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The capacity to aspire to higher education: ‘It’s like making them do a play without a script’

Jessica Bok*

School of Education, University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia

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Aspiration is currently a prominent concept in higher education policy debates. However, reference to this concept is often made in terms of low socio-economic status (SES) students simply lacking aspiration, which schools and universities must work to instill. In contrast to this potentially deficit view, this paper draws on Appadurai’s notion of the ‘capacity to aspire’, which reframes aspiration as a cultural category rather than an individual motivational trait. It discusses the proposition that low SES students *do* have substantive aspirations, but may have less developed capacities to realise them. Bourdieu’s theories of cultural capital, habitus and field provide a supplementary theoretical framework, which draws attention to the complex relationships between socio-cultural background and life-world experiences that inform students’ and families’ dispositions toward school and their capacities to aspire to higher education.

Keywords: Appadurai; aspiration; Bourdieu; disadvantaged schools; equity; higher education; parental attitudes

Introduction

At the current moment, discussions around higher education policy have become increasingly focused on equity issues, including persistently low university participation rates for students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). Australian Government policy (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), produced in response to the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008), proposes that aspiration is an important area to address in order to achieve the desired increase in low-SES participation from the historically low 15%, to 20% by 2020 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 13). This policy will provide funding for outreach programs intended to ‘increase the aspirations of low SES students’ and, ostensibly, to raise their higher education (HE) participation rates as a result (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 14).

This paper explores the aspirations of students from a public primary school serving a community on the urban fringe of an Australian capital city. Middle years students (11 and 12 years of age) were selected as a group of interest in this study. While this cohort has been a significant focus of research in Australia (Carrington, 2006; Luke et al., 2002; Smyth & McInerney, 2007; see also Hattam & Zipin, 2009), the attitudes and aspirations of students at this age have not been much explored by research into HE outreach activity.

*Email: sam.sellar@unisa.edu.au

Recent policy encourages Australian universities to engage in outreach activity with students early in school and there is a need for further research that can constructively inform this work (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009; Gale et al., 2010).

Education systems and policies are a fundamental aspect of the social mechanisms that reproduce unequal access to, and outcomes from, education for students from low SES backgrounds (Bourdieu, 2004; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005); however, this paper is particularly focused on the analysis of social and cultural factors, at the level of the home and classroom, that influence students' future imaginaries. I draw on Appadurai's (2004) theorisation of aspiration as a cultural capacity and Bourdieu's (1984, 1998, 2004) concepts of *cultural capital*, *habitus* and *field* in order to create a complex and non-deficit theoretical framework for this study. Combining these resources enables an exploration of how students from a school in an area categorised as low SES are able to imagine and articulate their aspirations to HE and their broader understandings of the 'good life'.

Appadurai (2004) describes the *capacity to aspire* as the ability to read 'a map of a journey into the future' (p. 76). A map is simply a document covered in unfamiliar symbols and words unless we are supplied with the information and experiences required to read it. As other research has also indicated (Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002; Prosser, McCallum, Milroy, Comber, & Nixon, 2008; Watts & Bridges, 2006), aspirations are complex understandings of the future pathways available to people. Students can access these pathways if they are provided with knowledge and experiences that enable them to make powerful choices (Ball, Maguire, & Macrae, 2000; Sweeney, 2002; Wyn, 2007) or to take risks discovering for themselves what lies ahead. In other words, students' capacity to aspire is influenced by past experiences with reading and successfully following their map of aspirations, in combination with their confidence to explore unmapped possibilities. People from more affluent and powerful groups often have more experience reading such maps and Appadurai (2004) argues that they 'share this knowledge with one another more routinely' (p. 69).

In order for students to develop their capacity to aspire, their families, other people within their local communities and those they encounter in their daily lives must have experience navigating particular fields and pathways. Higher education is a field that may be relatively unfamiliar to students and families from low SES backgrounds. Not only are HE institutions often located at a geographical distance, but the knowledge and information required for achieving entry may also be relatively inaccessible to these students and families. Moreover, many low SES families have not had first-hand experience with HE. In the *Review of Australian Higher Education*, Bradley et al. (2008) argue that:

many students from low socio-economic backgrounds are not aware of the benefits of higher education, and what financial assistance is available to them, particularly if they are the first person in their family to aspire to higher education. (p. 40)

According to Appadurai's (2004) argument, aspirations are relatively evenly held – having particular desires for the future is not exclusive to more affluent and powerful groups. However, the capacity to aspire, which is shaped by social, cultural and economic experiences, and the availability of navigational information, is *not* equally distributed. Exploring the notion of aspiration as a cultural capacity, rather than an individual motivational trait, enables the effects of the unequal distribution of social, cultural and economic capital on the capacity to aspire to be considered.

