

“Isn’t an aspiration like a personal journey, in which you challenge yourself?”

Aspirations, literacy and gender: Insight from young people and adults

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Introduction

Aspirations in the educational context have been a topic of interest for researchers, practitioners and policy makers for many decades. This is not surprising as aspirations function as motivators¹ and young people who develop ambitious but achievable aspirations are more likely to achieve positive outcomes². Some evidence does indeed suggest that young people’s aspirations influence their educational attainment³.

However, the relationships between aspirations and attainment are likely to be complex and not necessarily causal. For example, outcomes such as attainment may be more strongly influenced by opportunities than aspirations⁴, potentially suggesting that access to greater opportunities is more crucial for higher educational attainment than aspirations or motivation. Similarly, aspirations may help students to improve their attainment but are likely to be much more influential when combined with expectations, that is, an assessment of a likelihood of them becoming reality⁵.

¹ Sherwood, R. A. (1989). A conceptual framework for the study of aspirations. *Research in Rural Education*, 6(2), 61-66. Retrieved from http://jrre.vmhost.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/6-2_9.pdf

² Cabinet Office Social Exclusion Task Force. (2008). Aspiration and attainment amongst young people in deprived communities: A analysis and discussion paper. Retrieved from https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8547/7/aspirations_evidence_pack_Redacted.pdf

³ Ibid

⁴ St Clair, R. & Benjamin, A. (2011). Performing desires: The dilemma of aspirations and educational attainment. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37(3), 501-517. doi: 10.1080/01411926.2010.481358

⁵ Khattab, N. (2015). Students’ aspirations, expectations and school achievement: what really matters? *British Educational Research Journal*, 41(5), 731-748. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3171>

Much of the research in the field has focused on conceptualising aspirations as education and career related, and less is known about young people’s aspirations in a more holistic way as their goals in life in general. Moreover, fewer studies have focused on the dynamics of aspirations and the specific aspects of children and young people’s education that have the potential of supporting children and young people to realise and achieve their aspirations, such as literacy. Yet, some evidence suggests that aspirations differ based on literacy skills⁶, as those with low skills as adults were more likely to have career aspirations in the service industry, assembly line, maintenance or transport sectors as teenagers, indicating a potential link between literacy and aspirations.

Aspirations and related concepts, such as stereotypes and confidence, are particularly relevant considerations when it comes to certain groups of young people, such as girls. It has been widely documented how stereotypes and assumptions about careers impact on girls from as young as age seven⁷. Some sources have also indicated that a lack of confidence might be the reason holding women back in their aspirations. For example, a survey conducted with women aged 16 to 25 in Wales found that 1 in 8 (13%) feel that a lack of confidence is a barrier to them achieving their career aspirations⁸.

This report

This report aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of aspirations by focusing on aspirations more widely, beyond career or educational aspirations, and exploring the link between aspirations and literacy for young people as well as adults. We will use information from a survey of 2,317 young people⁹ from 13 schools in England, 11 focus groups in five schools, and a poll of 2,000 adults to investigate how young people and adults define aspirations, what their aspirations are, what influences them, what the perceived barriers for achieving them are and how these change over time, as well as how they see the role of literacy in achieving aspirations.

To address the link between aspirations and gender, the second part of this report focuses on girls and women in particular and discusses how they differ from boys and men in terms of their aspirations and perceived role of literacy in achieving them. Ultimately, we hope that these findings will help schools, communities and wider society support young people – girls in particular – to develop achievable aspirations in both professional and personal senses and realise their full potential.

⁶ Parsons, S. & Bynner, J. (2007). Illuminating disadvantage: Profiling the experiences of adults with Entry level literacy or numeracy over the lifecourse. Retrieved from http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/21971/1/doc_3912.pdf

⁷ Chambers, N., Kashefpakdel, E. T., Rehill, J., & Percy, C. (2018). Drawing the future: exploring the career aspirations of primary school children from around the world. Retrieved from <https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/DrawingTheFuture.pdf>

⁸ Chwarae Teg. (2018). Young Women’s Career Aspirations. Retrieved from <https://www.cteg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Bright-2018-Young-Womens-Career-Aspirations-Summary.pdf>

⁹ 49.6% of the participants identified as girls and 46.7% as boys. 3.7% identified as other or did not want to give their gender. 85.4% of participants were aged 11 to 14, 12.9% aged 14 to 15 and 1.6% aged 16 to 17. 21.9% of the participants say they receive free school meals, a proxy for socioeconomic status.

Key findings

What do young people and adults aspire to be?

- Nearly all young people have career- and education-focused aspirations and these are often combined with personal aspirations, such as having money, owning a house, having a family, having pets and achieving goals in sports and hobbies. This indicates that we need to focus on young people's aspirations more broadly than just their careers and education.
- Compared with young people, adults' aspirations are less focused on careers and more focused on personal goals such as being happy or successful.

What influences aspirations?

- Young people's responses from our survey and at the focus groups indicate that parents and family are important influences on aspirations. This corroborates previous research that has shown the importance of parents.
- Most commonly, young people have their aspirations because they want to earn good money in the future (70.5%), because it's something they are good at (50.0%) and because they want to help other people (49.3%).
- Family is also an important influence for adults' aspirations (51.2%). Other common factors influencing the aspirations of adults include their interests (43.6%), financial reasons (33.5%) and their abilities (30.3%). These influences reflect wanting to earn good money and doing something they are good at as reasons for the aspirations young people gave.

Do young people and adults feel they can achieve their aspirations?

- Nearly 3 in 5 (57.0%) young people believe they will achieve their aspirations, while nearly 2 in 5 (38.3%) were not sure. Most commonly, young people feel they need good grades (74.8%), confidence (73.4%) and a positive mindset (72.0%) to achieve their aspirations. In addition, nearly 2 in 3 (63.9%) young people feel they need good speaking and listening skills to achieve their aspirations. This indicates that they see the importance of literacy skills for achieving their goals.
- 1 in 20 (4.7%) young people feel they won't achieve their aspirations. Often this is due to low self-perception, such as thinking they are not smart enough or good enough to achieve their goals.
- Slightly more adults than young people believe they will achieve their aspirations (61.3%). Interestingly, however, nearly twice as many adults as young people believe they will not achieve their aspirations (8.3% vs. 4.7%). The reasons given by adults as to why they think they might not achieve their aspirations are mostly financial, such as not having enough money to achieve them.

Barriers for achieving aspirations

- Confidence (48.2%), other people's negative attitudes (40.8%) and lack of opportunities to gain experiences they need (29.3%) are the most commonly perceived barriers for achieving aspirations by young people.
- The most commonly perceived barriers for achieving aspirations by adults are money (46.9%), confidence (41.1%) and a lack of motivation (31.0%).
- Confidence being one of the commonly perceived barriers by both young people and adults might indicate that it is formed as a barrier in adolescence and continues into adulthood.

Literacy and aspirations

- Young people generally see the benefit of literacy for their aspirations as 90.8% of them feel that good literacy skills will help them to achieve their aspirations. At the same time, fewer feel that people with good literacy skills are more likely to achieve their dream career (40.5%) or goals in their personal life (39.1%). Moreover, a third (32.3%) of young people think that other skills they learn at school are more important than literacy skills for achieving their aspirations.
- Similarly, most adults (78.5%) agree that having good overall literacy skills are important for achieving aspirations. Most also agree that people with good literacy skills are more likely to achieve their career aspirations (76.7%) and aspirations in their personal life (69.4%). This might indicate that understanding the importance of literacy for achieving aspirations potentially increases with age.
- Young people see the benefit of good speaking and listening skills in particular for achieving aspirations as 2 in 3 (65.9%) feel that good speaking and listening skills will give them the confidence to pursue the things they want to do in the future. Similarly, 4 in 5 (83.2%) adults agree that good speaking and listening skills give people the confidence to pursue their aspirations. These findings might indicate that the value people see in literacy skills for aspirations lies particularly in speaking and listening to support people's confidence.

Aspirations and gender

Gender differences in aspirations have been widely documented. While girls have been found to have ambitious aspirations and good educational performance, these do not necessarily lead to higher career and financial outcomes for women. Possible reasons for this include gender-role stereotypes, women's generally lower levels of confidence in their own abilities, perceptions of sexism¹⁰, and women's earlier age of entry into parenthood¹¹.

¹⁰ Gutman, L., & Akerman, R. (2008). Determinants of aspirations (Wider Benefits of Learning Research Report No.27). Retrieved from <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1541614/1/Gutman2008Determinants.pdf>

¹¹ Schoon, I., Martin, P., & Ross, A. (2007). Career transitions in times of social change: His and her story. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 70(1), 78-96. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2006.04.009>

- Perceptions of inequality in the workplace might be a barrier for women in particular. Our survey shows that only 2 in 5 (39.9%) girls feel that women are treated equally in the workplace compared with half (53.5%) of boys, indicating that a large percentage of young women already expect not to be treated equally to men in the workplace. This gets worse in adulthood as even fewer women believe this to be true (29.8% vs. 47.6%).

Gender differences in influences of aspirations

- Our survey shows gender differences in what influences aspirations. Girls are more likely to list doing something good for the world (50.3% vs. 39.6%) and helping people (58.3% vs. 40.5%) as the main reasons for their aspirations, while boys are more likely to say wanting to earn money (73.6% vs. 68.4%) and doing what they are good at (53.5% vs. 46.8%) as the main reasons. These findings might explain some of the gender stereotypical career aspirations established in previous research, such as why girls are more likely to end up in caring and nurturing jobs.
- Data from adults show that more adult women than men say their family has influenced their aspirations (53.8% vs. 48.5%), potentially because of the traditional gender roles of women as mothers and homemakers.

Gender differences in perceived barriers for achieving aspirations

- Gender differences in perceived barriers in aspirations show that on average girls and women perceive more barriers for their aspirations than boys and men. Girls are more likely than boys to perceive other people's negative attitudes (46.0% vs. 36.0%), a lack of opportunities to gain experiences they need (31.7% vs. 27.3%), peer pressure (28.5% vs. 23.8%), mental wellbeing (24.3% vs. 16.8%) and their gender (12.4% vs. 6.4%) as barriers. Adult women are also more likely than men to see lack of opportunities to gain the experience needed (24.7% vs. 20.4%) and mental wellbeing (25.2% vs. 17.6%) as barriers for achieving aspirations. In addition, adult women are more likely than men to perceive money as a barrier (50.8% vs. 42.9%).
- Confidence in particular emerges as a barrier for girls and women. While half (55.5%) of the girls see confidence as a barrier for their aspirations, 2 in 5 (41.7%) boys think confidence is a barrier. Similarly with adults, nearly half (46.6%) of women think of confidence as a barrier for aspirations compared with just over third (35.4%) of men. This indicates that supporting girls and women to realise their full potential might require approaches aimed to support their confidence.
- Findings of the adult poll also show that more women than men agree that it's easier for men than women to achieve their aspirations (47.8% vs. 40.4%), suggesting that the perceived gender inequality might be a barrier for women.

