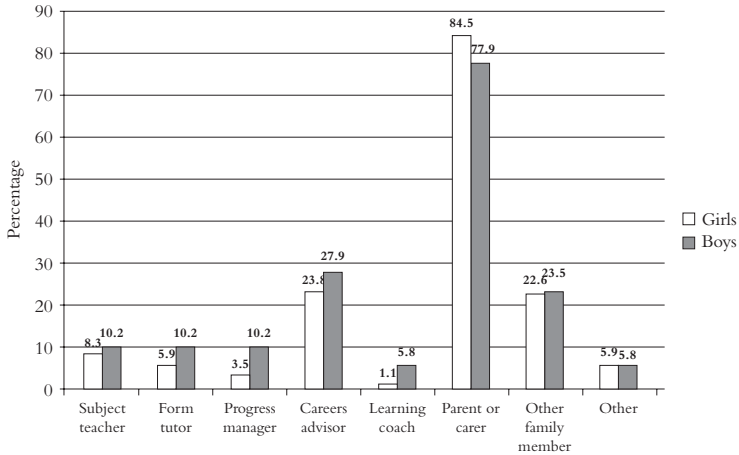
can clearly see that the vast majority of pupils are relying on their parents
when seeking advice about post-16 education. This would suggest that
there is a dichotomy between the *types* of conversations parents are having
with their children when helping them consider their aspirations, this is in
relation to the high percentage of pupils who did not know their immediate
family's background.

Theoretical perspectives: capital, habitus and fields of relation

The concept of capital (social, cultural, economic) was developed
throughout the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) who considered the
way they were continually transmitted and accumulated in ways that per-
petuate social inequalities. For example, Bourdieu described how economic
capital, by allowing for opportunities and experiences, can be translated
into embodied dispositions and capacities, and thus more cultural forms of
capital, over time (Bok, 2010). Such 'prosperity' can affect how people are
able to negotiate particular social spaces, such as the field of education
(Tramonte and Willms, 2010). Rather than trying to 'isolate the influence
of any one factor' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990: 87) it is the combined

effects of a student's cultural capital, class and other factors that should be examined in order to determine how students are able to navigate the educational field (Bok, 2010).

Also relevant to this study is Bourdieu's theory of habitus. For Bourdieu, habitus represents a set of dispositions that are acquired and develop over time as a result of everyday experiences. By its own definition, habitus is isomorphic with the structural conditions in which it emerged and can only be understood in the context of a particular set of social relations or what Bourdieu referred to as a *field* of relations (Connolly, 2004). The local area within which the pupils in this study live is viewed as field of relations and is considered to influence and shape the way that they think and behave – in other words, their habitus. This is where the link between Bourdieu's habitus, Ray's aspiration window and Appadurai's capacity to aspire lies. In a Bourdieusian sense, the field is the historically, politically and socially defined context in which people as agents are differently positioned to behave in particular ways.

An empirical study that demonstrated the formative qualities of habitus and the way it impacts on the decisions children make can be seen in the work of Connolly (2004: 85) when he wrote:

> young working class children raised on socially-deprived housing estates may well not know of anyone who has stayed on at school and gone to university. Their experience gained through their local estate and of family and friends living there provides the parameters for their worldview. It tends to shape the way they think and forms the boundaries within which they make decisions. 'What they know', then, is that everyone leaves school at 16 and finds work locally or attempts to make a living in other ways. Staying on at school and aiming for university is just not part of their practical experience, of their habitus.

This suggestion that children do not have role models within their families to talk with about continuing their education post-16 could lead to transgenerational transmission of low aspirations. Cummings et al. (2012: 5) have argued in their research that the focus should be on providing information and opportunities to families from disadvantaged areas rather than changing attitudes, this research would support that evidence.

Conclusions

This research shows that there are a significant number of families in south Wales who do not have experience of post-16 education and this lack of

shared knowledge is distinct and needs to be considered further. Establishing further initiatives to challenge pupils' educational aspirations, in the hope that an increasing number of pupils will choose to stay on to post-16 education or training, regardless of family background would be advantageous. The lack of aspirations, ability to maintain high aspirations and need to migrate also impacts on educational achievements and attainment. These families need more support and guidance when their children are younger to know what opportunities exist within the labour market and which learning pathways should be followed. Serious and innovative thinking needs to be undertaken to help families have a better understanding and experience of the labour market and post-16 education learning pathways.

Notes

1   Communities First is a community-focused programme that supports the Welsh Government's Tackling Poverty agenda. In 2017, it was announced that the Communities First Programme would be phased out by March 2018.
2   The annual Local Labour Force Survey (LLFS)/Annual Population Survey (APS) datasets are derived from a sample of approximately 23,000 people of working age across Wales, with a minimum of around 800 people of working age in most local authorities in Wales.

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