In this respect, Bourdieu's (2004) notion of cultural capital provides a means for thinking about the relationship between economic and cultural spheres. Bourdieu describes

how economic capital, by enabling certain practices and experiences, can be translated into embodied dispositions and capacities – cultural forms of capital – over time. This process can affect how people are able to negotiate particular social spaces, such as the field of education, in different ways (Sweeney, 2002). According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), cultural capital and class ethos act in concert with other factors to exert ‘the indivisible action of a structural causality on behavior and attitudes and hence on success and elimination’ (p. 87) at school. Rather than trying to ‘isolate the influence of any one factor’ (p. 87), it is the combined effects of a student’s cultural capital, class and other factors that should be examined in order to determine how students are able to navigate the educational field.

Also relevant to this study is Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, which describes internalised social structures and dispositions that are unconsciously developed from a young age (Apple, 2001; Dumais, 2002; Wyn, 2007) and which are unconsciously embodied by people and reproduced through everyday experiences (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 2004; Danaher, Schirato, & Webb, 2002). Certain attitudes and dispositions formed during the process of engaging in social interactions, and through being part of different cultural and social groups, are granted more value at school. This enables those who embody these attitudes and dispositions to more easily inhabit and negotiate the field of education (Bourdieu, 1998; Thomson, 2002; Wyn, 2007).

The structures that constitute habitus not only influence the attitudes and dispositions that students bring with them to school, but also their level of familiarity with and ability to ‘navigate the social space’ once they are there (Moore, 2008, p. 108). In Bourdieu’s terms, students are ‘subjected to forms of violence . . . but they do not perceive it that way; rather, their situation seems to them to be the ‘natural order of things’ (Danaher et al., 2002, p. 25). Symbolic violence is an ongoing process whereby students misrecognise ‘the actual arbitrariness of values in symbolic fields’ (Moore, 2008, p. 108) and accept their subordinate position unknowingly as part of their unconscious response to the structure of the field. In a Bourdieuan sense, the field is the historically, politically and socially defined context in which people as agents are differently positioned to behave in particular ways. These behaviours are a response to the logics of power that maintain the structure of the field that people inhabit (Thomson, 2008a, p. 70).

The notion of an aspirational ‘map’ developed in this paper, particularly when it relates to school and university, can be conceived in ways that resonate with Bourdieu’s concept of field. The social, cultural and economical factors at play in the navigation of the educational field, or map, can strengthen or render more brittle the navigational capacities of different students and their families. For example, previous experience in successfully navigating educational contexts can strengthen students’ capacities to aspire to HE because, according to Appadurai (2004), ‘the capacity to aspire, like any complex cultural capacity, thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture and refutation’ (p. 69). This paper explores students’ aspirations for their post-school lives in these theoretical terms.

School context and research design

The participants in this study were selected from a public primary school, with a population of approximately 160 students, located in an area that is categorised as low SES by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006) and classified as significantly disadvantaged by the relevant State government education department. Four students (see Table 1), their teacher, the school counsellor and their principal participated

Table 1. Contextual information on research participants.^{1,2}

Name	Gender	Year level	Parents' educational background
Student 1	Male	Year 7	Mother completed Year 12; father left school in year 11. Adult admission to Technical and Further Education (TAFE) (both parents).
Student 2	Female	Year 6	Mother completed Year 12; father left school in Year 11. Adult admission to TAFE (both parents).
Student 3	Female	Year 6	Mother left school in Year 11; father left in Year 10. Adult admission to TAFE (mother).
Student 4	Female	Year 7	Mother left school in Year 10. Attended a community education course.

in this study. Students undertook a series of interrelated tasks to generate data about their in- and out-of-school experiences, in an effort to position them as co-researchers and to give them a 'voice' in the project (Thomson, 2008b, p. 4). They completed a short survey with their families, which provided contextual information about their socio-cultural context and experiences (Johnson, 2008) and took photographs of significant locations in their life-worlds, which were used to elicit discussion during semi-structured interviews. The questions that guided the interview discussions with students focused on: their own and their parents' thoughts about their post-school futures, their family's experience with education and family conversations regarding university; and school-based discussions of university and post-school pathways with school staff and peers. The class teacher, school counsellor and school principal were asked about their knowledge of and views on students' post-school aspirations, students' levels of educational attainment and any activities provided at school to support HE aspirations and career pathways. The interviews with students and school staff each lasted 45 minutes.

