



Are We Expecting Too Much? Aspirations and Expectations of Girls Living in an Ex-Mining Community

Gill Richards

Introduction

Despite decades of equality policies, legislation and strategies, the UK still has one of the widest national attainment gaps, and evidence suggests that progress previously made in closing education gaps has now stalled or even started to widen (The Children's Society, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2021). If this trend continues, the Social Mobility Commission's prediction in 2017 of an 80-year timeframe to close the gaps between students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers could significantly increase and risk 'undoing decades of progress in tackling education inequalities' (Hutchinson et al., 2020, p.32). The UK also has one of the greatest 'within school variations', with students from different backgrounds having different experiences of the same school, some of

G. Richards (✉)

Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK

e-mail: Gill.richards@ntu.ac.uk

which negatively impact young people's educational experience (Jerrim et al., 2018; The Children's Society, 2020).

The research described in this chapter investigated the experiences of girls living in an ex-mining community located in an area of severe disadvantage identified in the Index of Multiple Deprivation as being in the top 10 per cent of most deprived places for education, skills and training. It also has one of the lowest rates for social mobility in England (Carneiro et al., 2020). The study was conducted over eight years. In the first stage, 89 girls were interviewed about their aspirations, hopes and fears for the future. The second stage involved follow-up interviews to discover their experiences as they developed into young adults.

Disadvantage and Underachievement

Successive UK reports have identified that young people from some backgrounds continue to be vulnerable to educational inequality and underachievement, despite initiatives like the 'Young Gifted and Talented Programme', the 'Future Talent Fund' and 'Pupil Premium' funding (Centre of Social Justice, 2014; EEF, 2018). Early developments brought mixed success, leaving a number of communities still feeling that they had been left behind (Social Mobility Commission, 2017). This can be attributed to a range of factors like the application of different definitions of disadvantage and underachievement, and which students meet those criteria. The Social Mobility Commission (2017) criticised, in particular, the use of too many short-term strategies rather than long-term targets with 'anchored policies' that would enable time to embed them, rather than 'drift with each political tide' (p. 6).

While young people's education attainment and achievements cannot be simply characterised by their backgrounds, some, like those who experience economic disadvantage, are persistently vulnerable to underachievement (EEF, 2018; Hutchinson et al., 2020). Where young people live and receive their schooling can also impact achievement; the attainment gap is significantly greater in parts of the country like the East Midlands, the north of England and some rural areas (Andrews et al.,

2017). Differences occur irrespective of school's locality or Ofsted inspection grade: '...the gap is as large in schools rated 'Outstanding' as in these rated 'Inadequate' (EEF, 2018, p. 2). The quality of teaching young people receive also makes a difference, varying not only between schools in the same locality, but also within individual schools (EEF, 2018; Hattie, 2009). These factors, particularly when combined, damage educational progress (Montacute, 2018).

An underpinning driver of government strategies to overcome disadvantage has been to increase 'social mobility'. In 2016, the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission identified 'cold spot' areas that failed to create opportunities for young people. Funding for 'Opportunity Areas' and the national plan 'Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential' followed, with an intention to 'level up opportunity' so that 'talent and hard work alone should determine how far people go in life' (DfE, 2017, p. 6). These ambitions generated a range of activities in schools that again had mixed success. Despite an intention to ensure that no community would be left behind and no children across the ability range were underachieving, national attention focused mainly on young people with the highest academic potential (DfE, 2017; Montgomery, 2020). Consequently, successful achievement by those not viewed as 'highly able' has been less celebrated, and some aspirations and talents viewed as more valuable than others.

A popular message about social mobility suggests that it results from raising aspirations and that anyone who wants something enough and works hard enough will be successful. While following this mantra may enable *some* young people to achieve their aspirations, others who are less successful can internalise this as their own failure. Focusing on increasing social mobility, rather than purely aiming to enable individuals to achieve their own potential and enjoy personal success with more choices in life, also suggests that some young people's backgrounds are so negative they need to escape from them. While multiple factors can make life difficult for those vulnerable to underachievement, many still experience positive elements which create pride in their heritage: the importance of these must be understood, accepted and integral to any initiatives. Assuming that people's lives will simply improve if they achieve higher qualifications, become wealthier and 'middle-class' ignores the more complex

issues of family expectations and community ties which affect individual decision-making. Young people can face barriers of isolation and loss of friendships after achieving well academically or have to reconcile new lives while remaining loyal to their ‘roots’. Cullen et al. (2018) also found that ‘fear’ affected decision-making—fear of leaving home and mixing with people unlike themselves, fear of feeling exposed due to unawareness of the wider world and fear of failure exacerbated by a perceived stigma of needing help. Fear also affected students’ behaviour in school, with some hiding academic talent for fear of losing friends. The consequences of this can lead to self-doubt with internal voices reminding them to ‘know their own place’ and live a ‘double life’ as they straddle two competing worlds (Mattys, 2013; Richards, 2018).

