

A longitudinal study of young women's transitions in Tower Hamlets in an age of austerity



Aldgate and Allhallows
Foundation



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Contents



Forewords	4
Executive summary	6
Recommendations include	10
Introduction	12
Rationale, background and aims for the study	14
<i>The national labour market and economic context</i>	14
<i>The local labour market: Tower Hamlets</i>	15
<i>Career guidance</i>	16
<i>Aspirations</i>	17
Methodological and theoretical frameworks	20
Aspirations	23
<i>Labour market aspirations</i>	23
<i>Education and training aspirations</i>	24
<i>Aspiring to stay local</i>	25
School-based influences on aspirations and transitions	26
<i>The curriculum and school subjects</i>	26
<i>School trips</i>	26
<i>Careers interviews</i>	27
<i>Visits to universities</i>	28
<i>Business and employment mentoring</i>	29
<i>Work experience</i>	30
Wider influences on transitions and aspirations	31
<i>Family role models</i>	31
<i>Parental influence on aspirations</i>	32
Wider discourses which influence aspirations	34
<i>Gendered, classed and raced narratives of ‘helping others’</i>	34
<i>Notions of a good life</i>	35
Conclusion	36
Recommendations	40
References & Borough profile	42
Author biography	48

Foreword by Denise Jones

Chair, Aldgate and Allhallows Foundation

Aldgate and Allhallows is an independent charitable Foundation, which provides grants to support the educational needs of disadvantaged young people in the City of London and London Borough of Tower Hamlets. We are situated in Aldgate, on the periphery of the City and its border with Tower Hamlets, so we are uniquely positioned to see first-hand the disparity in the socio-economic circumstances of communities across both boroughs. Our Board brings broad experience from across the education and voluntary sectors, as well as considerable local knowledge of our area of benefit. Having served on the Board for many years, I was delighted to be elected as Chair in 2019 and to be launching this report now.

On behalf of the Trustees of the Foundation, I would like to thank Professor Charlotte Chadderton for her dedicated time and research on this project. Originally based at the University of East London, Professor Chadderton moved to take up a position at Bath Spa University part way through the programme but showed continued commitment to this piece of research. The identities of the young women interviewed as part of this research have understandably been kept anonymous, as well as the school they attended, but it would be remiss of me to not also thank them and their families for their contribution, without which none of this would be possible. Finally, I would like to thank the staff team and my fellow Board members at Aldgate and Allhallows Foundation for having the long-term vision and foresight to support such an important piece of work.

October 2020

Foreword by Richard Foley

Clerk and Chief Executive, Aldgate and Allhallows Foundation

As an educational charity, we provide grants which seek to improve the educational outcomes for children and young people from low income families. We support projects which enhance the national curriculum, provide access to high quality arts, as well as those which test innovative approaches to teaching and learning.

As a relatively small charity and funder, most of our grants are awarded to educational projects delivered by schools and charities across our small area of benefit, or as bursaries and scholarships directly made to individuals in further and higher education. Only a small proportion of our funding would normally be spent on research, so when we do fund research we are keen to ensure that it can be used to directly inform our wider grant making. This five-year longitudinal study looks into the career aspirations and transitions for young women in Tower Hamlets, predominantly from Bangladeshi backgrounds. For this project, it was important to concentrate on one school in the borough. It was conducted over the period 2014–19, at a time when austerity measures disproportionately impacted those from low income families, women and minority ethnic groups. For us, it was important to know what this looked like on a micro-scale, and to use this learning to inform our funding more widely.

The Foundation recognises the important of obtaining robust and bespoke careers advice throughout secondary school. Students in Tower Hamlets should be encouraged to visit universities, including Queen Mary, University of London and to participate in school visits and educational and cultural projects, as it is clear that this leads to more informed choices being made and an improvement in the student's confidence and self-esteem.

It feels even more pertinent to be launching this report now, as 2020 marks the 125th Anniversary of Aldgate and Allhallows Foundation. I would like to echo the above thanks made by Denise Jones. We hope that readers from across the education and political sectors find this report as useful and insightful as we do, and that it can help to lead to policy changes in careers education both in Tower Hamlets and beyond.

October 2020

Executive summary

1

Little is known about the labour market aspirations and educational transitions of Tower Hamlets' young, working class, minority ethnic women, and what influences these.

2

This project begins to fill this gap by tracking a group of eighteen pupils, mostly from working class backgrounds and of Asian heritage (mostly Bangladeshi) through an enhanced programme of school-based Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) for five years from years 7 and 8 to years 12 and 13.

3

The study was conducted from 2014–19, at a time when austerity measures have disproportionately impacted on the lives of, and opportunities for, the economically disadvantaged, females and minority ethnic groups.

4

Annual focus group discussions were conducted with the participants about their changing aspirations, their transitions, their experiences of careers input, and what influences their aspirations and decisions. These were supplemented by interviews with selected school staff.

5

This study analyses aspirations as an aspect of habitus. Habitus is understood as individual or collective disposition, shaped by both past experiences and social structures that are raced, classed and gendered. It rejects the notion, commonly promoted by politicians and practitioners alike, that Asian females are generally shaped by non-western values and subservient to their parents' wishes. Rather in this study habitus is understood as including a range of different influences beside family background, including the school system and social position in the UK.

6

The study found that the pupils aspire more highly than their parents' jobs, and mostly to typically 'respectable' professions for working class/minority ethnic females, such as teacher, nurse and midwife. The majority of the participants had 'levelled down' their aspirations from professional/managerial to skilled/semi-skilled, or shifted to more feminised aspirations to meet with the expectations of their habitus by years 12 and 13.