Aspiring to different visions of the 'good life'

While the school selected for this study is located in a geographic area that is homogeneously categorised as low SES, it quickly became clear that students' attitudes and dispositions toward education are *heterogeneous* and their preferred futures are generally *optimistic and hopeful*. When discussing their families, home life and their futures, the students each described their own particular visions of the 'good life'. For these students, goods and services, such as televisions, computers and the Internet are 'normal components of an average lifestyle' (Thomson, 2002, p. 31). Along with places that provide the backdrop to daily life in much of suburban Australia, these goods and others such as sporting equipment featured predominantly in the students' photographs.

Heterogenous visions of the good life were also evident in the survey responses provided by students and their families. All parents cited a general preference for their children to 'succeed in life' and to find happiness in whatever form that might take for them in the future. The following student responses to the question of 'What would your parents like you to do when you are older?' provide examples of what Ball and Vincent (1998) describe as the 'amorphous, though strongly expressed, desire' of low SES parents for their children's 'general well-being and security' (p. 381):

My mum doesn't mind [what I do] as long as I work. She believes it is important to work to learn values and be independent but what I do is my choice and my parents will both support

me. They think I'm quite intelligent and I will figure it out as to what I would like to be. They both think probably something to do with the sporting industry. (Survey response, Student 1)

Mum and dad both agreed that they don't mind what I do when I am older as long as I'm happy. They also said they hope I use my gifts and talents to their full potential. (Survey response, Student 2)

I don't really have a plan for [Student 4], but whatever makes her happy will make me happy. (Survey response, Parent)

When students were asked during interviews to elaborate on what the 'good life' means for them, there were differences in the level of detail they provided about their imagined futures and what is required to reach them. For example, Student 2 refers directly to the importance of education for ensuring a 'good job' for herself in the future:

I like school. And I know that I have to go to school to get a good job. I know that from my parents. Well, both my parents care about me going to school. . . . They both think really highly of it and they both think I should go. But they've said they're not going to make me go, but they think I should go.

Student 2 describes how her parents' views on education influence her attitude to school and she provides an example of how 'parental expectation' can affect students' aspirations (Ball et al., 2002). In a survey response Student 3 describes a more ambivalent perception of her parents' expectations:

My mum wants me to stick with school and my dad wants me to leave home.

While Student 3 expands on this discussion in her interview, the expectations for her to continue her education beyond the compulsory years appear less defined. This may reflect qualitative differences between the conversations about education that Student 3 has with her family and the conversations in Student 2's family. Interview data collected from Student 3 provides further evidence for this interpretation:

Interviewer: What do [your parents] want you to have for your future?

Student 3: A good life.

Interviewer: How do they talk to you about how you could have this . . . good life? And what is a good life?

Student 3: Well . . . to me, a good life is like, um . . . having a great job. Having like, if you want a family, having a family. Not going to gaol, not doing drugs, not drinking a lot, and stuff like that. Um . . . Like not being rich but not being poor, or like average and stuff. . . . And not like . . . umm . . . doing stupid stuff, and all of that, going to gaol and all of that stuff.

In comparison to Student 2, Student 3 describes ideas about her future that are less related to educational issues. Although she mentions having a 'great job', she also identifies other factors that either enable or disable the 'good life' and that largely involve the avoidance of certain behaviours rather than the active pursuit of specific educational or vocational goals.

While some variation is evident between Student 2 and Student 3's descriptions of the good life, they each articulate their preferred futures in quite general terms. Appadurai (2004) argues that aspirations for the good life exist in all societies and are held by people from all cultural and economic backgrounds. However, the generic descriptions provided by these students and their families support his argument that people located in less

powerful social positions are often less able to narrate the relationships between ‘specific goods and outcomes, often material and proximate’ and the ‘pathways through which bundles of goods and services are actually tied to wider social scenes and contexts, and to still more abstract norms and beliefs’ (p. 68). This ability ‘to cultivate an explicit understanding of the links between specific wants or goals and more inclusive scenarios, contexts and norms’ is the central characteristic of a strong capacity to aspire (p. 83).