Gender differences in what young people need to achieve their aspirations

- Gender differences in what young people think they need to achieve their aspirations reflect the gender differences in perceived barriers in aspirations. For example, more girls than boys feel they need confidence to achieve their aspirations (78.0% vs. 70.3%). However, the largest gap between girls and boys is speaking and listening skills (70.2% vs. 59.3%). This might indicate that girls in particular see the value of literacy skills in achieving their aspirations and these could be utilised as a way for girls to fight the perceived inequalities when working towards achieving their goals.

Gender differences in the perceived role of literacy in achieving aspirations

- Indeed, we also saw that girls are more likely than boys to say that good literacy skills will help them achieve their aspirations (94.5% vs. 88.1%). This is particularly true for speaking and listening skills as 70.5% of girls agreed that good speaking and listening skills will give them the confidence to pursue their aspirations, compared with just 63.0% of boys. Boys are also more likely than girls to agree that other skills they learn at school are more important than literacy skills for achieving their aspirations (38.1% vs. 27.0%).
- While the results with young people showed that girls are more likely to see literacy as helping them to achieve their aspirations, there is no gender difference with adults in whether they see literacy as important for achieving aspirations. However, exploring their views specifically on aspirations, literacy and gender showed that more men than women believe that men are more likely to have the speaking and listening skills needed to achieve their aspirations (31.3% vs. 23.5%). This might indicate that men think their speaking and listening skills are superior to women's, which might have implications for women's confidence in their skills.

The findings in this report show that young people perceive many barriers to achieving their aspirations and need various types of support to achieve them. Confidence in particular might hold many young people, especially girls, back in the pursuit of their goals. Literacy, however, may have the potential to address these issues, and approaches focusing on speaking and listening skills in particular may be useful in supporting young people – particularly girls – to build the confidence they need to achieve the hopes, dreams and goals they have for their future and reach their full potential.

What are aspirations?

Aspirations can be defined as what the individual hopes will happen in the future¹². These begin to form at an early age but are shaped by experiences and the environment¹³. They can also be considered as “abstract statements of values and beliefs regarding future plans”¹⁴. Some researchers argue that aspirations are performative, meaning that they have a purpose in a specific context¹⁵.

The abstract nature of aspirations is also the key defining feature separating them from expectations. Gorard and colleagues (2012)¹⁶ offer a helpful distinction by defining aspirations as “what an individual *hopes will happen* in the future” whereas expectations are defined as “what an individual *believes will happen* in the future”. This is a crucial consideration as it has also been suggested that while aspirations do not necessarily reflect specific socioeconomic realities¹⁷, expectations are also linked to how students think they will perform in reality given their socioeconomic background and past and current academic performance¹⁸.

Educational and career-focused aspirations are some of the most commonly used definitions of aspirations. They refer to students’ hopes for their future education such as staying on at school post-16, continuing on to further study¹⁹ or their career hopes. Previous studies have explored aspirations from this point of view and shown that 81% of children and young people aged 12 to 13 aspire to attend university in the future²⁰.

However, some sources indicate that young people might define their own aspirations more generally. For example, the 2003 Young People’s Social Attitudes Survey found that half the young people said ‘to be happy’ was their main ambition for the future²¹. Other frequently given answers included aspiring to have a family and having a good job. Other evidence also

¹² Gorard, S., See, B. H., & Davies, P. (2012). The impact of attitudes and aspirations on educational attainment and participation. Retrieved from <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/education-young-people-parents-full.pdf>

¹³ Gutman, L., & Akerman, R. (2008). Determinants of aspirations (Wider Benefits of Learning Research Report No.27). Retrieved from <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1541614/1/Gutman2008Determinants.pdf>

¹⁴ Khattab, N. (2015). Students’ aspirations, expectations and school achievement: what really matters? *British Educational Research Journal*, 41(5), 731-748. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3171>

¹⁵ St Clair, R. & Benjamin, A. (2011). Performing desires: The dilemma of aspirations and educational attainment. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37(3), 501-517. doi: 10.1080/01411926.2010.481358

¹⁶ Gorard, S., See, B. H., & Davies, P. (2012). The impact of attitudes and aspirations on educational attainment and participation. Retrieved from <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/education-young-people-parents-full.pdf>

¹⁷ Khattab, N. (2015). Students’ aspirations, expectations and school achievement: what really matters? *British Educational Research Journal*, 41(5), 731-748. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3171>

¹⁸ Mickelson, R.-A. (1990). The attitude–achievement paradox among black adolescents. *Sociology of Education*, 63(1), 44–61. doi: 10.2307/2112896

¹⁹ Cabinet Office Social Exclusion Task Force. (2008). Aspiration and attainment amongst young people in deprived communities: Analysis and discussion paper. Retrieved from https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8547/7/aspirations_evidence_pack_Redacted.pdf

²⁰ King’s College London. (2013). ASPIRES: Young people’s science and career aspirations, age 10-14. Retrieved from <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/ecs/research/aspires/aspires-final-report-december-2013.pdf>

²¹ Park, A., Phillips, M., & Johnson, M. Young. (2004). Young people in Britain: the attitudes and experiences of 12 to 19 year olds (National Centre for Social Research: Research Report RR564). Retrieved from <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/5014/1/RR564.pdf>

suggests that young people had more holistic aspirations, including aspiring to be ‘a good person’, ‘an inspiration to others’, or to move abroad²².

Definitions of ‘high’ and ‘low’ aspirations are very subjective²³ and value judgements are commonly attached to education and career-related aspirations. For example, low aspirations have been defined as “teenagers reporting that their first or joint first choice for a job was in the service industry, on an assembly line, in maintenance or transport”²⁴, reflecting value judgements that are placed on certain career options. Similar value-added definitions can stem from studies that measure aspirations as the intention to go to university or importance attached to university degrees²⁵, as these only reflect one possible educational route.

Aspirations of young people and adults in 2019

This section presents findings from our survey of 2,317 young people aged 11 to 18 that explored what young people’s aspirations are, what has influenced them, whether they think they will achieve them, what barriers they perceive for achieving them, and what they need to achieve them. These results are compared with findings from a poll of 2,000 adults aged 18 to 92 across the UK to allow us to create a picture of aspirations across the lifespan.

What do young people and adults aspire to be?

Previous research has explored children and young people’s aspired careers. For example, a survey of 11,700 young people showed that the most common career aspiration in the UK was ‘actor’ at the age of 13 to 14 and ‘teacher’ at the age of 17 to 18²⁶. A study of younger children aged 7 to 11 on the other hand found that the most popular job is a sportsperson followed by teacher, vet, social media and gaming jobs²⁷.

We asked young people to tell us what their aspirations are, based on any definition they have for the term. Overall, 1,999 young people shared what their hopes, dreams and future plans are. Exploring these more closely shows that while nearly all young people have career and education-focused aspirations, these are also often combined with some kind of personal aspirations. These include a variety of things such as having money, owning a house, having a family, having pets and achieving goals in sports and hobbies.

²² Cabinet Office Social Exclusion Task Force. (2008). Aspiration and attainment amongst young people in deprived communities: Analysis and discussion paper. Retrieved from https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8547/7/aspirations_evidence_pack_Redacted.pdf

²³ Gutman, L., & Akerman, R. (2008). Determinants of aspirations (Wider Benefits of Learning Research Report No.27). Retrieved from <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1541614/1/Gutman2008Determinants.pdf>

²⁴ Parsons, S. & Bynner, J. (2007). Illuminating disadvantage: Profiling the experiences of adults with Entry level literacy or numeracy over the lifecourse. Retrieved from http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/21971/1/doc_3912.pdf

²⁵ Sammons, P., Toth, K., & Sylva, K. (2016). Believing in better: How aspirations and academic self concept shape young people’s outcomes. Retrieved from <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/30229/1/EPPSE-final-Believing-in-Better-1.pdf>

²⁶ Mann, A., Massey, D., Glover, P., Kashefpakdel, E. T., & Dawkins, J. (2013). Nothing in common: the career aspirations of Young Britons mapped against projected labour market demand (2010-2020) (Occasional Taskforce Research Paper: No. 2). Retrieved from https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/nothing_in_common_final.pdf

²⁷ Chambers, N., Kashefpakdel, E. T., Rehill, J., & Percy, C. (2018). Drawing the future: exploring the career aspirations of primary school children from around the world. Retrieved from <https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/DrawingTheFuture.pdf>

Figure 1 below presents some of the young people’s aspirations and shows the range of aspirations young people have, ranging from careers and education to personal goals and dreams such as having a job, passing GCSEs, travelling, dreaming, having a house and family, and being happy.

Figure 1: Some of young people’s aspirations



While the aspirations young people gave in the survey were commonly a combination of career-related, education-related and personal aspirations, in our focus group discussions, young people’s aspirations were heavily focused on their careers and education:

“I want to study humanities in Oxford University”

“I have always wanted to be an engineer”

“I’m quite creative so mine would probably be like an author or a journalist or maybe a film director”

“I want to be a pilot or like something to do with sports, like football or something”

“I kind of want to go into like TV and media”

“Either teaching or environmental law”

However, they also shared more personal aspirations. It is interesting to note that sometimes young people are not sure whether these aspirations relating to their personal life are in fact aspirations:

“...I just feel like I should be more closer to like friends and family... it just doesn't really sound like an aspiration or a dream but it's just like something I would like to do”

“I don't really know if it counts as an aspirations but in the future I'd like to like get married and have some kids”

“I want to try and do low-level competitive climbing”

“I wanna have kids”