7

They mostly do not aspire to work in the sectors in which Tower Hamlets council expects to see most growth, nor in the current largest areas of employment in the borough.

8

Despite the high fees for students in England, the participants mostly aspired to go to university, in the belief that achieving a degree will lead to a good job.

9

Enjoyment of subjects and school trips seemed to guide GCSE choices and participants chose a wide range of subjects at this level.

10

Much of the school-based careers input, such as careers interviews and work experience, seemed to guide the pupils, explicitly and implicitly towards more feminised positions and away from professional/managerial work towards skilled/semi-skilled work.

11

Visits to universities were not open to all pupils and were only conducted to the most elite universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge. This suggests that most participants were applying to universities they were very unlikely to have visited beforehand with the school, either because they had never visited a university, or they had only visited Oxford or Cambridge, to which none of the participants applied or planned to apply.

12

Participants' aspirations and educational decisions were influenced by older cousins and siblings who had already gone to university and navigated the labour market.

13

It was reported that parents were generally supportive of pupils' educational decisions and aspirations, but were not well-informed about the labour market or study routes. Some participants reported that 'respectability' and 'stability' were important to parents for their daughters' careers.

14

Participants were strongly influenced by a social discourse of 'helping others' in their careers, and by the end of the project they mostly aspired to feminised nurturing or caring roles in the labour market.

15

They were also influenced by ideas of a good life and financial stability.

Recommendations include

A

careers lessons to help young people understand the range of roles available to them, as well as understanding the raced, gendered and classed nature of the labour market and of their own aspirations and decisions;

B

access to information about the local labour market of Tower Hamlets;

C

opportunities for all pupils to visit different Higher Education Institutions, to ensure they are well-informed about the wide range of universities and their specialisms;

D

inclusion in the school careers programme of visiting alumni, who have experience in navigating university applications and the labour market, and personal experience of potential barriers and opportunities.

Introduction



This project explores the aspirations and educational transitions of working class, minority ethnic female pupils in Tower Hamlets in the current age of austerity and school-based career guidance. A group of pupils has been tracked through an enhanced programme of school-based Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) through five years (2014–19). They were in years 7 and 8 at the beginning of the research, and in years 12 and 13 by the end. The majority of the participants are of Bangladeshi heritage. Little is known about the labour market aspirations of young women in Tower Hamlets specifically, nor what influences their aspirations and transitions, and this research begins to fill this gap in knowledge. It also provides a rare, longitudinal study of aspirations shifting over time. It contributes to current debates around the aspirations of working class females at a time when austerity measures have disproportionately impacted on the lives and life chances of young people, women and minority ethnic populations.

Rationale, background and aims for the study

Young people's transitions through education are influenced by a variety of factors. These include the national economic and educational context, their local labour market, career guidance, family context and their aspirations, which in turn are influenced by the other factors mentioned. All of these factors are also influenced by structural factors such as gender, class and race. Little is known about what influences the transitions and aspirations of working class, minority ethnic young women in Tower Hamlets. This research therefore aimed to do the following:

- ▶ investigate young women's shifting aspirations in the current context;
- ▶ explore how these young women make decisions on transitions;
- ▶ explore their experiences of school-based careers work;
- ▶ establish what influences their aspirations and decisions such as their family and friends, race, religion, gender, social disadvantage, youth cultures such as celebrity culture, and how these intersect.

The national labour market and economic context

The financial downturn of 2007/8 created shifts in the national labour market and led to unprecedentedly high levels of youth unemployment, indeed, at the beginning of this project young people in the 16–24 age group were more than twice as likely to be unemployed as those aged 25 and over. These figures have now recovered, partly due to the fact that raising the age of participation means there are more young people in training and education (Gregg, 2015). There is evidence that public sector cuts, the growth in precarious and part-time work, falling wages, and greater welfare conditionality have disproportionately affected women (The Women's Budget Group 2016). Even prior to 2007/8 women were commonly in jobs which were less well paid and in which they were less likely to be promoted than men. Evidence also shows that austerity measures implemented since 2010 have impacted disproportionately on minority ethnic groups in the UK, and particularly on minority ethnic women, who experience structural inequalities in work,

education, housing, and care (Runnymede, 2017). In Tower Hamlets, there is a significant population of Bangladeshi heritage, who made up the majority of participants in this study. Nationally, the Bangladeshi population is particularly disadvantaged: 46% of people of Bangladeshi heritage live in poverty nationally, compared to 16% of the population overall (Ghaffar and Stevenson, 2018). The unemployment rate for people from a Bangladeshi background is 15%, compared to an overall UK rate of 4% (Powell, 2018). These numbers are particularly high for Bangladeshi women, who experience high levels of unemployment and economic inactivity (Powell, 2018), although this is beginning to change among young people born in the UK, and for example, the proportion of young women of Bangladeshi heritage with a degree has increased enormously over the last 20 years.

Fees of over £9k pa have been introduced for undergraduate degrees in England. Despite this, participation rates in Higher Education have been increasing and reached 50% in the year 2017/18 and participation is higher among women than men (DfE, 2019). Vocational routes into employment such as apprenticeships remain underfunded and available to too few, and young people are not well-informed about vocational alternatives to academic pathways to employment.