Educational pathways and imagined futures

When considering possible futures available to them, students in this study recognised, at least to some degree, their capacity to choose from a variety of potential career pathways. While these students described aspirations that required post-school education, the school principal also discussed other students who have an apparent lack of aspiration – students who ‘don’t care about missing out on learning’. The principal explained how, in conversation with these students, she is sometimes told that they have made up their minds about their future schooling:

[Students provide me with] informal information where they’ll say things like, ‘I’m not going to do that anyway’, ‘I’m only going to go to high school for two more years then I’m getting a job’.

The classroom teacher also described encountering similar attitudes regarding some students’ aspirations for post-school education:

Some kids are pretty clear about ‘Nah. I don’t want to go do further study. That’s not who I am’. And it’s probably not who they are at that particular time. Who’s to say in ten years time, they don’t make a decision to go back and you know, do something different with their lives?

Here, the teacher makes an important point about educational and vocational pathways. It has been a long-standing choice for many students in low SES contexts to leave school early and to join the workforce (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1985). For example, the educational trajectory described by the parent of Student 4 (see below) involved leaving school early, before returning to community college later to study art and children’s literature. Of course, students’ belief that they do not need to pursue senior secondary and post-school qualifications could be due to the perceived distance between their immediate lives and their future. While students may leave school early, later in life they may recognise both implicit and pragmatic worth in pursuing further study. The question of whether leaving school early means students have no aspirations for HE, or reflects their lack of awareness of the utility of HE, requires further exploration.

When asked to discuss their imagined futures beyond secondary school, students described their aspirations in quite formative ways. For example, Student 2 provided a general explanation for her current thinking about her future:

I’d like to be a nurse or doctor, because I’d like to help people. I’ve also like said to my parents and other people . . . I’ve given them kind of a list of what I want to do . . . and then that, most of the people have said, um . . . nurse or doctor would be the best thing to do.

Here, Student 2 indicates how she has received advice concerning appropriate career choices. Student 1 also demonstrated a formative sense of his post-school ambitions. He is committed to a career in football, but in an effort to be ‘realistic’ about these aspirations he also suggests several alternative sport-related pathways:

Maybe go to uni, depending what happens with footy. Like maybe play footy and do some . . . other learning. I'll maybe go to teachers' college or something, coz I might wanna be a PE teacher. Or get . . . I don't know. I've just heard that you can get employed by the club and you go out to schools and stuff and you do clinics.

Student 4 discussed her aspirations in emergent ways as well, pausing and repeating a cautious 'I think' as she articulated her desire to become a writer:

Well I was thinking . . . university . . . I think. A writing course, or something. . . . I just write about sad stories and stuff, but yeah . . . I'm good at poetry too.

Student 4 appears unsure about what is required to be a 'writer', and her further references to journalism as doing a writing course 'or something' and 'join[ing] one of those magazine things' to 'write articles and stuff' are quite vaguely defined. Further, Student 3 listed a variety of careers as options, including hairdresser, police officer or teacher:

Well, I wanna be a hairdresser, coz I love playing with people's hair. I love like cutting it. I love like putting my hair up and stuff. Police officer . . . I'm not sure why. . . . And I wanna be teacher. I don't really know. I like hanging out with kids and stuff. I like looking after kids.

Although she explains that she has thought about her aspirations, their diversity combined with the reasons she provides suggest that she is unsure about her future and has not translated her broad ideas into more concrete preferences at this stage.

While each of the students described aspirations for the future, these were often expressed as general preferences. Further, the degree to which they were articulated with concrete educational and career pathways varied, but was generally quite minimal. This could be the result of both the students' age and their capacity to discuss these issues based on their and their families' level of experience with post-school education.

Resourcing the good life in 'rustbelt' communities

The school selected for this study is located in an area that Thomson (2002) describes as the 'rustbelt': a post-industrial area situated in the outer suburban fringe, which has been adversely affected by the closure of factories and small businesses, resulting in relatively high unemployment and concomitant social disadvantage. However, social and educational disadvantage is not homogenous across this region. According to Thomson, 'family unemployment/underemployment/tenuous employment varies throughout the rustbelt. It plays out in particular schools in a range of ways' (p. 74). Yet, the levels of financial resourcing available to the families and schools in these areas *do* contrast with those available to the more affluent 'leafy-green' communities located near the city.