Girls and Vulnerability to Underachievement

Despite progress made to address gender inequality, girls from disadvantaged backgrounds remain especially vulnerable to underachievement. These girls may be overlooked because of other girls’ increasing education achievements, especially when their disengagement is hidden behind acceptable behaviour, as they silently ‘truant in their heads’, not causing trouble but also not contributing—‘hiding their dissatisfaction behind a veil of compliance’ (Fisher, 2014, p. 151).

Plan UK (2020) found government initiatives to improve equality failed to translate into equity for some girls, leaving them disempowered, unheard and frustrated by what they saw as empty messages and policies that made no real difference to their lives. UNICEF (2020) made similar observations, noting that girls’ career expectations still reflected gender stereotyping because education systems ‘allowed gender divides to be perpetuated and disproportionately affect the most marginalised girls’ (p. 3), impacting their future career opportunities.

Expecting Too Much?

Community Context

The girls lived in an ex-mining community within the UK's Midlands region—a community proud of its heritage but still severely impacted by mine closures which left men struggling to find alternative work. With few local full-time opportunities available, a 'new world' had been created for men and women. Many women were now the main wage earners, taking on (sometimes multiple) low-paid, part-time jobs, replacing the strongly traditional gender-based roles that had been the mainstay of this community. Previously, women typically became homemakers and mothers soon after leaving school, while men supported their families by working in coalmining like their forefathers. Generations had always lived and worked within the community; travel outside the area for work or leisure was unusual and generally viewed with disapproval. When the mines closed in the late-1990s and early-2000s, bitter divisions were created between families by acrimonious strikes and devastating unemployment. All of this continued to affect decision-making, so even with local government regeneration projects available, people in the community struggled to find work.

With opportunity for secure work to be found, in the main, outside of the community, further divisions were created. Those who took advantage of external employment were usually successful and many moved into new housing at the edge of the community. Most sent their children to schools outside the area, with high expectations of the career opportunities these would offer. Families remaining within the community viewed them as 'those up the hill' who had rejected their roots, a response that still affected relationships and social interactions, even within local schools.

School Context

The first stage of the research involved three primary schools (PS1, PS2, PS3) located within the ex-mining community. Two had been rated

‘Inadequate’ by Ofsted (PS1, PS2) because of a failure to address girls’ low achievement. The third primary school (PS3) was more successful, praised by Ofsted for raising standards and closing educational gaps.

The two secondary schools were ones to which most of the girls traditionally progressed. One was located within the community (SS1), and the other (SS2)—considered an exceptional choice by the community for a few girls—was situated fifteen miles away. Ofsted described SS1 as having an intake with below average standards and noted that employment skills were not developed enough for students to benefit in their working lives. SS2’s intake came from a wide, socio-economically advantaged catchment area with high attainment levels on admission. Ofsted praised the school for providing a wide range of extra-curricular activities and career guidance providing an ‘excellent’ preparation for adult life.

By the second stage of the research, significant changes had taken place within the schools. All three primary schools were rated by Ofsted as ‘Good’ and praised for raising girls’ achievement. SS1 had been inspected four times by Ofsted and each time had been rated ‘Inadequate’, with inadequate teaching identified as the main cause of disadvantaged learners’ poor attainment. In contrast, SS2 received an Ofsted rating of ‘Outstanding’.

These school contexts impacted the girls’ experiences and opportunities. Most had started in schools where girls were underachieving and then progressed onto a secondary school where attainment was low and employability skills underdeveloped, limiting post-school options. What became obvious during the timespan of the research was that irrespective of how their school was judged externally, individual girls had different experiences of what was provided, and this affected the way they anticipated their future.

Interviews

Eighty-nine girls were interviewed for the first stage of the research—fifty-three Year 6 girls who lived within the ex-mining community (PS1:6, PS2:34, PS3:13) and thirty-six Year 11 girls (SS1:17 who all lived in the ex-mining community; SS2:19 who came from a range of localities

including the ex-mining community). In each school, every girl in Years 6 and 11 was invited to take part and all whose parents gave permission were interviewed. They were given the choice to be interviewed individually, with one friend or a small group, to ensure they felt comfortable. Years 6 and 11 were selected because these were transitional points of the girls' education journeys.

The research was conducted using semi-structured interviews. These started by asking, 'What do you like about school?'. The Year 6 girls were then asked what they wanted to do when they grew up, and the Year 11 girls were asked about their post-school plans and what had influenced these. Follow-up questions focused on what they thought their adult lives would be like and their personal goals. At the end of the interviews, both groups were asked to anonymously complete two cards expressing 'Hopes' and 'Fears' for the future.

The second stage of the research started six years later and took two years to complete. Schools enabled contact to be re-established and set up opportunities for re-interview. Forty-six girls were found, and re-interviewed, and reliable information was collected on another twenty-one. This time, interviews focused on the successes and barriers they experienced moving into young adulthood.