The local labour market: Tower Hamlets

Policy makers often associate young people's labour market aspirations and educational decisions with their local areas, for example tending to connect low aspirations with disadvantaged areas (Kintrea et al, 2015). However, research suggests that there is little evidence for this connection, and the relationship between young people's aspirations and local labour markets is complex (ibid).

Employment in Tower Hamlets is currently dominated by the finance industry. 44% of jobs are concentrated in Canary Wharf and the largest

employment sector in the borough is the finance and insurance industry (26%). There are significant gender and ethnic discrepancies in employment rates and types of employment. For example:

- ▶ The employment rate for white residents in Tower Hamlets averaged 83% during 2014–2016, compared with just 59% for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) residents.
- ▶ Employment rates for BME women are lower in Tower Hamlets than in London (48 vs. 57%), however, the opposite is true for white women, who have a higher employment rate in Tower Hamlets than London (78 vs. 72%).
- ▶ The ethnic gap in employment rates between white and BME women is twice as wide in Tower Hamlets than in London (30 vs. 15 percentage points).
- ▶ Employment rates are particularly low for Bangladeshi women (26%).
- ▶ Only 14% of workers in Tower Hamlets are borough residents, which constitutes the fifth highest proportion of in-commuters in London.

Based on past trends, Tower Hamlets' growth sectors are expected to be business and professional services, ICT, the creative industry, and science and technology. It is worth noting that these are jobs in which Bangladeshi workers (of both genders) in Tower Hamlets are currently particularly under-represented. (Figures all obtained in personal communication from the local authority, 2017).

Career guidance

As part of the austerity agenda and programme to increase school autonomy, all national funding was withdrawn from Connexions, an external holistic support service for young people, in 2012. The responsibility for providing career guidance to young people in England now lies with schools. Guidelines on providing career guidance issued by the Department for Education (DfE) were initially extremely vague. In response to criticism, these were revised and updated in 2014 and again in 2015, 2017 and 2018, and from 2018 schools are

expected to adhere to the so-called ‘Gatsby benchmarks’ (Holman, 2014) which are generally accepted among practitioners and scholars as good practice in careers work for they provide a clear, common, long-awaited framework for schools on career guidance. However, schools have mostly not been provided with any extra funds or training to fulfil this statutory requirement and research suggests that provision remains patchy and careers work is not embedded in the curriculum (e.g. Chadderton, 2015). The DfE guidelines focus in particular on raising aspirations, engagement with employers, and challenging stereotyping. They do not require schools to engage qualified careers advisors or base guidance on up-to-date labour market intelligence.

Aspirations

There is a government policy focus on young people’s aspirations, which both pre-dates and accompanies the austerity agenda. Individuals are encouraged to rely more on themselves and less upon the welfare state. For example, politicians tend to suggest that high aspirations lead to upward social mobility (Archer et al 2014; DfE 2018). High aspirations, and related life success, are framed as an individual responsibility (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017) and conversely, a lack of success, or disadvantage, is portrayed as a result of low individual aspiration. Notions of individual flexibility and mobility are promoted as a tool to escape disadvantage and get better jobs (Kintrea et al, 2015; Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). The government also promotes the idea that aspiration is influenced by ideals of individual fulfilment through material consumption: ‘the risk takers. The young people who dream of their first pay cheque, their first car, their first home’ (Cameron 2012: n/p). Working-class girls in particular are encouraged to produce themselves as agentic, upwardly mobile, individualised and aspirational through investment in education (Allen 2016).

Scholarly research on aspirations provides us with a different picture. Research does suggest there is some connection between an individual’s

aspirations at school, and their later occupation, although this connection is not always straightforward (e.g. Croll, 2008). Studies also show that aspirations fall into raced, gendered and classed patterns and that young people from working-class and/or minority ethnic backgrounds, and those who live in disadvantaged areas often hold high aspirations (Archer et al 2014; Kintrea et al, 2015). There is however some evidence to suggest that as children get older, aspirations may be 'levelled down' as a result of contextual influences, including what appears achievable (ibid). Research shows that young people's aspirations are influenced by the jobs done by the people they know— family or friends (although this applies more to those from higher class backgrounds), what they see on TV, as well as jobs perceived to be well-paid (Archer et al 2014). School seems to have less of an influence.

Research specifically on working class females and aspirations also suggests that parental involvement and family approval plays a greater role than school factors (Richards, 2018). Studies also show that it is common for working class girls to feel a need to maintain contact with their roots and communities, and for this to conflict with any potential interest/aspiration to do something different. Some research indicates that higher status may be available for working class girls in traditional roles of wife and mother and that their aspirations are likely to be influenced by traditional expectations (Richards, 2018).

There is a tendency in both policy and practitioner discourses to view the aspirations of Asian young people as subservient to the parents, too narrow or unrealistic e.g. only considering medicine or law (Scandone, 2019). An impression prevails that the community as a whole does not encourage women to work outside the home unless in the most prestigious jobs and that there is a strong cultural prevalence for early marriage and motherhood (Ghaffar and Stevenson, 2018). Mirza and Metoo (2018) found that teachers encouraged the Muslim girls (mainly Bangladeshi, some Pakistani) in their study to actively challenge their families and cultures, who were perceived as

overly controlling or holding them back, to aspire to ‘freedom’ from family and cultural ties. However Vincent’s (2012) study of girls of Bangladeshi heritage in East London suggests that girls negotiate with their parents over their aspirations, to gain their support, and that teacher support in achieving this is key.