This contrast is evident at the level of school infrastructure. For example, the appearance of the school's adventure playground (see Figure 1) concerned Student 2:

Student 2: It's rusted. And there's lot's of graffiti on it. It kind of makes the school look bad I think. And it makes me feel weird when I know that the school looks so bad with graffiti.

Interviewer: How do you mean 'weird'?

Student 2: Umm . . . Not really ashamed, but something along the lines of that.



Figure 1. Local adventure playground.

Student 2's comments signal concern that the rusted and graffitied playground, surrounded by overgrown weeds, presents a negative image of the school and community. It may also reflect her awareness that other more elite schools can provide their students with more highly maintained and 'modern' resources (Student 2). However, with limited funding to draw on, this school must make hard decisions about the areas to which resources are committed. The state of the playground may reflect one effect of such hard decisions.

Students also described playing sport, both informally and in organised teams, as being a significant part of life in this place. Student 1 is a devoted football player, but is conscious of the potential safety issues associated with playing at his local park near other young people (ferals) who harass him:

I go there all the time, really. I like going there, but . . . sometimes there's like ferals around. And like they always try to like start on ya. Coz the skate park's just over there, so they always like bag [criticise] you and stuff.

However, when asked about the possibility of playing football in more formal contexts at school, he explained:

I wanted to have a school team this year, we've got some good footballers . . . but we couldn't, we didn't have a coach. Oh well. It's how it goes sometimes, I guess.

While stoically shrugging off this problem as something beyond his control, the lack of resources to support after-school sport is a factor that impacts on Student 1's capacity to pursue his aspiration to become a footballer. Arguably, schools with greater funding would not have the same difficulty resourcing a coach for the football team.

Navigating aspirational maps successfully requires a range of resources. Here students describe how relatively low levels of access to economic resources in this ‘rustbelt’ region can impact on the pursuit of aspirations. This is evident in the students’ discussion of how a combination of lack of funding and issues of community safety may inhibit their engagement in certain activities. A strong capacity to aspire requires funding that can support people to establish rich stocks of experiences and experiments that that can support their negotiation of aspirational maps.

Parental strategies in relation to education

While these students have relatively formative preferences for the future, they appear to be developing their sense of identity and beginning to think about the future in terms of their current skills and interests. There is also evidence that their family’s interest in and support for their education and future may strengthen their capacity to aspire.

Unlike elite groups, whose aspirations for HE may be conditioned by multi-generational university experience (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), low SES students must often actively seek beyond their families and local communities for information about HE. Parents’ capacities to make powerful decisions in support of their child rely heavily on their access to ‘grapevine knowledge’ that ‘is socially embedded in networks and localities and is distributed unevenly across and used differently by different social-class groups’ (Ball & Vincent, 1998, p. 377). This section explores the information networks available to the families in this study, which inform their understanding of educational pathways. It provides an analysis of parents’ strategic use of and access to ‘hot’ information that is elicited through family experience or knowledge from their social networks, and the ‘cold’ information that students and their families receive from schools regarding further education pathways (Ball & Vincent, 1998). Ball and Vincent explain that ‘hot’ knowledge is ‘based on affective responses or direct experience’ with subjective significance, whereas ‘cold’ knowledge is ‘official knowledge . . . normally constructed specifically for public dissemination’ (p. 380) in abstract and more ‘objective’ forms. Access to both forms of knowledge can affect parents’ understanding of, and capacity to help their child to navigate, the field of education.

Research suggests that socio-economic status is correlated with levels of parental education attainment (Centre for the Study of Higher Education, 2008; James, 2002) and ‘hot’ knowledge can be obtained through experience with educational institutions. None of the parents in this study have attended university and those that have enrolled in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) or community education courses as adults left school for some time before returning to study. In a survey response Student 1 describes his family’s educational experience:

My mum did year 12 and she was 18 when she left school, and my dad was 17 and did year 11.

All of the other parents left school in Year 10. In a survey response the mother of Student 4 provides an account of her reason for not completing secondary school:

At age fifteen I made the decision to leave school and conquer the world. However plans change and I decided to go back to school when [Student 4] was six to study children’s writing and an art course.