Several interview responses raised issues about attending university like a lack of parental support and being overwhelmed on university 'Open Days' because they misunderstood information and were too scared to ask questions. Some described how they felt unprepared for university life and struggled to 'fit in'. Despite selecting a small, local university because this would be less 'scary', and enabled them to still live at home, they experienced isolation because they missed out on university social life and lost school friends who did not understand their new life. One older girl, who had left SS1 a few years before the others and was now a mature student, volunteered to be interviewed and her experience is included in this chapter.

Aspirations and Expectations: Primary Schoolgirls

Despite the different experiences girls had of primary school education, they all had similar views of school and what their adult lives would look like. They enjoyed school, mostly because they were spending time with friends rather than anything they were learning and were all looking forward to new challenges at secondary school. They also had similar aspirations. Some wanted to become teachers, nurses, vets, paramedics, accountants and lawyers. Others, influenced by family and the media, wanted to become beauticians, hairdressers and singers who were ‘discovered’ on TV talent shows. Several were clear that they wanted different adult lives to those of their parents:

I'll be saving lives [as a paramedic] and I'll have a handsome husband with a 'fifteen pack' and blond babies.

I'll not do too much drinking. Don't want to ruin my body.

I want to be an accountant, [but] you get attracted and then you end up with a boyfriend and a family.

I want to live locally, not somewhere rough where the police are about and [there are] people with knives.

When asked about ‘hopes’ and ‘fears’ for the future, most wanted to be working in their dream jobs and have a happy home life, living with children in a ‘big’ house. Their fears were detailed, with some possibly reflecting on family experiences:

I fear getting into debt and not being able to pay the mortgage.

When I move out from Mum and Dad, I hope I *never* get broken into or robbed.

I meet the ‘wrong person’ and lose my friends and family.

I will get a divorce or have a husband that hits me.

My greatest fear is not to find a nice man and he beats me up.

When individuals’ ‘hopes’ and ‘fears’ were compared, direct links between these were found: fears that a wonderful family life could end with domestic violence or divorce, or a successful career might end in a

lost job, debt and homelessness—important contextual issues for schools to consider when seeking to raise girls' aspirations and build resilience.

Aspirations and Expectations: Secondary Schoolgirls

The secondary schoolgirls also enjoyed school because it provided the opportunity to socialise with friends. Differences between the two schools became clear as they discussed their experiences and aspirations. In SS1, six of the girls thought that being with friends was the only good thing about school. Others identified subjects they enjoyed and teachers they liked because they were 'helpful and always around, not like home' and gave them 'different points of view from home'. Few had told their teachers or career advisors about their aspirations, and most were unsure of what they would do when they left school in the summer. There was a consensus that teachers were more important than subjects; most girls had selected exam subjects based on liking the teacher (and who they thought liked them), irrespective of enjoying the subject, having any talent in it or offering a route towards a chosen career.

Five of the SS1 girls were expected to achieve excellent GCSE results and four of these wanted to go to university, although they hadn't decided on a career or what to study. The other girl did not know what she wanted to do. She had always wanted to be a hairdresser like others in her family but changed her mind after trying it during work experience and this was causing conflict at home. Six other girls wanted to go to university and become lawyers or vets, but only one was expected to get good GCSE grades and she knew that SS1 did not offer an A-level subject required to access her university course—she was too scared to study at another school, so her dreams had been shattered. The other girls wanted to leave school in the summer, with most having vague ideas about working in hairdressing, social care or early years' settings, but all were unaware of the qualifications and experiences needed to achieve these.

When the SS1 girls described their 'dreams' for the future, most focused on family life:

I want a big home, lots of garden, twin girls and a boy with blond hair and blue eyes, 2 Husky dogs and a Yorkshire Terrier. I don't mind [having] a husband if he's the right person. I want a secluded country house, not where I am now, I want fresh air.

I want to have kids and be a WAG. Mum thinks I'll be a good WAG. I want a 'fairy tale wedding' with feathers, all pink and white. Everyone would dress up dead pretty and Dad will walk me down the aisle. I want to be a children's rep abroad. I'll find a hot Spanish man and retire when I have kids.

I have lots of dreams, I'd like to be famous. I want a boyfriend who is absolutely gorgeous and my kids to be popular at school...I want my husband to have a good job, good money. I'll look after my kids at home and get a part-time job when they go to nursery. I'd really like to be a model.

I want a big house, nice car. I want to be married with children – no more than two, I'm one of four. I want to go to a university near home, come home at night. It's tradition we go to university and stay at home.

The fragility of such dreams became apparent when one group, who had started a lively discussion about their futures, suddenly stopped and asked the interviewer: 'Are we stupid to want this? Are we expecting too much?'

The girls' fears for the future centred around what they saw as 'failure', for example:

My worst fear is to be worrying about money all the time and not to get far in life.

I fear that I won't be able to do what I want with my life.

To have an unsuccessful marriage, especially if it was to happen multiple times. To become a dull workaholic and stuck up.