Methodological and theoretical frameworks

The current research consisted of two main elements. Firstly, a literature review was conducted to provide context, enhance understanding of relevant issues, inform the data analysis and ensure the study built on previous research. The literature review was constantly updated throughout the project. The review included conducting a search of relevant databases using keywords.

Secondly data was collected in a single secondary school in Tower Hamlets. A group of 18 pupils was tracked from 2014 as they followed a programme of enhanced career guidance. In-depth narrative interviews were conducted once a year with each pupil, in order to track their aspirations, educational decisions and experiences of the careers work. Selected staff were interviewed to gain a perspective on the school context and continuing careers input. The interviews were all audio-recorded and notes taken.

The pupils in the study were born between September 2000 and August 2002. They were in year 7 and year 8 when the project started, and in year 12 and 13 when it finished. They were mostly, but not exclusively, of Bangladeshi heritage. One was described as ‘White and Asian’ and one ‘white other’. All but one identified as Muslim. About half received Free School Meals.

The participants were selected because they belonged to the middle-attainment group, (i.e. predicted when we started to get 5 GCSE’s at A*–C) one of the groups most in need of career guidance and support because of the potentially wide range of academic and vocational options open to them, but least likely to receive adequate support (Colley et al, 2010). By the end of the project, four students did worse than originally predicted, and all the others did slightly better. Half chose to do A Levels (the more academic qualification), and half to do a BTEC Level 3 in either Health and Social Care or Business (the vocational qualification).

Data was gathered on parental occupation, which was used as a proxy for social class (whilst recognising that this notion is actually more complex). Most participants lived in households where only the father worked. Three of the pupils lived in households where both parents worked, three in households where neither parent worked. The pupils' fathers/male guardians were employed mostly in skilled manual work (chef, builder, tailor), semi-skilled manual (hotel work, used car salesman) or unskilled work (security guard, delivery man, shop assistant). One father was a project manager (managerial). The three mothers who worked were classified as managerial (an editor [although unclear where or what kind]) and skilled manual (masseuse, finance administrator at a university). Their occupations shifted slightly throughout the project, for example, one mother enrolled as a student at university. Following this, one family was classified as middle class (the project manager and editor were a couple), and the others as working class.

The study aims to foreground the voices of the pupils. The participants in the study cannot be considered representative of any group.

The research received institutional ethical approval. Participants received a guarantee that their data would be anonymised. Information forms and consent forms were provided, and consent was obtained from the school staff and pupils involved in the research, as well as from the parents of the pupils. All participants were made aware that they could withdraw their data at any time until after the collection of data had been completed, without having to justify their decision. The school has also been anonymised and no identifying details have been included.

Profiles were built up for each student participant throughout the project. Interviews were also analysed thematically each year, and a final analysis was conducted of all interview data after the last round of data collection.

In order to understand the participants' relationship with their environment and their aspirations, the study draws on Bourdieu's notion of habitus. Habitus can be understood as individual or collective disposition, which is shaped both by past experiences and also social structures which are raced, classed and gendered. It is also a 'matrix of perceptions' which guides notions of what 'people like us' might think, do, or aspire to. In this study, aspirations are therefore analysed as an aspect of habitus (Scandone, 2019). Habitus makes some decisions and future identities thinkable, and others inconceivable. Previous work on Asian females' aspirations has often focussed on their habitus as their family background and non-western culture which is seen to shape their aspirations. However, in this study, the habitus of these young people also includes the education system, as well as raced, gendered and classed structures and discourses which disadvantage and pathologise working class, minority ethnic females. The analysis is also informed by postcolonial theories which reject the stereotypical notion that young Asian people, especially females are somehow inferior, inadequate or 'trapped' in essentialised non-Western cultures and families. In addition 'culture' is regarded not as fixed or monolithic, but as plural and shifting and present not only in the girls' families but also in England in general and Tower Hamlets more specifically.

Aspirations

Labour market aspirations

All the students began the project aspiring more highly than the jobs they report their parents are doing. The most common aspirations mentioned throughout the project were teacher, nurse, midwife and lawyer. These are traditionally secure jobs and are high status jobs for BME females. Teacher, nurse and midwife are feminised professions.

Throughout the project, the pupils did not consider a particularly wide range of occupations. They mostly did not aspire to work in the sectors in which Tower Hamlets council expects to see most growth, (business and professional services, ICT, the creative industry, and science and technology) nor did they aspire to finance or insurance, currently the largest areas of employment in the borough.

Some of the pupils' aspirations did shift somewhat as they moved through the five years of schooling. By the end of the project, nine had adjusted their aspirations to roles which are traditionally more feminised or from professional/managerial to skilled/semi-skilled:

- ▶ Secondary teacher to nursery nurse
- ▶ Doctor to Maths teacher
- ▶ Photographer to midwife
- ▶ Doctor to midwife
- ▶ Politician to paediatrician
- ▶ Doctor to teacher
- ▶ Engineer to administrator
- ▶ TV presenter to nurse
- ▶ Lawyer to policewoman

This concurs with other research which suggests that working class young people 'level down' their aspirations to meet with the expectations of their

habitus. However this research also suggests that in aspiring to roles which are traditionally more feminised, some girls are also adjusting to social expectations for women as they get older.

Education and training aspirations

Most participants aspired to go to university, despite having some financial concerns. The participants' reasons for wanting to study were:

- 1 They believed it would lead to a good job;
- 2 their older siblings had gone and had enjoyed it;
- 3 it was important to their parents;
- 4 for the experience;
- 5 they believed it would give them an edge over others.