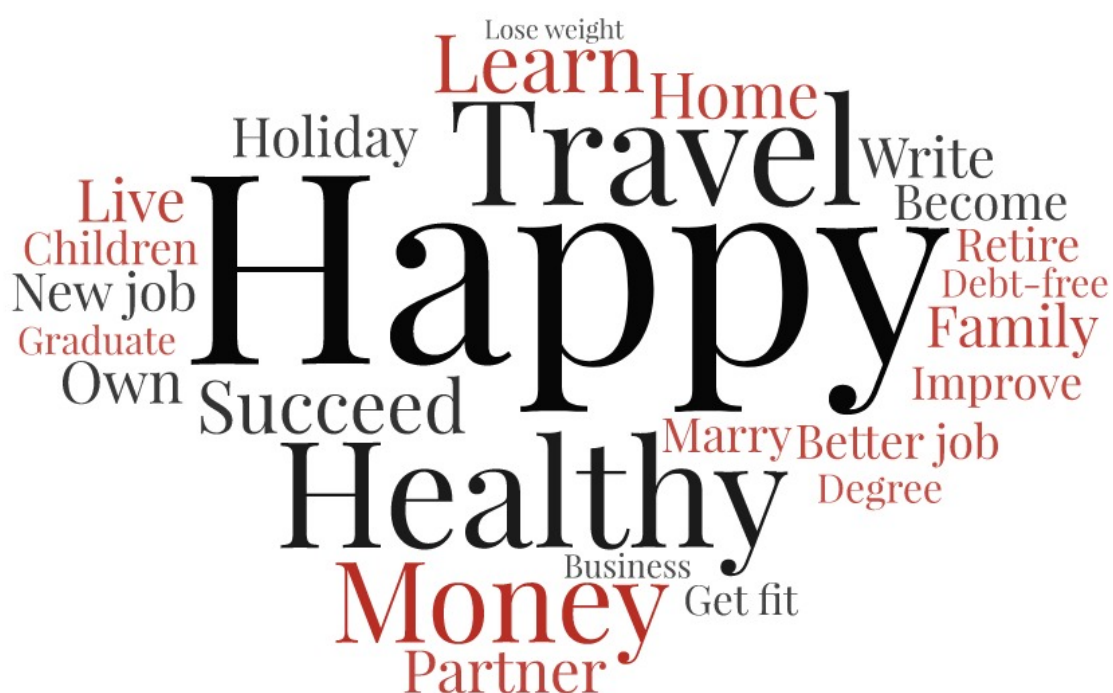
“I aspire to be a good dad, 'cause, you know, a child needs kind of a father figure”

“But a personal aspiration of mine is to have amazing family life... I aspire for my children to have a better life than I had”

Overall, these findings highlight that focusing on aspirations as only careers and education assumes too narrow a view. While it is natural that young people focus on their future career and education given their age, it has to be acknowledged that their aspirations are more broad and we should focus on supporting children and young people to achieve their aspirations more widely, and in particular move away from defining aspirations solely based on aspiring for managerial roles or going to university.

Compared with young people, adults' aspirations are less focused on careers and more focused on personal goals (see Figure 2). For example, many adults list personal aspirations such as being happy or successful. Other themes that emerge from adults' aspirations related to health, such as getting fit or losing weight; finances, such as becoming financially stable or debt free; travelling to different countries; and education, such as completing a master's degree. Adults also mention some career-related aspirations, most commonly getting a new job.

Figure 2: Some aspirations mentioned by adults



What influences aspirations?

Understanding what determines young people's aspirations is complex as they are shaped by various characteristics of the young people themselves as well as their families, peers, schools, neighbourhood and wider forces such as the historical context²⁸. However, the influence of parents on young people's aspirations is well established and some sources suggest they are one of the most significant influences²⁹. For example, educational aspirations parents have for their children are known to be associated with their child's own aspirations as 84% of 14-year-olds whose parents expressed a desire for them to continue into higher education shared this aspiration³⁰.

The influence of parents and other family members was also evident from our survey responses and focus groups with young people. Many young people mentioned their family's inspiration as part of their aspirations in general, and some gave specific reasons how their family influenced them to have certain aspirations, such as wanting to make their parents proud or help their family in some way:

²⁸ Gutman, L., & Akerman, R. (2008). Determinants of aspirations (Wider Benefits of Learning Research Report No.27). Retrieved from <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1541614/1/Gutman2008Determinants.pdf>

²⁹ Cabinet Office Social Exclusion Task Force. (2008). Aspiration and attainment amongst young people in deprived communities: Analysis and discussion paper. Retrieved from https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8547/7/aspirations_evidence_pack_Redacted.pdf

³⁰ Chowdry, H., Crawford, C., Dearden, L., Joyce, R., Sibieta, L., Sylva, K., & Washbrook, E. (2010). Poorer Children's Educational Attainment: How Important Are Attitudes And Behaviour? Retrieved from <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/poorer-children-education-full.pdf>

“my mum inspired me to be the best version of me i can possibly be and everyday she pushes and motivates me to do that”

“I just want to help people and help my family”

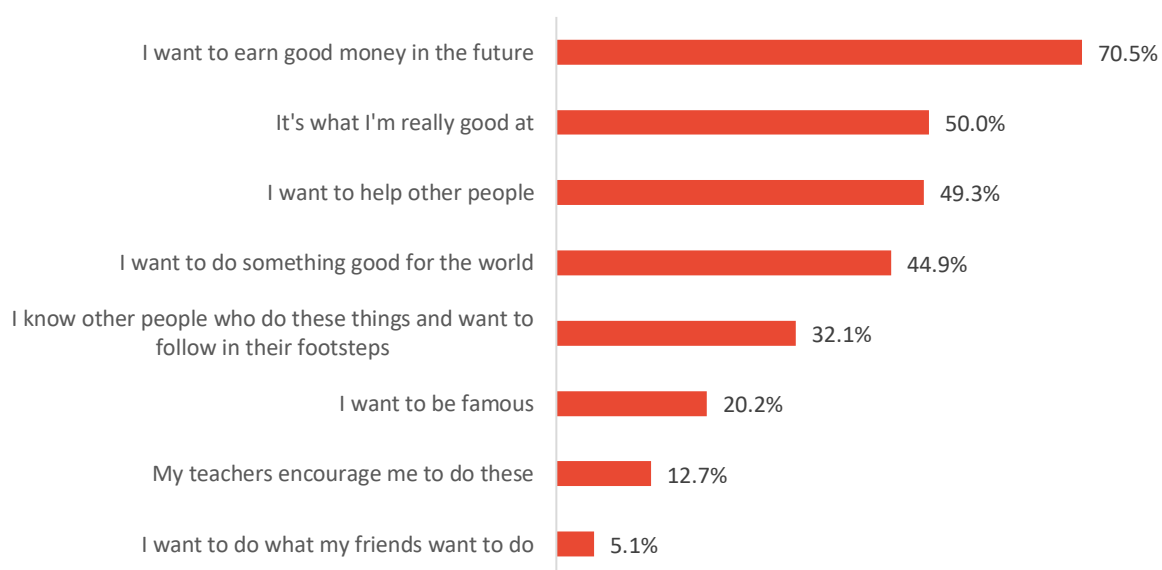
“... because my parents worked really hard to...bring us here. And like, they worked hard to get a job. So, I want to like, give them the things and... my mum a house because she's always wanted a garden”

“Without my parents, I would have gone down a completely different path. Because my parents, because they're deaf, I've always wanted to help them or try... and try to benefit them in a way that would do that.”

“My family. Like, they all do something related to my aspiration”

To investigate the influences on young people's aspirations more widely, we explored other possible reasons for young people to have their aspirations. Figure 3 presents the reasons young people have for their aspirations, when asked to pick the three main reasons. It shows that 7 in 10 (70.5%) young people have their aspirations because they want to earn good money in the future. This is followed by evaluation of their skills, as half (50.0%) of the young people have their aspirations because they relate to something they are good at. Many young people also have their aspirations because they want to do something good: nearly half say they have their aspirations because they want to help other people (49.3%) and because they want to do something good for the world (44.9%). Fewer are influenced by their teachers (12.7%) and friends (5.1%).

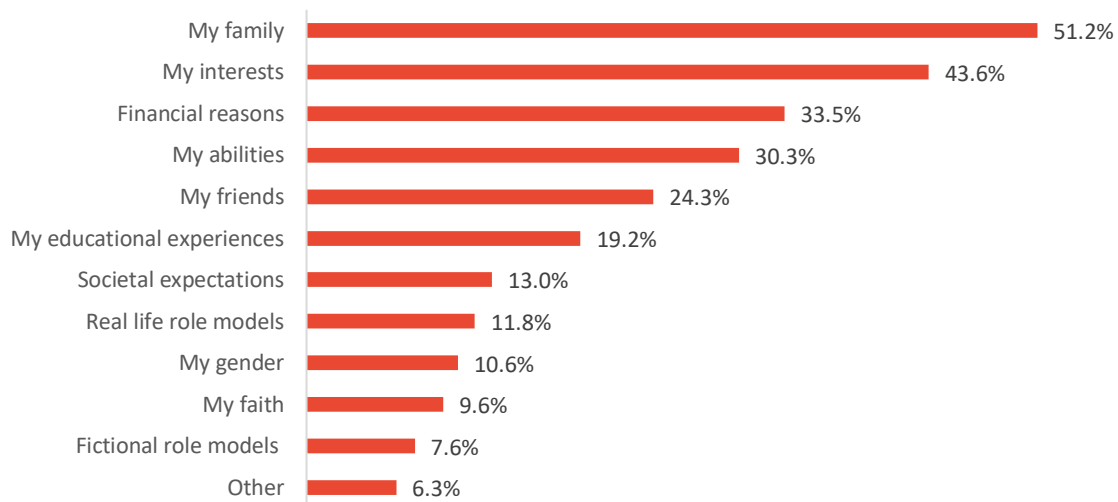
Figure 3: Main reasons young people have for their aspirations



Our poll of 2,000 adults showed the importance of family in influencing adults' aspirations as well (see Figure 4). Other common factors influencing the aspirations of adults include their interests, financial reasons and their abilities. These influences reflect wanting to earn good money and doing something they are good at as reasons for the aspirations young people gave.

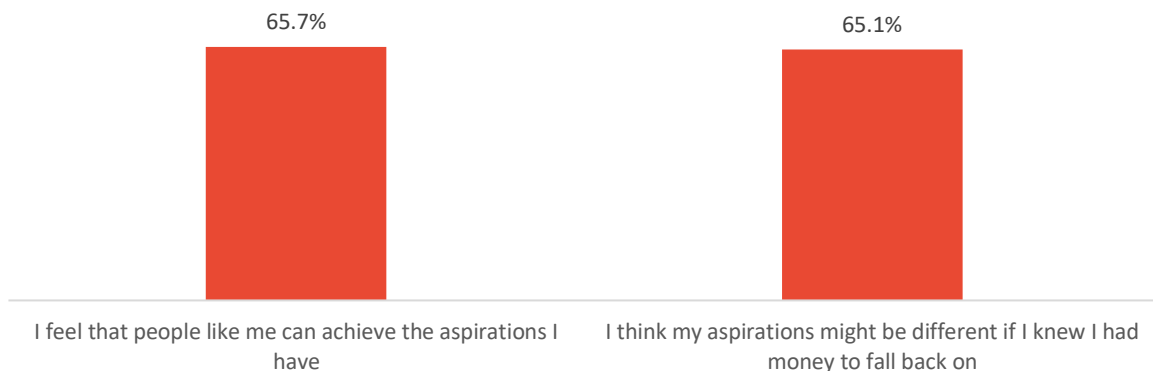
Other influences on aspirations that adults mention in the survey include physical or mental health, change in life circumstances (e.g. divorce or death of a partner) and getting older.