I hope that I don't end up living in a council house, no money, no kids, and [my] parents aren't pleased with what I have become.

In contrast, all nineteen SS2 girls were enthusiastic about the subjects they were studying and knew how these provided a route towards their selected careers. They were well-informed about university courses, and several had studied additional vocational courses or taken on voluntary extra-curricular activities to enhance their CVs. Most saw university as

an opportunity to move away from home to meet new people and start living independent lives. Some were undecided having 'realised [they were] not clever enough for university' so intended looking for local work and have a life of 'partying and fun'.

The SS2 girls also dreamed of happy adult lives, but these were linked to having a successful career and financial independence:

I want to be successful and rich. I want two children...I want a job I enjoy and a nice car and a nice boyfriend. I want my own business.

I want my own place, settle down with my own money and car. Have a decent job, get more money, get a bigger place, get a nice boyfriend.

I want to go away...see the world, take every chance. Don't mind the idea of living alone, you can learn a lot about yourself. Why wouldn't you take the opportunity to be so much more?

I want to be happy, financially and emotionally, waking up each morning and loving my life.

Their fears were similar to those of the SS1 girls, with some concerned about losing control of life choices:

My greatest fear is ending up at home still when I am in my late twenties without a job. I'll be lonely and single – no money and drinking every night.

I fear being unsuccessful, having no friends, earning no money and being in lots of debt. Some-one else controlling my life.

I fear being out of control, not being able to decide what to do, being in debt or depressed.

I fear being unsuccessful because I would live life always regretting, I could have done more.

Superficially, both sets of secondary schoolgirls had similar aspirations and fears for the future, but there were key differences. The girls from SS1 had post-school plans that generally kept with the familiar, even if this limited their options. They had not shared their aspirations with teachers or careers officers, preferring to discuss these with friends and families, who were usually supportive but unable to help them. The SS2 girls were far more confident in their choices and prepared to take risks;

they had taken full advantage of school and family support to prepare them for the next stage in their lives. In spite of such confidence, some of this group felt under constant pressure from teachers and family, while others felt devalued by teachers because they were less academically successful. They were placed in lower sets and described how some teachers ignored them and this had ‘taken away hope’.

Achieving Aspirations?

The second stage of the research focused on the girls’ experiences after leaving school and if there was anything they wished that they, or their school, had done differently. The primary schoolgirls had completed secondary schooling and either moved on to further studies, work or in some cases, settled into family life as a mother. The secondary schoolgirls had left school and were either completing further studies or settled into working lives. A few were unemployed and four had become mothers.

The Primary Schoolgirls Who Progressed to SS1

Thirty-two of the primary schoolgirls had progressed to SS1. After completing GCSEs, twenty-five of these had left school. Eight were now studying vocational qualifications in childcare, hairdressing, health and social care, or catering at the local college. They all intended to work locally in careers they envisaged during their original interviews. Two others had decided to study A-levels at a college further away and then apply to university, because as one explained: ‘I wanted to meet new people I have more in common with. They [SS1 peers] didn’t want the same things I did – I wanted to work hard, they just wanted to have a good time’.

Two girls had followed their dreams. One emailed this update:

Well, my life has changed completely, and it couldn’t be more different to what I envisaged in Year 6! I wanted to be a vet...however, this was my head speaking, not my heart! I was always a dancer – this was my true

passion, but my parents encouraged me to keep my dance separate from schoolwork – which I always did.

Basically, I have followed my heart. I am now a professional dancer. I started in Sixth Form but quit after a few months – I was very unhappy. I moved away from home, and I did a year of Performing Arts at College...I now teach dance in schools and have my own Dance Crew...I am making a career and good living from what I love – dance! I am studying to be a qualified Ballet Teacher with the IDTA and a Gymnast Coach with the British Gymnastics Association. My life is non-stop dancing, choreography, training and teaching. I love it and have never been happier. My aim is to open my own dance school – but first I want to experience as much of the dance world as possible!

The other girl had resolutely focused on achieving her dream of working with horses and avoiding ‘trouble’:

I didn’t spend time with the other kids. People round here are not who I want to spend time with, they’re into drinking and drugs, so I avoid them.

I want to be in the Olympics and the Worlds within 10 years. I now work for a top Olympic showjumper, and he lets me ride his horses. I’ve got two of my own now that I keep with his horses. It’s one of the best places in the UK...I work hard, starting at five-thirty in the morning and finishing about eight at night, riding all the horses.

You need millions to get to the top in show jumping, so I’m going to have to work my way up...and get sponsors. Those who aren’t so good, but mega-rich, make it earlier and younger. My family used to fund me when I was just competing with ponies, but now at this level it can cost £25,000 to get into a show. I’m off to Germany for a top international competition soon and just the ferry is £300. My family pays unless I am riding one of the horses owned by [Olympic showjumper] and then he pays.