In our culture...not in our culture, but in certain families, having a degree is something you should have. In my family, all the cousins, all the girls have got degrees. So I feel under pressure, I need to get one too, you know. I'm the first daughter, so there's a lot of pressure.

I want to go to university no matter how much debt I'm in, I wanna go to university! Because there's so much demand for jobs now, but if you go to university you've got something that others are less likely to have.

The older the participants got, the more the aspiration to go to university became about getting a good job. It seems likely that the participants' aspirations to go to university are influenced by dominant neoliberal discourses such as employability and competition for jobs. Equally, as others have argued, for working class students and recent migrants, going to university is about upward mobility (Riddell, 2010; Ghaffar and Stevenson, 2018), which was also evident in their responses.

Three pupils did not want to go to university. Their reasons included:

- 1 Financial concerns and not wanting to get into debt;
- 2 They felt they had had enough of education.

This therefore suggests that a minority of pupils in this study were put off applying for a university degree because of the current high student fees.

There was some awareness that apprenticeships offer an alternative route, but only one of the participants planned to apply for one of these.

Aspiring to stay local

Virtually all, though not all, the students in the project wanted to stay geographically close to family when they left school.

 *But I wanna stay in London, close to home. I just like home. [...]
All my siblings live in London. I don't wanna move away from my family.*

*My parents would help me financially. It's just... I like staying at home,
I like spending time with my family*

This is consistent with trends in aspirations of young people of Bangladeshi heritage (e.g. Mac an Ghail and Haywood, 2005; Ghaffar and Stevenson, 2018), and of working class young people (Allen, 2016). The participants conceived this as a positive choice, rather than a form of missing out on travel or being totally immersed in university life, as the 'ideal' university experience model might suggest (Allen, 2016).

School-based influences on aspirations and transitions

The curriculum and school subjects

Careers lessons as a module took place in Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) for key stages 3 and 4. These careers lessons were not written by a specialist careers advisor. The careers co-ordinator at the school told me she was *'not sure about standards of careers input. It needs developing, it can be a bit superficial'*. In the interviews, the pupils seemed to barely remember these lessons and had not made the connection between these lessons and their future careers, suggesting it had little influence on them.

Enjoying a subject had a big influence on whether they chose it for GCSE or not.



I picked Art, Sociology and History. I'm quite good at Art and Sociology and History they're interesting. You learn about society and stuff. I like drawing and stuff. I think my drawing skills are quite good.

However, simply enjoying a subject was not presented as the main driver for their post-GCSE choices, as is shown below.

School trips

School trips were a source of inspiration for labour market aspirations and did seem to widen some participants' horizons.



I enjoy textiles and I would like to become a photographer. I've taken a photography course. We went to the London College of Fashion and we did some fashion shoots there.

I want to do something with politics, and work at parliament. [...] The school recently took us on a trip to parliament.

However, over time, the influence seemed to wane and those who had been influenced to aspire beyond their immediate habitus, changed their minds by the end of the project.

Careers interviews

In year 11 the pupils had one-to-one careers interviews with an external careers adviser. Many of the interviews confirmed their pre-existing choices, rather than challenging the participants' aspirations or encouraging them to explore:



They gave us a little booklet, everything we told them about our careers and what we want to be, they researched it for us. For every single individual in year 11. It was really helpful. I said apprenticeship and they gave me so many different booklets on apprenticeships

I didn't find it helpful. They just asked me what I wanted to do, they just wrote it down. That was it. I can't really remember.

Some participants' aspirations were challenged, but in these cases they were guided towards job roles traditionally perceived to be more stereotypically suitable for Asian females, such as nursing and midwifery.



That's what made me wanna become a midwife. [...] I wanted to become a photographer but she kind of helped me decide I wanted to become a midwife. But if that doesn't turn out right, then I can become a photographer.

Ok... Do you feel she kind of pushed you in that direction at all?

Yeah. [laughs]

Do you mind that?

No...

This concurs with previous research examining factors which influence young women's aspirations, which argues that those working with the

Bangladeshi population tend to have fixed notions of culture and identity (Smart and Rahman, 2008; Mirza and Meetoo, 2018).

Visits to universities

Visits to HEIs were mainly to the most elite universities, such as Oxford or Cambridge, rather than to a range of universities. In addition, these visits were only open to those students who were already in the so-called 'Gifted and Talented' (G&T) group of pupils currently attaining highly:



There have been visits to universities, like some people have been to Oxford and Cambridge, but it's the people like who the teachers think, oh yeah, they're likely to get the grades. And it's really cut off from other people, who may not be the teachers' ideal students, but they still might be considering going there.

This is significant since the majority of the participants did aspire to go to university, but had not had the opportunity to attend an open day with their school to inform their decision. The participants' aspirations to go to university were therefore not influenced by actual experiences of the types of university they are most likely to go to. The school data shows that the majority of pupils from this school who attend university go to newer, post '92 institutions.

Those who did attend an open day at Oxford or Cambridge (three participants had been included in the G&T group by year 11), did not want to apply there on the basis of that experience:



It's a bit too posh and a bit too rich.

The guy who was introducing us and giving us a tour, he wasn't engaging so he put us off.

This supports other research which suggests that working class pupils don't apply for a place at the most elite universities not because of their grades, but rather due to 'a more elusive sense of what is appropriate for "people like us"' (Mendick et al, 2018). It is likely that the classed and raced habitus of these pupils was so different from that of the elite universities and the students they encountered there, that they felt they might not 'fit in' if they do apply. Although young people from minority ethnic backgrounds have been more likely to go to university than their white British peers since the early 90s, students of Bangladeshi backgrounds make up just 0.6% of all entrants to Russell Group universities (Boliver, 2018). Boliver shows this is due to both low application rates and lower acceptance rates. Russell Group universities are still majority white spaces and minority ethnic students are under-represented.