Figure 4: What adults think has influenced their aspirations



We also explored how adults perceive the influence of their background on their aspirations. Figure 5 below shows that nearly 2 in 3 (65.7%) adults feel that people like them can achieve the aspirations they have. Similarly, nearly 2 in 3 adults (65.1%) feel that their aspirations might be different if they knew they had money to fall back on. This is particularly interesting as Figure 4 above shows that only 1 in 3 (33.5%) felt that financial reasons have influenced their aspirations, suggesting that the financial factors may be more important in influencing aspirations than some adults would admit.

Figure 5: Percentage of adults who believe people like them can achieve the aspirations they have and who feel that their aspirations might be different if they knew they had money to fall back on



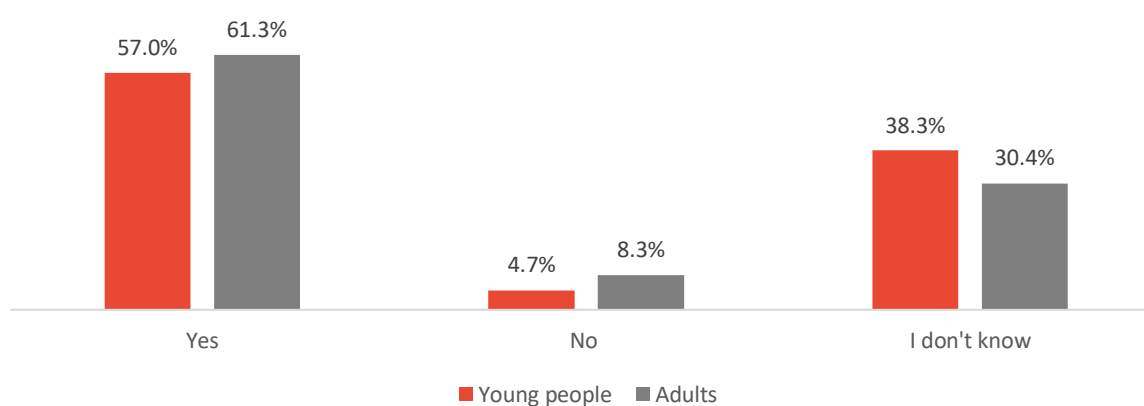
Do young people and adults feel they can achieve their aspirations?

Nearly 3 in 5 (57.0%) young people believe they will achieve their aspirations (see Figure 6). At the same time, nearly 2 in 5 (38.3%) were not sure whether they will achieve their aspirations. In addition, 4.7% of young people feel they won't achieve their aspirations.

A closer look at the reasons young people have for thinking they might not achieve their aspirations shows that many involve low self-perception, such as thinking they are not smart enough or good enough to achieve their goals. This indicates that support in self-efficacy and confidence might be particularly useful for many young people.

Slightly more adults than young people believe they will achieve their aspirations (61.3%). Interestingly, however, nearly twice as many adults as young people believe they will not achieve their aspirations (8.3% vs. 4.7%). The reasons given by adults as to why they think they might not achieve their aspirations are mostly financial, such as not having enough money needed to achieve them. Some other reasons given include age and poor health.

Figure 6: Do young people and adults think they will achieve their aspirations?



Barriers for achieving aspirations

To explore barriers for achieving aspirations, we created a barrier score that includes all the possible barriers summed up. This resulted in a score ranging from 0 to 12. On average, young people see 3.1 (SD = 2.4) barriers and adults 2.4 (SD = 2.4)³¹.

A closer look at our findings show that for young people confidence (48.2%) and other people's negative attitudes (40.8%) are the most common barriers. As Figure 7 also shows,

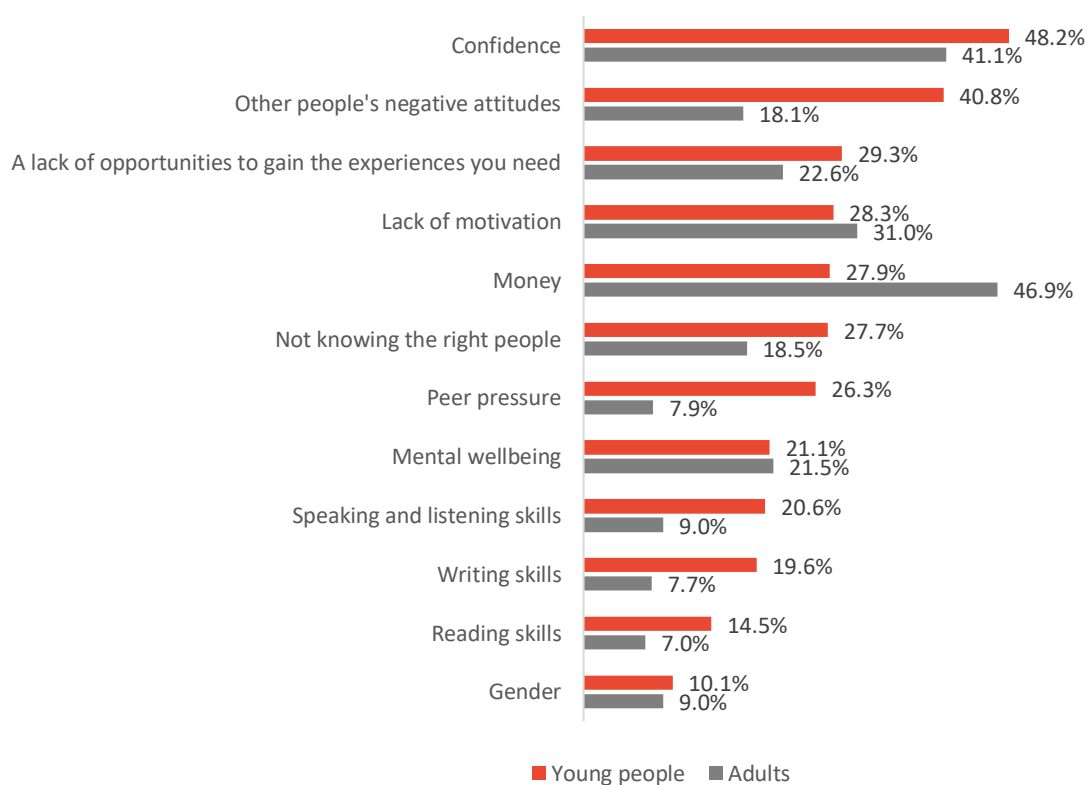
³¹ Please note that the results might not be directly comparable because the wording of the question was slightly different for young people and adults. For young people, the question asked specifically about the barriers they perceive for their aspirations, and for adults generally about what are possible barriers for aspirations. This is due to the different ages, life situations and lived experience of adults as they might have already overcome most of their barriers and therefore it was considered more appropriate to ask what they see as barriers for their aspirations in general.

nearly 1 in 3 also perceive a lack of opportunities to gain experiences they need (29.3%), lack of motivation (28.3%) and money as barriers (27.9%).

The most commonly perceived barriers for achieving aspirations by adults are money (46.9%), confidence (41.1%) and lack of motivation (31.0%). Confidence was also one of the most commonly perceived barriers by young people, indicating that the confidence as a barrier is formed in adolescence and continues into adulthood.

The percentages of adults who say they perceive confidence and lack of motivation as barriers are also quite similar to young people. Interestingly, more adults than young people perceive money as a barrier: while nearly half of adults feel money is a barrier, just 27.9% of young people feel the same. This difference might relate to the different nature of aspirations. Many adults express aspirations such as being debt-free, buying a house and travelling as their aspirations, all of which relate to having money.

Figure 7: What young people and adults perceive as potential barriers for achieving their aspirations



Other people’s negative attitudes or doubts and money were also mentioned by many young people in the focus groups as potentially preventing them from achieving their aspirations. However, in addition, many of them talked about self-doubt or self-criticism that might stop them, as one young person describes:

“I think that the only thing that actually stops young people from achieving their aspiration is the fear of failure. Because usually when there is a fear of

failure you kind of get yourself into the mindset that the chance of failure is bigger than the chance of you achieving your goal”

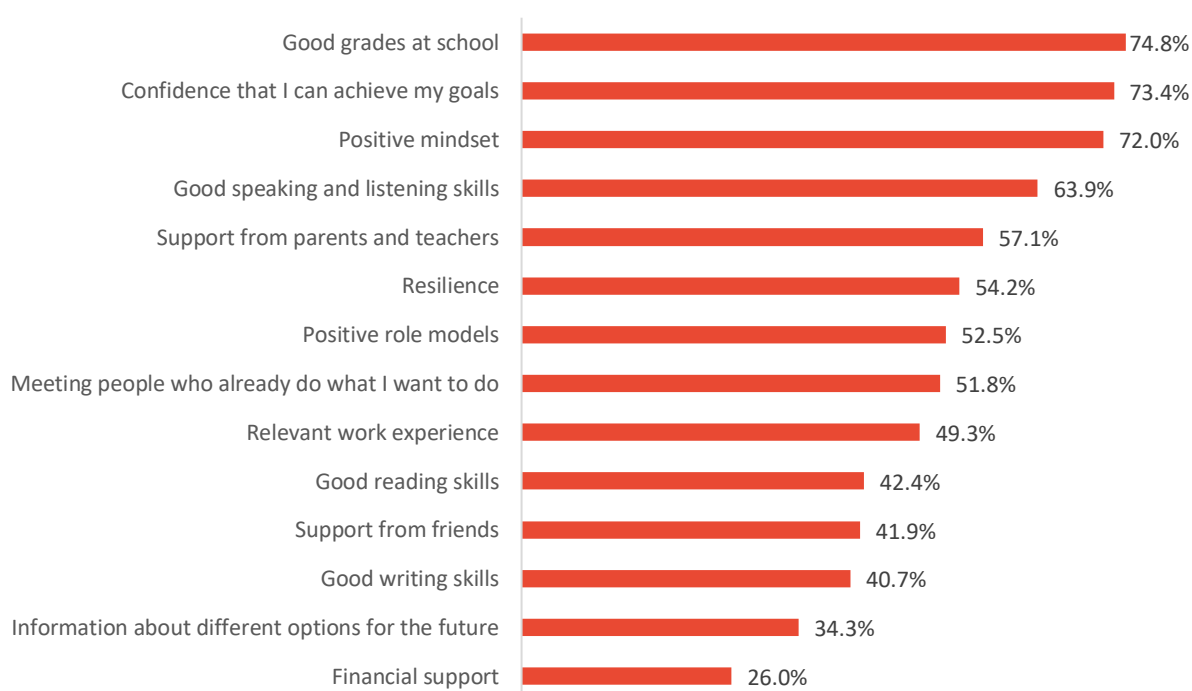
Self-doubt, criticism and other people’s negative attitudes or comments were also commonly mentioned in the survey where young people were given the opportunity to write about the barriers they perceive. Some young people also commented on bullying and discrimination (based on gender, ethnicity, sexuality and/or religion) as barriers.