One girl, who had wanted to become a beautician, became pregnant soon after leaving school. Her second interview provided insight into some of the difficulties encountered at school:

I'm a single mum. I really love it. I didn't plan to have a baby and her dad doesn't see her, but I live with my mum and I'm really happy. Mum's been brilliant. She stopped doing all that stuff she did before, and we get on really well now. I only see Dad occasionally.

I didn't work at all after I left school, I just sat around. I didn't know what to do. I had no qualifications. I messed up so much at school. I thought about joining the Army but then I stopped going to school and got involved with people who didn't go to school. Dad didn't help. If I'm really honest, I think my problems at home were probably too much for me to work at school. I think I was really lucky they didn't kick me out. A couple of teachers tried really hard to help, but they didn't even know what was going on at home.

I don't see many people from school now. The girls I knocked around with in Year 9 all got into drugs. I wish I'd gone more [to school] and stayed out of trouble. I'd probably have done OK if it weren't for the people I was with and the stuff that was happening at home. I think I knew that by Year 11, but it was too late then to change things, so I just truanted more. When [daughter] goes to school, I'd like to go to college and do childcare.

Seven girls had stayed on at school to take A-levels, with six intending to apply to university. They had all changed their minds about the careers discussed in their first interviews, mostly as a result of school-organised work experience. The other girl was the main carer for her disabled father and this experience had fostered an interest in a new career and she was now supporting disabled students in a local college.

The other girls were working locally in hairdressing, cafes and administration. Two could not be found to re-interview, but their school and peers knew their situations. One had wanted to become a solicitor, but after struggling in school was excluded in her final year. Her family were involved in a serious crime that had negatively impacted her relationships with the community. The other girl, who had planned to go to university, started drinking heavily and became a drug addict after leaving school. She had now turned her life around and was a happily married devout Muslim who avoided previous friends.

The Primary Schoolgirls Who Progressed to SS2

Four girls progressed to SS2, all from PS1. One completed her GCSEs and now attended the local college. The other three were studying A-levels at SS2, two of whom no longer intended to go to university and become vets. They were now considering vocational courses at the local college, having decided that going to university would be ‘worrying’ and ‘scary’. The other girl, who had dreamed of being a famous singer, now wanted to study aerospace engineering at university. She was inspired by her brother who was an aerospace engineer. He had organised work experience for her, which she had loved. Her teacher was encouraging her to apply to Cambridge University and she had dreams of working in Formula 1.

The Primary Schoolgirls Who Progressed to SS3 and SS4

Six girls from PS2 had selected another school (SS3), one of whom had transferred there after attending SS1 for six months, because ‘it was a terrible school’ and she realised that she was a ‘smart kid and wanted more’. Three of these left school after their GCSEs. The other three stayed on to take A-levels. In primary school, they had wanted to become a bank accountant, an interior designer and an actor. Now, two planned to go to university, one to study pharmacy and the other to study health care (like others in her family). The third girl still wanted to become an actor, but her father would not support her going to university: ‘Dad just wants me to get off my arse and get a job’.

Two girls from PS1 had chosen to attend a fourth school (SS4). In primary school, one had wanted to be a nurse and to travel. After initially staying on to study A-levels, she left to work in a local pub, where she became a manager. The other girl had been a county athlete and wanted to work in ICT, like her father. She still lived locally but had lost contact with her peers, who described her as ‘turning a bit weird...drinking in school and self-harming’: the reasons for this were unknown.

The Secondary Schoolgirls: SS1

Despite eleven girls originally intending to go to university, only five were known to have done this. One had wanted to attend a university close to home and then join the police force. Her plans had changed after receiving low exam results. She accepted a 'clearing' place at a university sixty miles away and enjoyed the experience:

I've just got a 2:1 in Criminology, Criminal Justice and Law. Going away was exciting, meeting new people. I made the choice late – a last minute decision. In the first year I came back every weekend, but I got used to it, made more friends and stayed there more...I'm looking now at other jobs in criminal justice to use my degree until I get into the police...I've got friends from all over now – UK and abroad.

Another girl had also wanted to join the police force after her A-levels but because there were no local places available, found work in a nearby retail store. She went back to her teachers in SS1 to seek advice and with their support was sponsored by a multinational company to study for a business degree at a local university. She was excited about her future:

It's an amazing experience. I want to set up a property business. I'm definitely more confident now, I speak up more. Before...I went to school, got taught, went home. I was bullied but didn't say anything. I'm looking to buy a house with my boyfriend and then a big holiday after I finish my degree.

One girl had found the whole university experience to be less positive and now had different plans:

After college I applied to do law at university, I wanted to be a lawyer. School put me down, said I'd never get to university, but I did. I stayed a year and a half, then I left. The teachers put me down and I didn't like the people. I didn't know what I wanted. I got a job at the chippy, then an admin job. I'm doing an advanced NVQ now in customer service. I did it all myself – no-one helps you if you aren't clever. My family tried

to help me through uni and were disappointed when I left. I'm going to work hard and get promoted and get rich.