Business and employment mentoring

About half the participants took part in a programme of business and employment mentoring, in years 10 and 11. The students saw this as helping them build useful skills such as writing their CV's, formal e-mails and giving presentations, as well as building confidence around the world of work and applying for jobs.



It was alright. We used to talk about how you can improve your presentation skills and that.... It did help me. It boosted a bit of my confidence.

Timing was really bad, and she was coming from really far away. But she improved my CV, 'cos she was, like, head of recruitment, and she told me a lot about how she recruits people and what she looks for, so that was helpful.

Work experience

Nine participants in this research had the opportunity to do one or more work experience placements. All those participating stated that the experience had influenced their aspirations directly, either positively or negatively. Most of these work experience placements were arranged by the school, in collaboration with the local Education Business Partnership. All the placements involved roles traditionally associated with lower class women, such as administration and childcare. This was the case whether the school found the placements or the pupil found it herself through external contacts.



Mine was in Canary Wharf. I went to be an administrator. And it was so fun. At the end of the week, I got £50 [...] They said to email them to get a part-time job, 'cos they really liked me. I had to dress smart. They're so prestige. They're so professional and they just treated me like one of the workers. I had to do filing, photocopying, ordering the stationery.

I did it in a primary school. I wanted to do it in a hospital but they couldn't offer me a space. You have to be 18. So I worked in reception. The kids are so cute but they're so much hard work. They make so much mess and you have to clean up! But I didn't like the job.

The council to do with adult social care. It was office work. I found that myself. It was my friend, we found it together. They gave us a self placement form, and we would have to look our self. And if we struggled obviously they would help us. They would let you check yourself, you could do what you're interested in. We emailed places. It's cos my friend's mum, she works there, so she could get us in. She works there basically. I found it ok, but I didn't feel like it was for me. I enjoyed it but I don't want to do that as a job.

Other research shows that work experience can both widen student horizons and reproduce social inequality (e.g. Le Gallais and Hatcher, 2014). It could therefore be argued in this study, that these placements reproduced the students' classed and gendered habitus, rather than widening horizons.

Wider influences on transitions and aspirations

Family role models

The most important family influence on aspirations was older siblings and cousins who had been through the school system and to university, and were working in more highly qualified jobs than their parents. They provided valued advice and information to their younger family members.



I wanna do something with law or politics or media. 'Cos my cousin, she's a lawyer now and my sister's a journalist for The Guardian and she does stuff like short articles for Channel 4 and magazines and stuff.

My brothers and sisters have influenced me cos they've all been to uni.

My brother took Economics and he really likes it. He told me that he thought I would like it. And I do like it as well!

Interviews held with teachers revealed that they assumed that pupils lacked social capital and networks needed to guide them in career decision-making, as they were both working class and in addition, many were the daughters of immigrants. However, the fact some were drawing on advice from siblings and members of their extended families suggests that they do avail themselves of more social capital than assumed by school staff (see also Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008).

Parental influence on aspirations

Several pupil participants maintained throughout the project that their parents would support them no matter what they did, and did not influence their aspirations directly:



My dad he says I can do whatever I want to, so he doesn't really mind. He lets me do whatever I want to do.

My mum don't mind what I do. As long as I'm happy.

Mum and dad just say do what I like. They do talk to me about the future a little bit, but they can't tell me anything.

Other research has shown this is common among working class families who tend to be 'hands-off' supportive of aspirations (e.g. Archer et al, 2014). Some reported their parents would support them as long as they choose something 'respectable' or stable':



My parents don't really mind what field I go into, but they want me to have a respectable and well-earned job, so...

I'm the youngest of five, so there's not so much pressure. All they want for me is to just do my best, and just get a job, and just enjoy... All my brothers and sisters have got a degree. But they didn't pressure them to get a degree either. They wanted them to have a job and be stable in life.

Just a respectable job, so I don't need to depend on anyone else.

Partly, as they explain above, this is a question of financial security, however, as Basit (1997) argues in her study of Muslim women, a respectable job may also be one 'which does not jeopardise the safety and reputation of these

young women' (p.428). Other research shows that the working classes tend to be viewed as not 'respectable', so it is important to aspire to it (Skeggs, 1997).

Some participants confronted common stereotypes about Asian parents directly. Despite this, they were also keen to distance themselves from these perspectives, stating that these either did not apply to their own family, or that they challenged them.



That's what Asian families want, they want to you to be a doctor or lawyer, they want you to go into the highest paid jobs...

Is that what your family does?

No, not my family – My parents don't mind what I do.

He wants me to be a doctor, but I said no. He doesn't mind now what I do.

My brothers and my Mum said you shouldn't do Art, because you're not gonna get a job with that. They wanted me to do something, to be like a doctor or a lawyer or something. Basically typical Bengali parents. I didn't listen to them. I'm doing Art.

In her study of British-born Bangladeshi women, Scandone (2018) found examples of women presenting themselves as trend-setting and able to negotiate with their parents. It is worth noting that in this study, some of those who initially challenged their families' aspirations for them had shifted their aspirations by the end of the project. For example, the pupil quoted above who wanted to do Art in the end chose a Health and Social Care BTEC and aspired to become a midwife.