The additional responses by adults on the other hand were largely focused on health, age and a lack of time as barriers, indicating the changing nature of barriers in adulthood.

What do young people think they need to achieve their aspirations?

The barriers young people perceive for their aspirations are also reflected in what they think they need to achieve their aspirations. For example, nearly 3 in 4 (73.4%) young people feel they need confidence that they can achieve their aspirations (see Figure 8). Unsurprisingly, 3 in 4 (74.8%) also think that they need good grades to achieve their aspirations. 7 in 10 (72.0%) feel they need a positive mindset. In addition, nearly 2 in 3 (63.9%) young people feel they need good speaking and listening skills to achieve their aspirations. This indicates that they see the importance of literacy skills for achieving their goals.

Figure 8: What do young people think they need to achieve their aspirations?



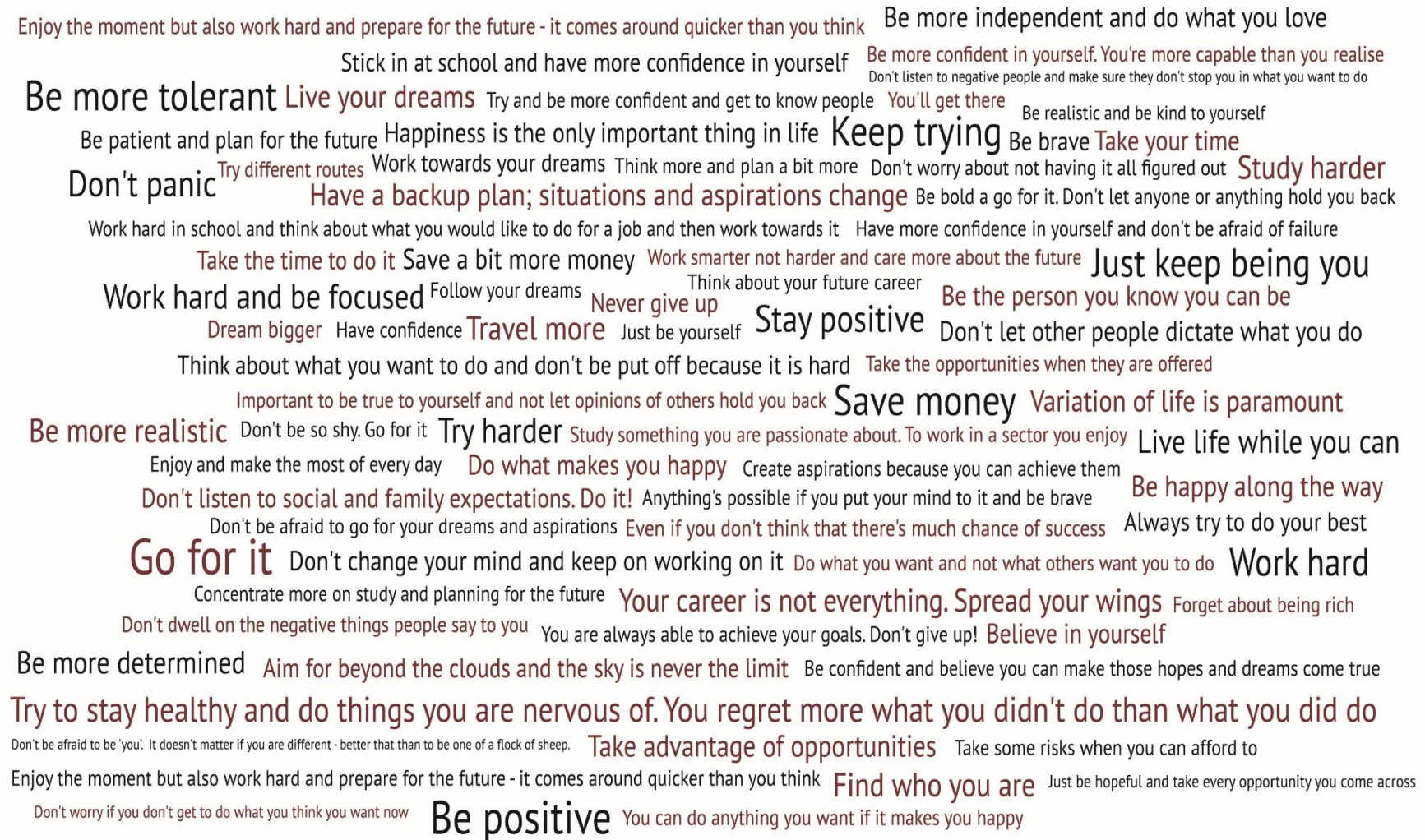
Young people’s survey responses as well as the focus groups also showed that young people feel they need a positive mindset, good grades and confidence to achieve their aspirations. In

addition, young people commonly mention support from friends, family and teachers as something they need to achieve their aspirations.

What advice would adults give their younger selves?

We asked adults what advice they would give to their younger self. Most commonly, adults would advise their younger selves to save money, study and work harder. Figure 9 shows some of the advice adults gave. It shows that much of it is also focused on encouraging and empowering messages such as having confidence, believing in yourself and not giving up.

Figure 9: What advice adults would give to their younger selves



Literacy and aspirations

Some existing evidence suggests that aspirations differ based on literacy skills. Data from the British Cohort Study showed that men who had low literacy skills at the age of 34 were twice as likely to have 'low' career aspirations (defined in this study as "reporting that their first or joint first choice for a job was in the service industry, on an assembly line, in maintenance or transport") at the age of 16 compared with those with better literacy skills³². The same data showed that the gap between women is even more pronounced: those with low literacy skills at the age of 34 were three times as likely to have 'low' career aspirations at the age of 16 than women with better skills. These findings indicate that literacy might be an issue for women's aspirations in particular.

At the same time, the role of literacy for achieving aspirations has not been widely explored. However, considering how literacy can contribute to young people achieving their aspirations and help them navigate the barriers they face could be beneficial for supporting them to realise their full potential and giving them the skills they need for their future. Literacy might potentially provide a solution for supporting women in particular to achieve their aspirations, such as by breaking down the barriers women perceive for their aspirations and supporting their confidence to pursue the goals they set for themselves.

Some evidence from literacy programmes for women in developing countries shows that an increase in literacy skills is linked to increased self-confidence and self-esteem³³. Similarly, the lack of confidence women experience in the world of work can be linked to speaking and listening skills. For example, commentators have suggested that some women feel meetings are a significant issue for their work and that they are unable to communicate their views in high-level meetings³⁴, potentially resulting in them talking less.

This is also indicated by their male colleagues who suggest that women have a harder time making their voices heard in meetings and if they do speak up, they fail to articulate their view effectively³⁵. This indicates that supporting women in their speaking and listening skills can give them the confidence they need to achieve their aspirations.

This section explores literacy and aspirations by how young people themselves perceive the role of literacy in achieving aspirations and how this might differ from adults' views.

³² Parsons, S. & Bynner, J. (2007). Illuminating disadvantage: Profiling the experiences of adults with Entry level literacy or numeracy over the lifecourse. Retrieved from http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/21971/1/doc_3912.pdf

³³ Stromquist, N. P. (2009). Literacy and empowerment: a contribution to the debate. Retrieved from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000187698>

³⁴ Heath, K., Flynn, J., & Davis, M. (2014, June). Women, find your voice. Harvard Business Review. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2014/06/women-find-your-voice>

³⁵ Ibid

How young people and adults perceive the role of literacy in achieving aspirations

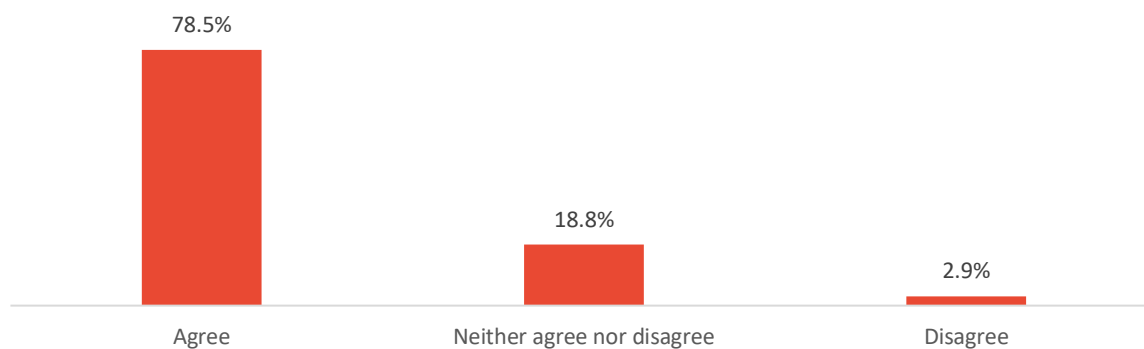
Our survey of young people showed that young people generally see the benefit of literacy for their aspirations as 9 in 10 (90.8%) of them feel that good literacy skills will help them to achieve their aspirations (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Do young people think that having good literacy will help them achieve their aspirations?



Similarly to young people, most adults see the value of literacy skills for achieving aspirations. Nearly 4 in 5 (78.5%) adults agree that having good overall literacy skills are important for achieving aspirations (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: The percentage of adults who agree or disagree that literacy skills are important for achieving aspirations



We also asked young people why they think literacy is important for achieving their aspirations. Their responses from the survey and focus groups highlight that they see the importance of literacy in getting jobs, education, generally being able to communicate with others as well as for their confidence:

“Because reading, writing and speaking skills are necessary when it comes to communicating, applying for jobs etc.”

“because I know that these are the things that will help me get a degree”

“Because I have good listening and speaking skills that enable me to listen to other people and give them my opinion. I have good writing skills that enable me to identify the things I need to find...”

“yes because it gives you confidence whether you are talking to your class or going an interview. it will get you a job”

“I said yes because being able to speak and write confidently will help you in all aspects of life.”

“It can help you with your communication skills and then pretty much every job needs that”

“Again, communication if you’re like spending time with your friends and family, you... won’t actually really have a good time if you don’t communicate”

“Literacy is like the basis of everything we do now, like you need to be able to communicate, even if it’s not writing or speaking, like everyone needs it.”

“But I think literacy, as long as you can communicate with other people it will help you in the future”

“Actually in every job you need literacy because you probably talk”

“...Even outside careers... if you are illiterate you literally have no social life”

Why some young people do not see the value of literacy for their aspirations

It has to be noted that while young people generally see the value of literacy for achieving their aspirations, some do not believe literacy will help them achieve their goals. A closer look at the responses from those who do not believe literacy will be useful for them indicates that some young people may have a very narrow definition of literacy as reading and writing and therefore they do not perceive the importance of it for their future goals. In addition, some young people appear to have limited understanding of what is involved in their future aspirations, such as not needing literacy skills for physical jobs, art or sports:

“Because a boxer doesn’t need to write an essay”

“because football is played with your feet”

“because i do not need to listen or talk to fix cars”

“Because I don’t think literacy will come up in masonry”

“because i don’t have to be able to read to ride a motorbike...”