The other girls went straight into work after completing GCSEs. Some had low exam results that prevented them from studying A-levels, whereas others with excellent results encountered challenges that had reshaped their plans. One girl explained that 'my family put me down, said I wasn't good enough to be a vet', so she studied animal management at the local college. When she was unable to find a job in animal care, her father found her work in a local pub, which she enjoyed because it 'brought me out of my shell, gave me confidence'. Another, who was now a single mother, described how she had become pregnant at sixteen, four months into an engineering course. She intended to work as soon as her son was in school: 'I want to be financially stable. When my son is in full-time education, I'll do anything...I don't care what I do, but I want to work'.

Generally, the girls had lost contact with their school friends, having found new ones after leaving school. Some saw their futures as offering exciting new opportunities, but others were scared as much seemed uncertain, with one girl describing the future as 'more frightening than anything else in my life'.

The Secondary Schoolgirls: SS2

Six of the girls from SS2 achieved their plans to go to university, none of whom came from the ex-mining community. Three girls from the ex-mining community were doing something different to their early aspirations. One left the school's sixth form after a year and moved to Cornwall for work with a fashion company. After promotion to Events Manager, she returned home to set up her own company:

I put together a business plan and got support from the bank and my parents. I now own a shop and sell an organic range of clothing that's ethically sourced and sustainable. I've just moved to a better location and have pop-up shops in different locations. I set up a traders' association and got all the local shops together to promote our town with Christmas

events as a 'destination' town. Now I've expanded into clothing from Italy and India. I'm trying to support the textile industry in other countries as well as the UK. Mum works with me two days a week and Dad is a financial advisor, so that helps – it's a real family business.

Another girl was diagnosed with epilepsy just after her first interview which prevented her joining the Navy. She had trained as a primary school teacher instead and was excited to have just accepted a teaching post in the local area. The third girl had dreamed of owning her own spa. She explained how bullying had affected her education:

I left school after Year 11 'cos I failed my GCSEs except Science. It had been a hard year...racial bullying out of school, but it came into school. I stopped going to school and they sent work home. The school had a reputation as a good school but...!

I went to college and did Health and Social Care, then changed to Forensics, but it didn't suit me. Then I got pregnant. He's two now. I want to concentrate on being with him and go back to college next year and start again. I don't know what I'll do. I'm not going to let it get to me. I left my previous school because of problems. If I hadn't done that, I'd have paid more attention when I transferred to [SS2]. I could have been a new person there, but I concentrated on making friends, not working. If I hadn't done that, I'd have had a whole new life. I'm hopeful for the future. I want to be successful for my little one...I won't be a 'benefit huffer', I want my son to see me working, not just a stay-at-home mum.

The three girls knew of one other girl who had been part of their original group. She had been very quiet in her first interview, only stating that she wanted to have a good job and a happy family life. They knew that she had suddenly changed, and after becoming 'wild' at the end of Year 11, was now a single mother who lived locally but avoided old school friends.

What Can Schools Do?

The girls' accounts provide insight into factors influencing their decision-making as they negotiated the pathways they saw available to them as young adults. Three themes were identified: confidence and trust; achievement and resilience; understanding successful learning behaviour.

Confidence and Trust

Most of the girls either remained in, or returned to, the ex-mining community, irrespective of the school they attended or what they did after leaving school. Many started with high aspirations, but these had been tempered by family expectations, unexpectedly low exam results, and a fear of the unknown.

Family and friends had a significant impact on the girls' decision-making, especially as they got closer to leaving school: most discussed their aspirations with them but had chosen not to share these with teachers. Some of the girls experienced bullying in school or difficulties at home which they had kept secret, even when it affected their learning. Others reported having been treated negatively by some teachers and peers, leaving them feeling there was no point in trying. In their second interviews, several girls explained the difficulties they had experienced:

I needed more time with teachers who understood what I was feeling about what was happening at home.

I wished that I'd asked for more help with Maths, then I could have done pharmacy. School should have noticed I was struggling, but they didn't know what I wanted to do.

I wished I'd told the teachers I was struggling. I didn't have the confidence and didn't like to admit I couldn't do something.

They pushed the elite students, but if you're not one of those, it's not the same. We had to push ourselves. It was hard.

Teachers need to really know you, know when something is wrong. Teachers didn't know who we were.

I wish that school would sit people down and talk to them about what they want to do. This is really important because so many still don't know

what they want to do. So many on my hairdressing course don't want to be hairdressers.

Overcoming such reticence requires schools to consider how much they really know about their students' lives and how they can establish relationships that inspire confidence and trust. They must accept that some young people, like these girls, are often skilful in keeping important parts of their lives private, especially if they feel vulnerable. Students often perceive teachers to live very different [privileged] lives to themselves and assume that they cannot understand their problems—a view reinforced when teachers suggest 'opportunities' or 'solutions' which are unachievable because the unique community context has not been taken into account. When students then fail to respond, teachers may become discouraged as their efforts to address 'disadvantage' appear to fail. The schools in this study had staff roles and procedures to provide support, but the girls did not utilise them. This shows that more needs to be done to discover individual barriers young people experience and respond to these specifically so that students can have trust and confidence in staff and school systems.