Participants did not aspire to do the same as their parents:



...he talks to me about it, [working in a shop], but I don't want to do that.

Wider discourses which influence aspirations

Gendered, classed and raced narratives of ‘helping others’

By year 12 and 13, the strongest influence on the pupils’ aspirations was that these roles would allow them to ‘help people’. This was the case even with jobs which did not explicitly involve caring or nurturing roles, such as police officer or lawyer.



Ever since 2nd year, I wanted to become a teacher or at least work with children, I’ve always had that aspiration. I’ve got an interest in children, I feel like I could help them.

My sister has four kids. And one of them was born at home, and I was there, and I wanna become a midwife now. I’ve just grown to like kids. And I kind of wanna help them...come out? If that makes sense?

It’s just the simple fact that I’m helping others. I wanna help others. It’s a rewarding job.(nurse)

It’s like giving back to the community as well. And in my religion you get a lot of rewards for it. Religion might play a part in it. In Islam, saving one person is like saving the whole of humanity.

I go to the hospital sometimes to see the paediatrician, and I like what they do, they help little children.

I wanna be a solicitor. I wanna give people advice.

I just don’t wanna do anything else. I don’t wanna sit in an office, like I’m very active and I’d rather be out there... like help people – bonus. (policewoman)

This suggests that these young women were strongly influenced by notions of caring work, work which is traditionally done by working class women, and roles which are assumed to come naturally to women. Other research in this field shows firstly, that caring and nurturing roles are linked to notions of acceptability and respectability for working class women, so such discourses enable these students to aspire to respectable femininity (Skeggs, 1997). Secondly, working class girls are likely to have had to experience caring for elderly and younger family members, and will have learnt to fulfil caring roles in the home, meaning this is a familiar habitus for them (Colley, 2006).

Notions of a good life

Several of the students maintain their educational choices are guided by the aspiration to have a ‘good’ and financially secure life



It’s weird but my cousin, he is proper successful, in his education, he’s got a good job and a nice house. And I want that as well. He works in a bank.

To have my own house. Obviously that means have a good job because I’d need a good income for that!

So if I wanna live in London, I’ll have to get a well-paid job.

These discourses of a good life are reminiscent firstly of the neoliberal ideal of aspiration as fulfilment through material consumption. Secondly, they remind us of the dream of upward mobility and improved social position which is so important to some working class students, and/or those from families who have a history of recent migration.

Conclusion



This project explored Tower Hamlets' working class, minority ethnic females' aspirations, educational transitions and influences on these. A group of eighteen pupils was tracked through an enhanced programme of school-based Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) through five years (2014–19). The pupils were in years 7 and 8 at the beginning of the research, and in years 12 and 13 by the end. The majority of the participants were of Bangladeshi heritage. This research begins to fill a gap in knowledge around the labour market aspirations of young women in Tower Hamlets and what influences their aspirations and educational transitions.

There is a tendency in both policy and practitioner discourses to view the aspirations of Asian females as subservient to their parents, shaped by stereotypically non-western cultural expectations, or too narrow or unrealistic e.g. only considering medicine or law (Scandone, 2019). There is also a tendency to neglect the role of the school, wider discourses beyond the immediate family, and the role of gender, race and class as shaping and guiding aspirations and transitions. In this study, aspirations were instead analysed as an aspect of habitus, understood as individual or collective disposition, which is shaped both by past experiences and also social structures which are raced, classed and gendered. This includes family background as well as the education system itself and the shifting social expectations of working class and minority ethnic females.

The study found that the pupils aspired higher than their parents, and mostly to typically 'respectable' professionals for working class/minority ethnic females, such as teacher, nurse and midwife. The majority of the participants had 'levelled down' their aspirations from professional/managerial to skilled/semi-skilled, or shifted to more feminised aspirations to meet with the expectations of their habitus by the end of the project. They mostly did not aspire to work in the sectors in which Tower Hamlets Council expects to see most growth, nor to the current largest areas of employment in the borough. Despite the high tuition fees for students in England, the participants mostly aspired to go to university, and by the end of the project, were indeed in the process of applying, in the belief that a degree would lead to a good job. Virtually all, although not all, the students in the project wanted to stay geographically close to family when they left school.

Enjoyment of subjects and school trips seemed to guide GCSE choices and participants chose a wide range of subjects. However, the careers input they received from the school generally did not challenge their aspirations or encourage them to explore new options. Indeed it confirmed existing social expectations regarding working class, minority ethnic women's roles in the labour market. Work experience placements were offered in feminised professions and skilled/semi-skilled work. There was some evidence to suggest that careers interviews were guiding some participants towards more feminised professions, and their shifting aspirations reflected this. Visits to universities were not open to all pupils, only to the high achievers, and even then, they were taken only to the most elite universities, which put off some of the research participants from applying. This suggests that the participants were all in the end applying to universities which they were unlikely to have visited. Business and employment mentoring was seen as useful for developing generic skills, however, it does not provide insight into a wide range of different roles, industries or services available in the labour market.

Participants claimed to be highly influenced by older siblings and cousins who had already been to university and entered the labour market to work in professional or skilled roles. These family members offered valued advice. Several participants maintained that their parents were unable to give them useful advice due to their lack of experience with the Higher Education system or current job market. Most claimed that their parents would be supportive of their choices, although some reported that respectability and stability were important to their parents.