“because i want to do something practical”

- “Because I was told I only need maths and physics”
- “because i wont need to be able to write a good story to be able to fly a plane”
- “because my goals have nothing to do with writing or english”
- “do you need to spell encyclopedia to draw cartoons? nah didn’t think so.”
- “i dont think i need english skills to make my own company”

However, many of the young people who do not think literacy will help them achieve their aspirations give their low ability or difficulties with literacy as a reason for this:

- “No because im just bad at English”
- “no because i struggle”
- “no because i am dyslexic”
- “... i don’t really focus sometimes and i’m in a low set”
- “I’m not always very good at expressing myself”
- “I struggle at reading and writing and I’m not smart”
- “cause it was my lowest SATs results and it is boring”

Interestingly, while most young people think that literacy will help them achieve their aspirations, Figure 12 below shows that only 2 in 5 feel that people with good literacy skills are more likely to achieve their dream career (40.5%) or goals in their personal life (39.1%). Moreover, a third (32.3%) of young people think that other skills they learn at school are more important than literacy skills for achieving their aspirations.

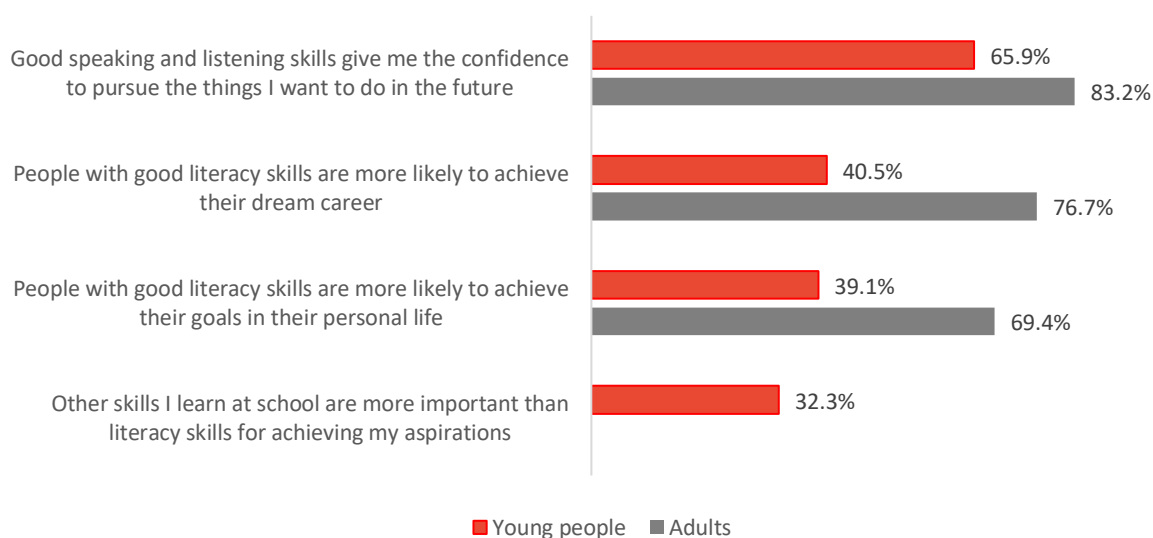
At the same time, Figure 12 also shows that that 2 in 3 (65.9%) feel that good speaking and listening skills will give them the confidence to pursue the things they want to do in the future. This might indicate that the value young people see in literacy skills for their aspirations lies particularly in speaking and listening, giving them confidence to pursue their aspirations.

Over 4 in 5 (83.2%) adults also agree that good speaking and listening skills give people the confidence to pursue their aspirations³⁶. Slightly fewer feel that people with good literacy skills are more likely to achieve their career aspirations (76.7%) and aspirations in their

³⁶ Please note that the results might not be directly comparable because the wording of the question was slightly different for young people and adults. For young people, the question asked specifically about the speaking and listening skills giving them the confidence to pursue aspirations while for adults the question was focused more generally around giving people confidence. This is due to the different ages, life situations and lived experience of adults and therefore it was considered more appropriate to ask what they see as barriers for aspirations in general. The other statements were also worded to be more appropriate for adults. The second statement was similarly worded as “career aspirations” instead of dream career for adults and the third statement as “achieving aspirations” instead of goals.

personal life (69.4%). It is interesting to note that these figures are generally higher than for young people, indicating that understanding the importance of literacy for achieving aspirations potentially increases with age.

Figure 12: How young people and adults see the value of literacy skills for achieving aspirations



Aspirations and gender

Gender differences in aspirations have been widely documented. For example, findings from the Millennium Cohort Study³⁷ suggest that teenage girls are significantly more likely to aspire to going to university compared with teenage boys. Research with educational aspirations has also found that girls are more likely than boys to agree that doing well at school means a lot to them, and this can be seen in practice as girls have been outperforming boys at GCSEs since the 1980s³⁸.

At the same time, men have been found to have higher occupational status, career advancement and financial rewards than females³⁹, indicating that the ambitious aspirations and good educational performance do not necessarily lead to higher career or financial outcomes for women. While multiple reasons might explain the gap in terms of gender, some of the potential factors include gender-role stereotypes, women’s generally lower levels of

³⁷ Centre for Longitudinal Studies. (2017). The university and occupational aspirations of UK teenagers: how do they vary by gender? Retrieved from <https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/MCS6-Briefing-03-University-and-Occupational-Aspirations.pdf>

³⁸ Rampino, T., & Taylor, M. (2013). Gender differences in educational aspirations and attitudes (Institute for Social and Economic Research: No. 2013-15). Retrieved from <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/research/publications/working-papers/iser/2013-15.pdf>

³⁹ Gutman, L., & Akerman, R. (2008). Determinants of aspirations (Wider Benefits of Learning Research Report No.27). Retrieved from <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1541614/1/Gutman2008Determinants.pdf>

confidence in their own abilities, perceptions of sexism⁴⁰, and women's earlier age of entry into parenthood⁴¹.

Persisting career stereotypes

Studies have suggested that stereotypical ideas of careers are established as early as the age of seven. A recent study by Education & Employers (2018) asked children aged seven to draw their future dream careers and found that more boys wanted to take roles in traditionally masculine sectors, with over five times as many wanting to have a role in the armed forces or firefighting services compared with girls, whereas girls tended to go for jobs linked to working with people or being 'caring', with nine times the number of girls wanting to become teachers compared with boys⁴². Other sources have also suggested that girls hold stereotypical ideas about careers, such as plumbing being messy so it is a boy's job⁴³.

These gender differences in career aspirations persist throughout adolescence: teenage boys most commonly aspire to be sportsmen and software developers, whereas teenage girls most commonly aspire to be medical professionals and teachers⁴⁴. Teenage girls were also more likely to want to work in occupations that were female-dominated. Women currently account for 59% of the workforce in the jobs teenage girls indicated they want to do. Boys on the other hand wanted to work in male-dominated occupations, where women currently account for just 26% of the workforce⁴⁵.

Lack of role models in particular fields may also contribute to the persisting career stereotypes. For example, findings from the Girls' Attitudes Survey in 2018 found that 57% of girls would like to see more representation of women in leadership roles of businesses⁴⁶. If women were exposed to counter-stereotypic women in leadership roles, they would be more likely to associate leadership with women⁴⁷. The impact of role models is also seen across sectors: exposure to female STEM experts have been found to promote positive attitudes and stronger identification with STEM for female students, leading to increased self-efficacy and a motivation to pursue STEM careers⁴⁸.

⁴⁰ Gutman, L., & Akerman, R. (2008). Determinants of aspirations (Wider Benefits of Learning Research Report No.27). Retrieved from <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1541614/1/Gutman2008Determinants.pdf>

⁴¹ Schoon, I., Martin, P., & Ross, A. (2007). Career transitions in times of social change: His and her story. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 70(1), 78-96. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2006.04.009>

⁴² Chambers, N., Kashefpakdel, E. T., Rehill, J., & Percy, C. (2018). Drawing the future: exploring the career aspirations of primary school children from around the world. Retrieved from <https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/DrawingTheFuture.pdf>

⁴³ Ofsted. (2011). Girls' career aspirations. Retrieved from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413603/Girls__career_aspirations.pdf

⁴⁴ Centre for Longitudinal Studies. (2017). The university and occupational aspirations of UK teenagers: how do they vary by gender? Retrieved from <https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/MCS6-Briefing-03-University-and-Occupational-Aspirations.pdf>

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Girlguiding. (2018). We see the big picture: Girls' attitudes survey 2018. Retrieved from

<https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girls-attitudes-survey-2018.pdf>

⁴⁷ Dasgupta, N., & Asgari, S. (2004). Seeing is believing: Exposure to counterstereotypic women leaders and its effect on the malleability of automatic gender stereotyping. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 40(5):642-658. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2004.02.003>

⁴⁸ Dasgupta, N., Hunsinger, M., and McManus, M. A. (2011). STEMing the tide: Using ingroup experts to inoculate women's self-concept in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100(2):255-270. doi: 10.1037/a0021385

The importance of confidence

Confidence might be another reason affecting women and their aspirations. For example, a survey conducted with women aged 16 to 25 in Wales found that 1 in 7 (13%) girls feel that a lack of confidence is a barrier for them achieving their career aspirations⁴⁹. Focusing particularly on leadership roles, Girl Guiding UK (2019) on the other hand found that 46% of girls thought it was a lack of confidence that was putting women off⁵⁰. It has also been suggested that women's confidence to reach top leadership positions decreases the more time they spend in their jobs: women's aspiration levels to reach top management have been found to plummet from 43% to 16% within two years of joining a company⁵¹. This shows that something in the workplace might cause aspirations to decline, and the authors suggest it may be due to lack of encouragement from managers.

The difference in confidence between women and men can also be observed in self-reported skill levels. For example, despite women performing equally to men on a science test, when asked to predict their score before and after the test, female participants significantly underestimated their ability in comparison with the male participants⁵². They were also less likely to submit their responses to a follow-up science competition. This lack of self-belief can partially account for the gender differences in career aspirations, with females significantly less likely to aspire to STEM careers than males⁵³.

Perception of workplace equality

Perceived barriers for women's aspirations might also stem from perceived inequality in workplaces. For example, the Girls' Attitudes Survey in 2018 found that 3 in 4 (76%) 11- to 21-year-old girls said that the under-representation of women in workplaces contributes to women being treated less fairly than men⁵⁴. The same survey a year later found that half (50%) of 11- to 16-year-olds feel that women are likely to be discouraged from top roles because they feel female leaders are criticised more than their male counterparts⁵⁵. In addition, 1 in 3 (32%) feel that it's harder for women to make mistakes or take risks and that women are harassed for speaking out⁵⁶.