Achievement and Resilience

Most of the girls attributed their success to personal motivation and family support. Some only achieved their aspirations after first complying with family and community expectations or separating themselves from these—an experience the university student explained:

Mum only started her career when I was sixteen and my brother and sister left school at sixteen. I went to uni at eighteen, but I think I was too young – I wasn't ready. I got into a financial mess and Mum bailed me out. I decided to get out and went home. I worked for two years and then suddenly thought I was under-fulfilling myself. I felt I wasn't doing myself justice and felt ashamed for failing at uni – Mum always wanted me to go to uni. I realised I had to go to uni to be where I wanted to be.

I consider myself as 'moving up' – a prestigious thing that I deserved. Financially it was hard, but I wanted to become a teacher, so I did the

access course. The [University] Open Day was welcoming, but daunting and scary. It was all so big – my previous experience was of small rooms and people I knew.

Mum was really pleased – she wanted for me what she didn't have. My Nan is proud, deep down – but she said 'What do you want to do that for? Isn't [the village] good enough for you?' My brother always looked up to me and he is at uni now. I feel they have put me on a pedestal. I think it's down to parenting and what they want for you. My friends' parents expected them to stay in the family community.

I lost touch with old friends; none went to university – it wasn't considered the norm. They could have done it too but didn't see it like that. I was the special one that got away. Being part of the girls' cliques we were in, uni wasn't considered. All the clever ones did A-levels but didn't consider university. A lot of the others, well...it was cool to not be clever, cooler to be involved with things like beauty therapy and making yourself beautiful. Now they say 'Oh, she's changed. She looks different and talks differently now'. I have changed massively. I think my mind has been opened and I feel passionate. It is small-minded in the village, I realised that I was small-minded.

I feel distanced from the village, the community is very small, and friends and family are a strong part of your everyday life. You have to accept that to go to uni, you'll have to be someone different, give up everything in a way.

Her account reflects many of the challenges experienced by the younger girls. She knew her family were proud of her but realised that achieving her dreams meant becoming 'someone different' and giving up everything familiar. Resilience and family support were key to her success. Several of the other girls had found resilience to cope with similar changes in their lives but others struggled. Some had showed early resilience that had broken down as pressures increased: the different ways in which parents provided support significantly impacted outcomes. Where parents had the social capital to support their daughters, this scaffolded the girls' resilience. In other situations, some dealt with arising problems by offering a route that reverted back to the familiar. A few parents made it clear that they would not support aspirations that differed from community norms, giving their daughters a stark choice between following family expectations or risking censure and isolation

by acting independently. It is these situations that schools need to work with families to resolve by building deeper relationships that are based on equal partnerships which accept parents' individual starting points—respecting where they 'are' in terms of understanding opportunities available, implications of choices and community pressures. This must start early to keep young people's aspirations on track and prevent a growing fear of the unknown influencing their final career decisions.

Several of the girls wanted more school support in understanding the 'new worlds' they were entering after school:

I wish we had done work experience in pairs. I was scared.

I wish school had prepared us more for the 'outside world'. They only taught us subjects.

Most at this school don't know what they are going to do. We don't know about many jobs.

I wish school had organised more visits to University Open Days and went with us.

They just focused on A-Levels, not preparing us for uni.

It's really hard when you leave school. You're on your own, not prepared for when you leave. School got people to talk to us before we left, but I needed that after I left – I felt stranded.

If requests like these were accommodated within schools' careers curriculum, increased self-confidence could enable unfamiliar situations to be met with resilience. Some needed staff assistance outside of school time—attending 'overwhelming' University Open Days with them or offering advice to unemployed ex-students who felt 'stranded' and spent their days waiting around outside the school gates—highlighting the importance of providing support that extended past the end of a school day.

Understanding Successful Learning Behaviour

Many of the girls did not understand what was required to be successful learners. On reflection most realised that they should have been more conscientious:

I wish I'd worked harder, then I wouldn't be in the situation I'm in now. I didn't believe it when I was told we needed to do more work. I wish I'd kept my head down. A year-13 student came and told us we had to work hard and what it was really like. Still, some of us didn't believe it.

I wish I'd listened to my parents more. My Dad didn't do well at school and had to do 'night school'. He wants me to do well. I wish I hadn't lied to them about doing my revision.

I didn't make enough of the opportunities given, like when I had careers advice, I didn't take it seriously, I didn't listen.

These comments demonstrate the problem for schools, especially as *all* the girls said that they only realised they should have worked harder when they received their exam results. Despite teachers having emphasised the importance of working hard, this had little impact on the girls' behaviour, resulting in post-school opportunities limited by wrongly selected subjects and low exam grades. Enabling young people to understand successful learning behaviour requires them to trust their teachers and believe the advice they give them. Critical reflection on the school–parent–student partnership is needed to identify how expectations and responsibilities are shared and clarified so that everyone understands the reality of this—for example, how *hard* is hard work and what does *good* revision look like to parents supervising the young people doing it?