This parent’s optimistic decision to leave school early, and its contrast with her later decision to return to study, provides an example of changing life situations. Access to

information about the value of educational credentials for obtaining employment and social mobility may affect students' decision-making in relation to education pathways. While parents' level of HE experience, and the 'hot' knowledge obtained via this experience, can inform students' knowledge about HE, it can also affect their capacity to navigate alternate pathways.

'Common sense' deficit constructions of low SES families often position students as not receiving adequate parental support. However, the descriptions provided by students and families in this study suggest a more complex non-deficit picture. These parents are eager to assist with their child's education in any way they can; however, having *less familiarity* with education institutions may limit their capacity to help their child successfully negotiate school and university pathways. At times, this limitation may be expressed as frustration. The school counsellor provided a vivid account of his experience with parents expressing such frustrations, which is worth quoting at length:

There's sometimes an interesting perception about parents out in the north about that they don't actually care about what it is they want for their kids. I'd say that *every family here really wants their kid to succeed*, and are just looking out for their best interests. They might not necessarily know what that looks like, or what that possibly could mean. But they absolutely want it for their kids. For families that are trapped in cycles of poverty or disadvantage, they don't want that for their kids. And they're looking at how [that] can be different for their children. They might not always express it in those terms. Sometimes they're just used to language that is available to them. But, when you actually talk to them and sit down and take the time to listen, that what they're actually saying is that there's something wrong. That they don't like what's going on. Or that they are frustrated, or they don't know the next step to support their child. Just like you would [see] in any different class-type of school environment. It's just that the language of school and the language of home in that situation is the same, so the message is a lot easier to communicate between the parents and the school. Whereas here, sometimes you have to go past the screaming to understand what's actually happening for them.

Here the school counsellor's argument echoes Thomson's (2002) emphasis on the importance of 'holding off moral judgments about character and focusing instead on the behaviours and how they are produced' (p. 58). He looks beyond the surface of parents' expressed frustrations with school to consider how parents' educational and cultural experiences may result in them being unable to voice their concerns in a way that is appreciatively understood by schools and education systems. The 'screaming' he describes may be a means for parents to have voice in their child's education, even when they are feeling disempowered. For many students and families in these contexts, the lack of information about, and experience with, education institutions and difficulties voicing their opinions in a manner comprehensible to the school, may both frustrate their aspirations for their child while being expressed simply as frustration with school.

In contrast to such frustration, Student 2's narrative demonstrates how her family habitus may be more aligned with the dominant culture of schooling and how this may result in very different kinds of relationships with education, both formal and informal. She describes how her family's dispositions toward education have affected her extra-curricular activities and the kind of secondary school that she plans to attend. For example, from an early age her mother encouraged her to play the piano (Figure 2):

I've been practising [the piano] . . . I've been learning since I was like five. . . . Um, I'm currently learning the song 'Entertainer'? . . . I've got a concert coming up this Christmas. I practice



Figure 2. Student 2's family piano.

most days. Whenever I can I practice . . . for fifteen minutes, half an hour. Until I think I've learned enough for that day, I guess.

Private music tuition potentially reflects familial recognition of 'opportunities for improvisation or "tactics"' that have enabled them to 'act in ways to transform' the culture of the family (Mills, 2008, p. 106). Student 2 is also enrolled to take up a place in a private single-sex secondary school situated closer to the city. According to González (2005), this experience may be indicative of the 'interculturality of households, [which involves] drawing on multiple cultural systems and using these systems as strategic resources' (p. 43). From this perspective, her family may be drawing on the dominant 'cultural system' of schooling as a means to strategise in relation to education. When asked why her family had decided on a private education, Student 2 explained that her mother considered it a 'good school', based on her own attendance there as a student. To enrol, Student 2 sat an interview that she prepared for with her mother:

- Student 2: We had an interview . . . and I just talked about kind of my interests and what I do. And . . . I took in a folder with all my report cards and my piano certificates . . . umm, and my achievements, I guess.
- Interviewer: And what sort of achievements have you got?
- Student 2: Umm . . . like my piano. I'd sit piano exams and I got really high scores in them . . . umm . . . other achievements, certificates . . . like school certificates. I took in my report cards.

The ability to play the piano can be considered a form of cultural 'distinction' that has been cultivated in the family of Student 2 (Bourdieu, 1984). Her early enrolment in the private single-sex secondary school indicates that her family appears to be investing their cultural capital, derived in part from her mother's education in a more elite setting.