⁴⁹ Chwarae Teg. (2018). Young Women's Career Aspirations. Retrieved from <https://www.cteg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Bright-2018-Young-Womens-Career-Aspirations-Summary.pdf>

⁵⁰ Girlguiding. (2019). Girls' attitudes survey 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girls-attitudes-survey-2019.pdf>

⁵¹ Coffman, J., & Neuenfeldt, B. (2014, June). Everyday moments of truth: Frontline managers are key to women's career aspirations. Retrieved from <https://www.bain.com/insights/everyday-moments-of-truth/>

⁵² Ehrlinger, J., & Dunning, D. (2003). How chronic self-views influence (and potentially mislead) estimates of performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(1), 5–17. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.84.1.5

⁵³ King's College London. (2013). ASPIRES: Young people's science and career aspirations, age 10-14. Retrieved from <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/ecs/research/aspires/aspires-final-report-december-2013.pdf>

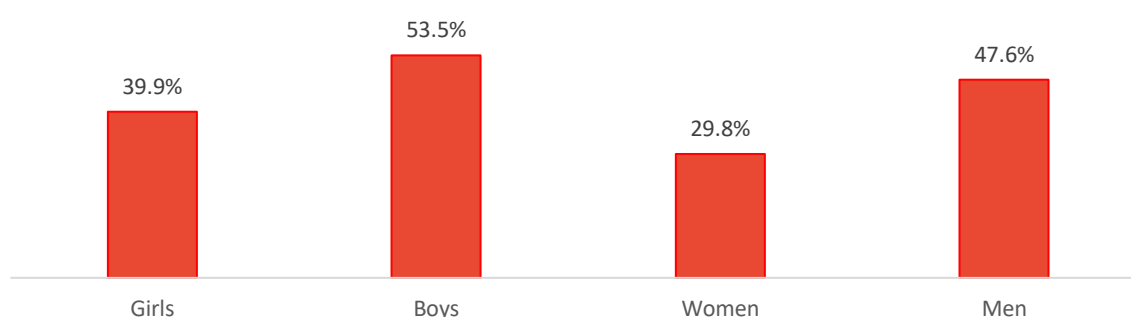
⁵⁴ Girlguiding. (2018). We see the big picture: Girls' attitudes survey 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girls-attitudes-survey-2018.pdf>

⁵⁵ Girlguiding. (2019). Girls' Attitudes Survey 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girls-attitudes-survey-2019.pdf>

⁵⁶ Girlguiding. (2019). Girls' Attitudes Survey 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girls-attitudes-survey-2019.pdf>

Indeed, in our own survey of young people and adults, we find that only 2 in 5 (39.9%) girls feel that women are treated equally in the workplace compared with half (53.5%) of boys (see Figure 13). This indicates that a large percentage of young women already expect not to be treated equally to men in the workplace. This gets worse in adulthood when even fewer women believe this to be true, and by then people have more experience with the world of work.

Figure 13: Percentage of young people and adults who agree women and men are treated equally in the workplace by gender



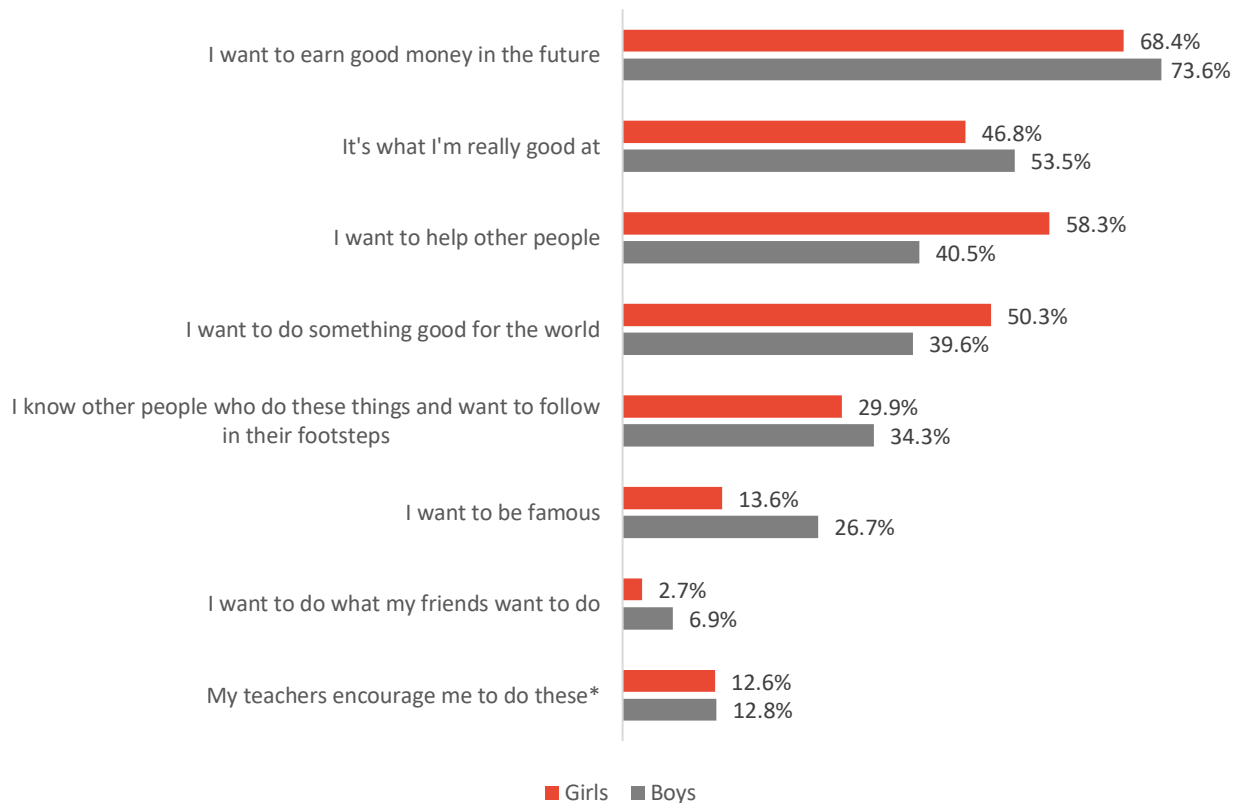
Gender differences in young people and adults' aspirations

Gender differences in what influences aspirations

Our survey data show that girls are more likely to want to do good for the world (50.3% vs. 39.6%) and help people (58.3% vs. 40.5%) while boys want to earn money (73.6% vs. 68.4%) and do what they are good at (53.5% vs. 46.8%; see Figure 14). Boys are also more influenced by what their friends do (6.9% vs. 2.7%) and twice as likely to aspire to become famous (26.7% vs. 13.6%). These findings could be linked to the gender-stereotypical career aspirations established in previous research (see, for example, Chambers, Kashefpakdel, Rehill & Percy, 2018⁵⁷) and might explain why girls generally end up in caring and nurturing jobs.

⁵⁷ Chambers, N., Kashefpakdel, E. T., Rehill, J., & Percy, C. (2018). Drawing the future: exploring the career aspirations of primary school children from around the world. Retrieved from <https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/DrawingTheFuture.pdf>

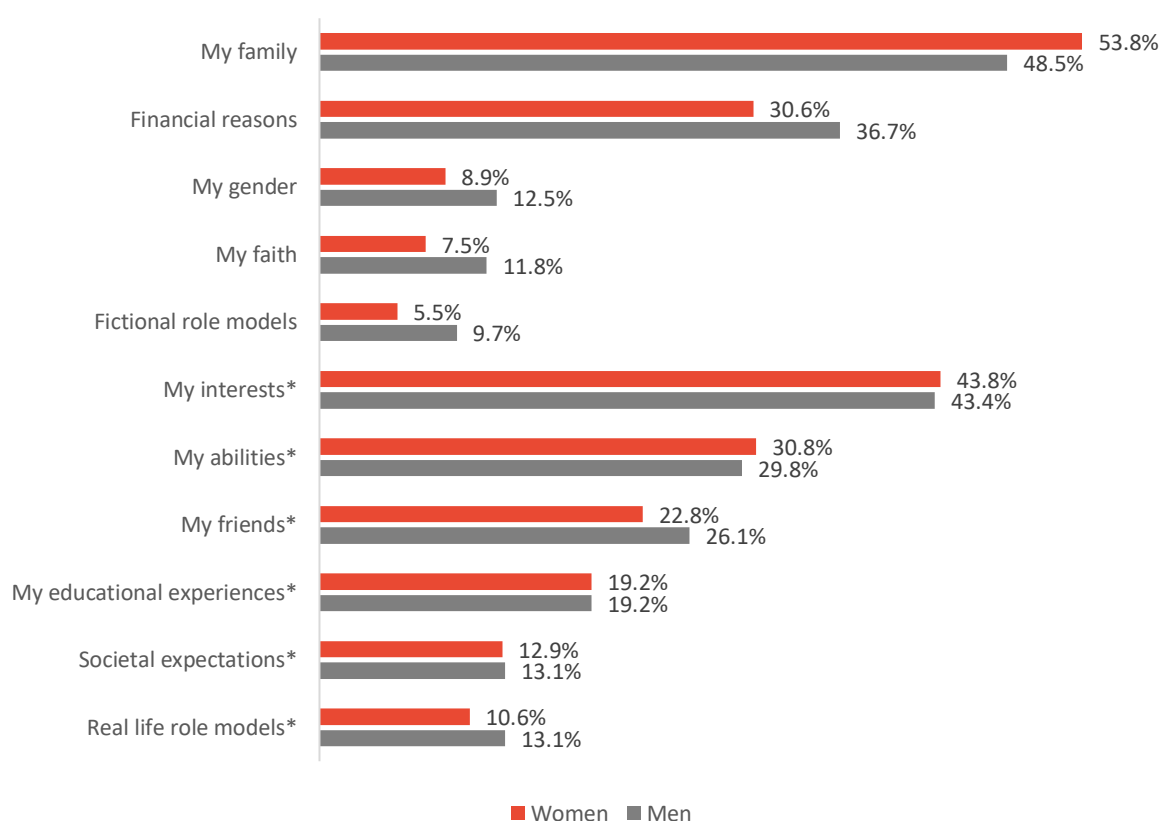
Figure 14: Gender differences in reasons young people have their aspirations



**non-significant statistical difference*

Data from adults show that more women than men say their family have influenced their aspirations (53.8% vs. 48.5%; see Figure 15), potentially because of the traditional gender roles of women as mothers and homemakers. It is also interesting to note that more men than women feel that financial reasons (36.7% vs. 30.6%) and gender have influenced their aspirations (12.5% vs. 8.9%).