Participants seemed to be mostly influenced by two, dominant social discourses. Firstly, a discourse of 'helping others', which meant that by the end of the project, most aspired to feminised roles in which caring and nurturing were assumed to be the most important skills and dispositions. This suggests that they were strongly influenced by notions of respectability for working class women. Caring roles are assumed to come naturally to working class women, so it can be argued that these aspirations enabled the students both to aspire to respectable femininity and to remain within a familiar habitus, as working class girls are likely to have had to experience caring for family members. Secondly, a discourse of a good and financially secure life was a common narrative throughout. This suggests that they were perhaps influenced by neoliberal ideals that define aspiration as personal fulfilment through material consumption. They might also have been influenced by the dream of upward mobility and improved social position so important to some working class students, or those from families who have a history of recent migration.

Recommendations



Schools should be supported to provide:

A

careers lessons to help pupils understand the whole range of roles available to them, as well as develop understanding of the raced, gendered and classed nature of the labour market and of their own aspirations and decisions;

B

information specifically about the local labour market of Tower Hamlets, which is particularly useful for those to whom it is important to stay close to family in the future;

C

opportunities for all pupils to visit different Higher Education Institutions, to ensure they are well-informed about the wide range of universities and the institutional specialisms;

D

inclusion in the school careers programme of visiting alumni, who have experience in navigating university applications and the labour market, and personal experience of potential barriers and opportunities.

References & Borough profile



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Tower Hamlets Borough profile

Population ^{1,2}

- ▶ Tower Hamlets had 308,000 residents as of June 2017 and remains the second most densely population local authority in the UK, after Islington.
- ▶ *It is home to the largest Bangladeshi population in the country, making up 32% of its population. 38% of its residents are Muslim, the highest proportion in the UK.*
- ▶ It has the 4th youngest population in the UK. Almost half of its residents (46%) are aged 20–39.
- ▶ *Tower Hamlets is the 10th most deprived local authority in England, in terms of its average deprivation score.*
- ▶ It has the highest rate of child poverty in the UK: 31% of children live in families below the poverty line, almost double the rate nationally (17%).

1
https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/Research-briefings/Population_2_BP2018.pdf

2
https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/Research-briefings/BP2018_3_Poverty.pdf

3
https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/Research-briefings/BP2018_7_Education_FINAL.pdf

4
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/destinations-of-ks4-and-16-to-18-ks5-students-2018>

Education ³

- ▶ *There are 37,800 pupils recorded in primary and secondary schools in Tower Hamlets. Bangladeshi pupils account for the highest proportion of pupils in the borough (63%).*
- ▶ On average, girls have higher attainment levels in schools in the borough than boys, White pupils have lower attainment levels than Black and Minority Ethnic pupils, pupils whose first language is not English have higher attainment levels than those whose first language is English, and pupils eligible for free school meals have lower levels of attainment than pupils not eligible for free school meals.
- ▶ *40% of its secondary pupils are eligible for and claim free school meals, compared with the London average of 17% and the national average of 13%.*

HE progression ⁴

- ▶ There were 1,757 students in 16–18 study in Tower Hamlets in 2018 (814 male students and 943 female students), of which 76% progressed to Higher Education or training (75% of male students, 78% of female students)
- ▶ *22% progressed to the top third most selective Higher Education Institutions.*



Economy ⁵

▶ Tower Hamlets has the 3rd highest economic output of any local authority area in the UK, next to Westminster and the City of London. In 2015, the borough's economic output was around £29 billion – accounting for 2% of the UK economy.

▶ *The borough has experienced some of the fastest economic growth in the country: economic output increased by 71% in the past ten years, the number of enterprises increased by 55% in the past five years, and the number of workers increased by 49% between 2001 and 2011.*

▶ Employment is dominated by the finance industry. 44% of jobs are concentrated in Canary Wharf and 26% are in the finance and insurance industry, making it the borough's largest employment sector.

▶ *30% of working residents are employed in Tower Hamlets and 14% of workers in Tower Hamlets are borough residents.*

Employment ⁶

▶ The borough's employment rate has risen considerably over the last decade, from 56% during 2005–08 up to 68% in 2014–17, bringing it closer to the rate in Great Britain (74%). Despite these improving trends, inequalities within the labour market persist and certain groups of residents continue to face a higher risk of worklessness than others. These include Black and minority ethnic residents, particularly women, residents with poor proficiency in English, those with no qualifications, disabled residents, and older residents aged 50 and over.

▶ *Employment rates are typically low for young adults, many of whom are students. In Tower Hamlets, less than half of those aged 16–24 were in work during 2014–16. The 2011 Census found that over one third (36%) of residents aged 16–24 were not in work because they were in full-time education.*

▶ Women in Tower Hamlets have a lower employment rate than men (60% vs. 78%). Within the BME population, employment rates are very low for women - just under half (48%) of BME women are in work, compared with 70% of BME men

5

https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/Research-briefings/BP2018_4_Economy.pdf

6

https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/Research-briefings/BP2018_5_Employment.pdf

Author biography



Charlotte Chadderton is professor of education at the School of Education, Bath Spa University, where she teaches sociology of education, and was previously reader in education at the University of East London. She conducts research on education and social justice and the ways in which race, gender and class shape educational experiences. She has a particular interest in improving the support for young people's school-to-work transitions and understanding what influences young people's aspirations. Her book, *Judith Butler, Race and Education*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2018.

She first became involved in careers education for young people while working in Manchester in the early 2000s, where it was apparent that young people's education and work opportunities were largely defined by their social position. Since then she has worked to both better understand, and to challenge, educational disadvantage, and to support others to do the same.

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