Conclusion

Many of these findings reflect those from other studies. Plummer's earlier research (2000) on working-class girls' aspirations also found that educational success was often achieved at high personal cost as girls struggled to balance achievement with community expectations. Reay (2018) identified similar personal conflicts arising from social mobility, describing how the 'injustice at its heart' (p. 37) made individuals responsible for their own success and finding acceptance 'in middle-class contexts' (p. 40). Cullen et al. (2018) and Allen et al. (2021) also found the negative impact of fear on decision-making and the importance of

‘belonging’. These reoccurring themes all suggest that our education system needs to do more and do it better.

Keeping aspirations on track is much harder than just inspiring young people. It is also not enough to just get students past the ‘starting line’ onto their chosen course or selected career, they want to feel they belong and enjoy success. Long-term support is needed to achieve this, supported by detailed monitoring across the whole of young people’s education journey and beyond—monitoring that focuses on aspirations, belonging, attainment and progression. Sharing detailed information from these data across education settings would enable them to jointly better support young people’s aspirations, working in partnership with families and taking account of contextual issues that affect their decision-making and, ultimately, their adult lives.

Relationships were key to the girls’ decision-making. Where these provided positive support, they generally had confidence and resilience to deal with ‘scary’ new situations. Without this, most made choices that kept them within their comfort zone irrespective of previous aspirations. Developing deeper, individualised relationships with students and their families can enable ‘insider’ information that increases understanding of some of the complex contextual challenges young people face, especially where seemingly similar problems arise from different personal situations. This would avoid generalizations about disadvantage that result in many initiatives not impacting all those for whom they are intended. Getting these right matters, all young people should be able to face the future feeling ‘happy and alive’, ‘passionate’ about what they do and have the opportunity to achieve their aspirations.

References

- Allen, K., Slaten, C., Aslan, G., Roffet, S., Craig, H., & Vella-Bridrick, D. (2021). School belonging: The importance of student and teacher relationships. In M. Kern & M. Wehmeyer (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of positive education* (pp. 525–550). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Andrews, J., Robinson, D., & Hutchinson, J. (2017). *Closing the gap? Trends in educational attainment and disadvantage*. Education Policy Institute.
- Carneiro, P., Cattán, S., Dearden, L., van de Erve., Krutikova, S., & Macmillan, L. (2020). *The long shadow of deprivation—Differences in opportunities across England*. Social Mobility Commission.
- Centre for Social Justice. (2014). *Closing the divide: Tackling education inequality in England*. Centre for Social Justice.
- Children's Society. (2020). *The good childhood report*. The Children's Society.
- Cullen, S., Cullen, A., Dytham, S., & Hayden, N. (2018). *Research to understand successful approaches to supporting the most academically able disadvantaged students*. DfE.
- DfE. (2017). *Unlocking talent, fulfilling potential: A plan for improving social mobility through education*. Department for Education.
- EEF. (2018). *Attainment gap report*. Retrieved June 28, 2021, from: www.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk
- Fisher, H. (2014). It would help if the teachers help you a bit more...instead of going to the brainiest who don't need a lot of help. Exploring the perspectives of dissatisfied girls on the periphery of primary classroom life. *British Educational Research Journal*, 40(1), 150–169.
- Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge.
- Hutchinson, J., Reader, M., & Akhal, A. (2020). *Education in England: Annual report 2020*. Education Policy Institute.
- Jerrim, J., Greany, T., & Perera, N. (2018). *Educational disadvantage: How does England compare?* Education Policy Institute.
- Mattys, M. (2013). *Cultural capital, identity and social mobility: The life course of working-class university graduates*. Routledge.
- Montacute, R. (2018). *Potential for success: Fulfilling the promise of highly able students in secondary schools*. The Sutton Trust.
- Montgomery, D. (2020). *Tackling disadvantage and underachievement in schools: A practical guide for teachers*. Routledge.
- Plan International UK. (2020). *The state of girl's rights in the UK 2019–2020*. Plan International UK.
- Plummer, G. (2000). *Failing working-class girls*. Trentham.
- Reay, D. (2018). Revisiting the 'zombie stalking English schools': The continuing failure to embrace social class in working-class education. In R. Simmons, & J. Smyth (Eds.), *Education and working-class youth, reshaping the politics of inclusion* (pp. 29–53). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Richards, G. (2018). *Working class girls, education and post-industrial Britain: Aspirations and reality in an ex-coalmining community*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Social Mobility Commission. (2017). *Time for change: An assessment of government policies on social mobility 1997–2017*. Institute of Public Policy Research.
- UNICEF. (2020). *Towards an equal future: Re-imagining girls' education through STEM*. UNICEF.
- World Economic Forum. (2021). *Global gender gap report 2021*. World Economic Forum.