The capacity to understand and effectively ‘overcome the obstacles that are typical for those in their class position’ (Dumais, 2002, p. 47) shows the power of the ‘hot’ information networks available to Student 2. The knowledge acquired from her mother’s own experience navigating a similar pathway may have strengthened this student’s capacity to aspire.

This inter-generational nature of aspiration formation was also evident in Student 1’s discussion of his desire to become a professional footballer, just as his father had desired at a similar age. For Student 1, this aspiration to play football professionally can be understood to have been passed on through the ‘family script’ (Ball et al., 2002). He explained:

Dad played footy. He was going to play AFL. He got picked up by [an AFL team], I think. And he got his neck broken. But he’s alright now. So he couldn’t play. So he lost his career. I’ve got scouts looking at me every week. I got this certificate. It’s like, what the program is called . . . ‘Youth Academy Centre for Excellence’. So they want me to go there and play under sixteen’s football when I’m fourteen. Go to the state championships. I’d like to play footy when I’m older. That’s my biggest dream. But anything, as long as I’m working. But I gotta be happy and don’t get a job coz that like ‘that’s all I can get’, coz I want to do the best I can.

Student 1 is clear about the kinds of strategies required to navigate towards this ‘dream’. With his father’s keen interest and previous experience as support, this student has spent time actively seeking information about entry into a prestigious school for gifted footballers and realises that having access to scouts is the means for furthering his aspirations. However, he also recognises the necessity of having alternative options:

It’d be nice to play AFL but you’ve always got to have another . . . you gotta have a back-up plan . . . I don’t know . . . I’d like to be like, work in medicine, or something . . . interesting. Yeah, go to uni . . . AIS, Australian Institute of Sport. Would be a coach or something.

This comment indicates the potentially significant influence of his father’s experience – an injury that cut short his career – on the development of Student 1’s aspirational map. The inscription of footballing experience in the ‘transgenerational family scripts or “inheritance codes”’ (Ball et al., 2002, p. 57) has potentially contributed to Student 1 developing an attitude of informed wariness about the risks involved in sporting aspirations and grasping the importance of having alternative pathways or ‘back-up plans’. This parental experience has informed Student 1’s aspirational horizon and provided a resource that has potentially strengthened his capacity to aspire.

As the school counsellor suggested, all families strive to provide a ‘better life’ for their child regardless of their socio-economic position; however, differences in family habitus can result in this desire being played out as relatively powerful negotiations of the education field or as frustrations with school. The access to forms of ‘hot’ knowledge described by Student 1 and Student 2 may strengthen their aspirational capacity in ways that ‘cold’ knowledge cannot (Ball & Vincent, 1998). The absence of ‘cold’ knowledge in students’ accounts may reflect their lack of experience with more formal university and career information at this relatively early stage in their schooling.

Conclusion

While three of the students in this study aspire to futures that will likely require HE – ‘high’ aspirations in the simplistic terms of recent HE policy – their teacher raised the

question of whether her students have the necessary levels of academic achievement to support their access to university. The teacher describes the hard choices that this situation requires her to make:

. . . it's kind of disheartening when they say to you 'I want to be a lawyer' and you are marking a piece of writing where you just think 'you know you've actually got a great personality for this, but you're not going to cut it. It's not going to happen for you'. So then I don't say 'You're not going to be a lawyer because your school marks are [not good]' . . . so . . . 'That's, that's really commendable. What happens if you can't be that?' Then they'll go 'I don't know', so then I'll have discussions with them about other . . . 'You know you can still work within law, but here are other ways you can do it'. So when they talk about aspirations. . . . And it's judgmental. I know it's judgmental, but I kind of feel bad for saying 'Yeah, you go for it!', you know, when you know that's not going to happen for them. So I like to start conversations with 'If you want to work with law because you like talking and debating, here are some other options that you can take'.

Here, the teacher describes the difficulty she experiences when working to scaffold her students into academic performances for which they do not yet have the requisite academic capacities. While the teacher is describing the 'high' aspirations of some students, she also acknowledges that students' levels of achievement may constitute a barrier to reaching them. In response to the academic challenges she foresees her students encountering later in school, she describes engaging in a 'mediation' of their aspirations toward more 'realistic' ambitions. She acknowledges the ethical tensions of negotiating between the dual risks of proffering naive support for 'high aspirations', which may be 'unrealistic' for achievement reasons, and helping her students aim for an occupation in their desired field that requires more 'realistic' levels of achievement. While effectively 'lowering' students' aspirations, this teacher sees reason to develop more achievable outcomes, which may constitute a first step toward the original goal. But there is no simple resolution to this difficult negotiation. Providing students with knowledge of alternate pathways could enable them to achieve their aspirations, by providing entry points into a particular field, but it could also subtly contribute to more deficit, 'realistic' assessments of low SES students' academic capacities and potentials.

As te Riele (2004) explains, 'young people are vulnerable to the decisions of adults – parents and teachers as well as government agencies and employers – over which they have little control' (p. 246). With the potential strength of her influence on students' aspirations in mind, it is important to note that this teacher is a strong advocate for her students and community and well-respected for her teaching skills. Her concern is with the tensions that must be negotiated when helping students to compete with more privileged peers, whose cultural capital provides them with a head-start and ongoing advantage in a field structured toward their success. The teacher explains:

You're under this constant pressure to get kids to perform, but them not having the basic knowledge and skills to do the performance. *It's like making them do a play without a script.* It's really difficult.

The teacher refers to the capacity for her students to aspire as an ability to perform in a play *without a script*, which is essential to help guide their actions, dialogue and the nature of the performance. Appadurai's (2004) notion of the navigating aspirational maps can be understood analogously with the performance of a play. A map or a script provide the actor with direction that can help them produce the desired outcome. From this perspective, the capacity of low SES students to navigate their aspirations may be like performing

a play with no rehearsal – experiments and experiences – to prepare them and a minimal script that requires much improvisation. The capacity to improvise a script that is suitable for the context and the desired outcome of the play is influenced by students' access to 'hot' knowledge. Where such information can be obtained through family and local networks, it may provide useful cues for improvisation. Extending this analogy, Bourdieu's (1986, 1998, 2004) concept of field can be understood as a stage on which students as actors are required to perform. The success of the performance will depend on the actors producing certain actions, movements and enunciations that are, in a certain sense, part of a pre-determined script and set of 'stage directions' that are more readily available to higher SES students. Without such a script, and with less experience rehearsing the act, the capacity of students from low SES backgrounds to intuit their correct moves for the performance is hampered and the play becomes more difficult to perform.

This study found that transgenerational experiences, access to information networks beyond the local community and academic achievement supported at school are important factors that contribute to students' knowledge of and capacity to navigate educational pathways toward desired futures. While the school site selected for this case study was located in a suburb categorised as low SES, it is evident that *homogenous* notions of populations and place do not provide sufficiently nuanced descriptions of the aspirations, achievement levels and capacities of students and families in these areas. The findings of this study suggest a more complex theorisation of aspiration – beyond simplistic 'high' versus 'low' dichotomies – by exploring the notion that all people aspire, although socio-economic and cultural factors enable some to more powerfully pursue their aspirations than others (Appadurai, 2004).

The discourse of aspiration raising has recently gained prominence in Australian and UK higher education policy, reflecting the concomitant rise of neoliberal 'aspirational politics' with its emphasis on individual responsibility and entrepreneurialism (Raco, 2009). However, the policy rhetoric of 'raising aspirations' is inadequate for describing the needs of students in disadvantaged contexts and these findings contribute toward unsettling a discourse that is offensive in its suggestion that students attending schools categorised as low SES 'lack' adequate desires for their future (Valencia, 1997). Further, this study provides evidence in support of calls for more nuanced approaches to outreach work (Bradley et al., 2008). As indicated by recent research into Australian university outreach activities (Gale et al., 2010) and reflected in recent Australian Government policy positions, these approaches require that institutions across multiple education sectors work in partnership with each other and disadvantaged communities to provide the resources needed for young people to achieve their tertiary aspirations. The students participating in this study *do not lack such aspirations*; rather, they have levels of access to 'scripts' – comprising economic, social and cultural resources – that make it relatively difficult for them to produce the performances required to realise them.

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Notes

1. Table contains data obtained from family surveys.
2. In Australia, Technical and Further Education institutions provide vocational education and training. Year 12 is the final year of secondary school in South Australia.

Notes on contributor

Jessica Bok recently completed her Bachelor of Education (with Honours) at the University of South Australia. She is currently teaching in Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) schools in Adelaide, Australia.

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