Figure 15: What adults think has influenced their aspirations by gender



**non-significant statistical difference*

Gender differences in perceived barriers in aspirations

While there are no gender differences in whether young people or adults believe they can achieve their aspirations, our data show differences in barriers they perceive for their aspirations. Comparing the barrier scores for girls and boys shows that girls perceive more barriers for achieving their aspirations than boys (M = 3.4; SD = 2.3 vs. M = 2.9; SD = 2.3). Similarly, women perceive more barriers for achieving aspirations than men (M = 2.6; SD = 2.4 vs. M = 2.2; SD = 2.4).

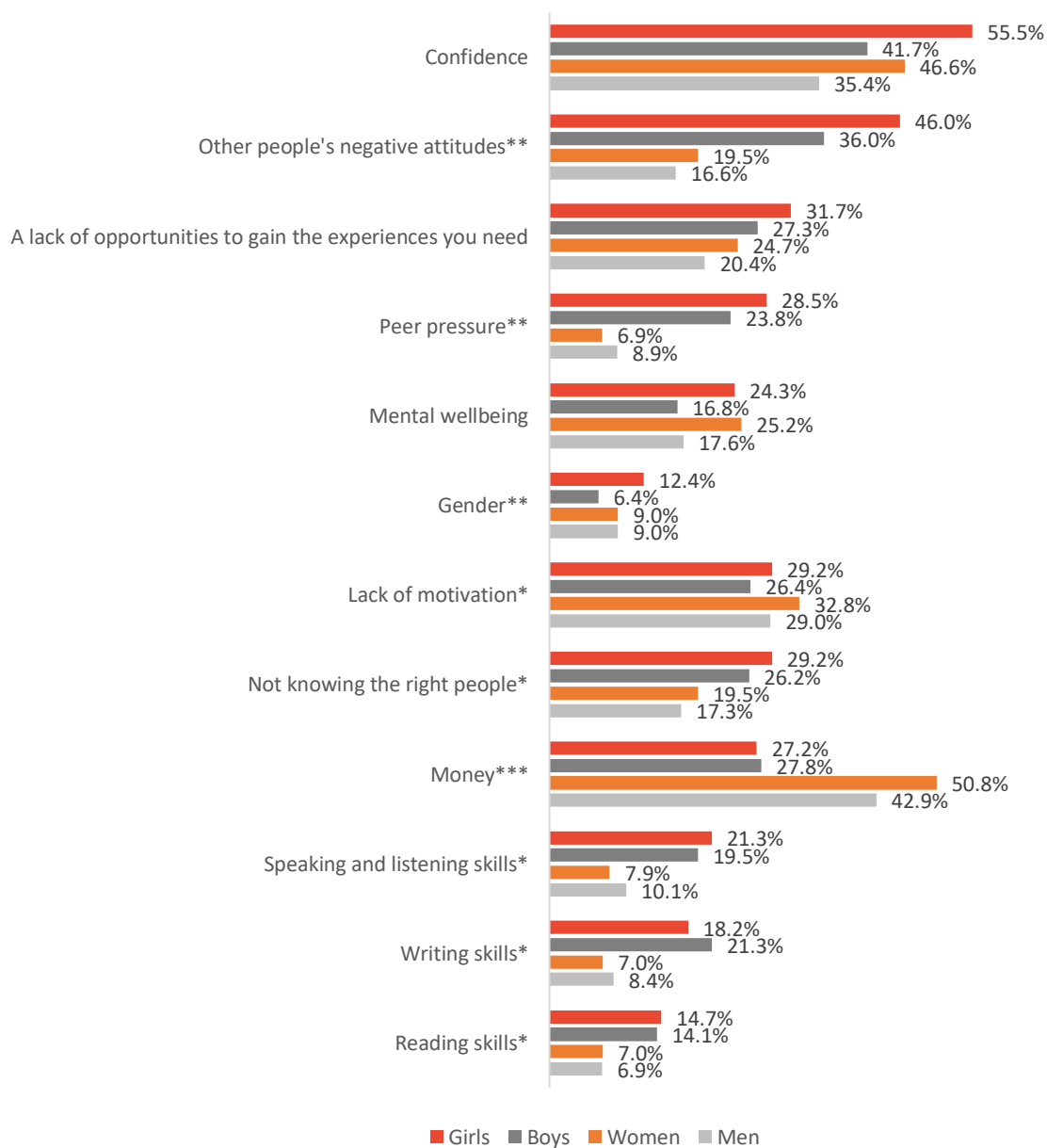
Confidence in particular emerges as a barrier for girls and women. While half (55.5%) of the girls see confidence as a barriers for their aspirations, 2 in 5 (41.7%) boys think confidence is a barrier (see Figure 16). Similarly with adults, nearly half (46.6%) of women think of confidence as a barrier for aspirations compared with just over third (35.4%) of men. This indicates that supporting girls and women to realise their full potential requires approaches aimed to support their confidence.

A closer look at the barriers young people perceive also shows that more girls than boys perceive other people’s negative attitudes (46.0% vs. 36.0%), a lack of opportunities to gain experiences they need (31.7% vs. 27.3%), peer pressure (28.5% vs. 23.8%) and mental

wellbeing (24.3% vs. 16.8%) as barriers. It is particularly interesting to note that twice as many girls as boys see their gender as a barrier (12.4% vs. 6.4%).

Adult women are more likely than men to perceive money as a barrier for aspirations (50.8% vs. 42.9%). Similarly to young people, they are also more likely than men to see lack of opportunities to gain the experience needed (24.7% vs. 20.4%) and mental wellbeing (25.2% vs. 17.6%) as barriers for achieving aspirations. These findings suggest that supporting women to gain experiences and maintaining positive mental wellbeing are already needed in adolescence and continue to be important in adulthood.

Figure 16: Young people and adults' perceived barriers for achieving aspirations by gender



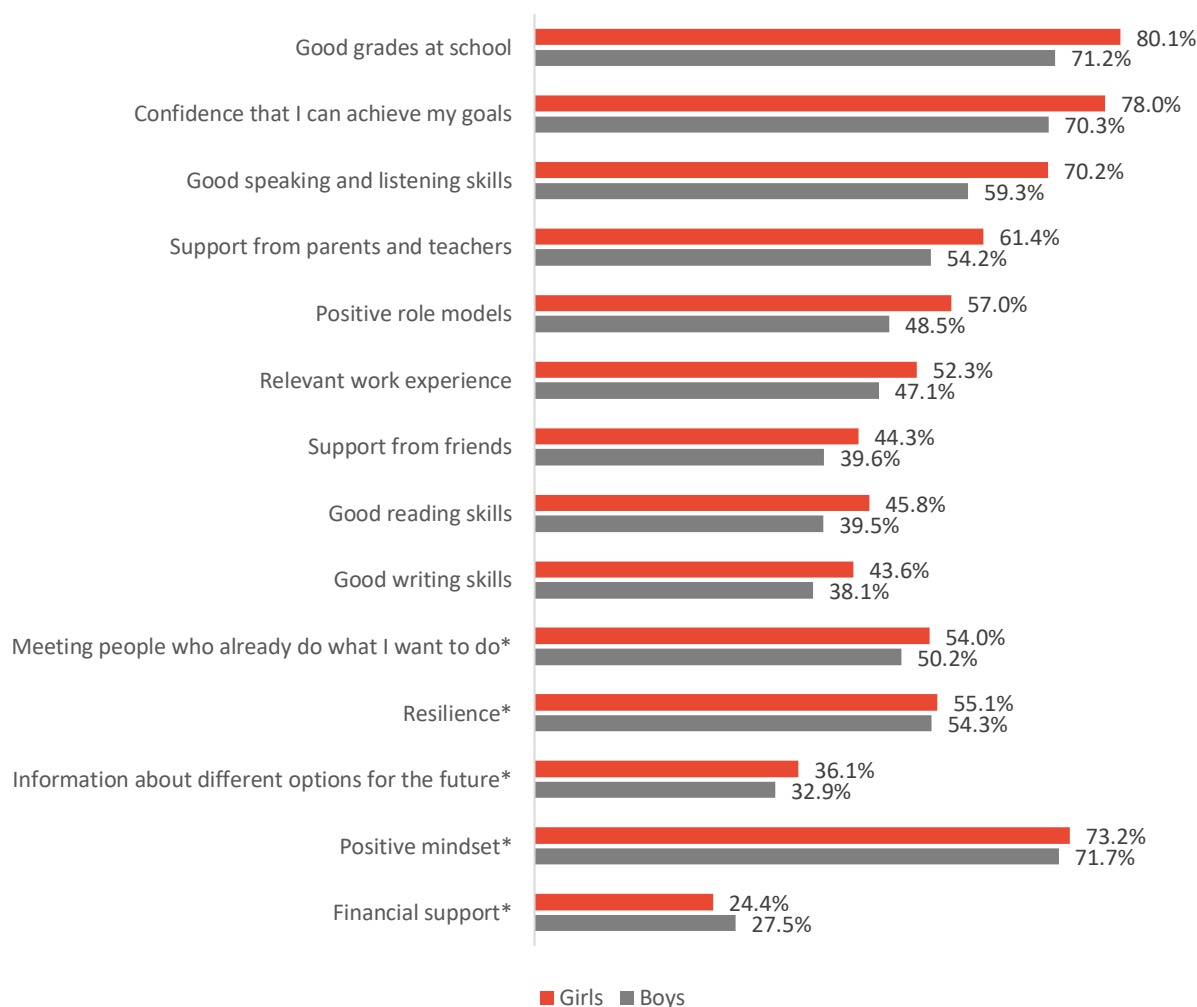
*non-significant statistical difference for both young people and adults, ** non-significant differences for adults, *** non-significant difference for both young people and adults

We also asked whether adults think it's easier for men than women to achieve their aspirations. We found that more women (47.8%) than men (40.4%) agree that it's easier for men than women to achieve their aspirations, suggesting that the perceived gender inequality might be a barrier for women.

Gender differences in what young people need to achieve their aspirations

Gender differences in what young people think they need to achieve their aspirations reflect the gender differences in perceived barriers in aspirations. For example, as Figure 17 shows, more girls than boys feel they need confidence to achieve their aspirations (78.0% vs. 70.3%). However, the largest gap between girls and boys is speaking and listening skills (70.2% vs. 59.3%). This might indicate that girls in particular see the value of literacy skills in achieving their aspirations and these could be utilised as a way for girls to fight the perceived inequalities when working towards achieving their goals.

Figure 17: Gender differences in what young people think they need to achieve their aspirations



**non-significant statistical difference*

Gender differences in perceived role of literacy in achieving aspirations

Girls are more likely than boys to say that good literacy skills will help them achieve their aspirations: 94.5% of girls think that literacy will help them, compared with 88.1% of boys (see Figure 18).

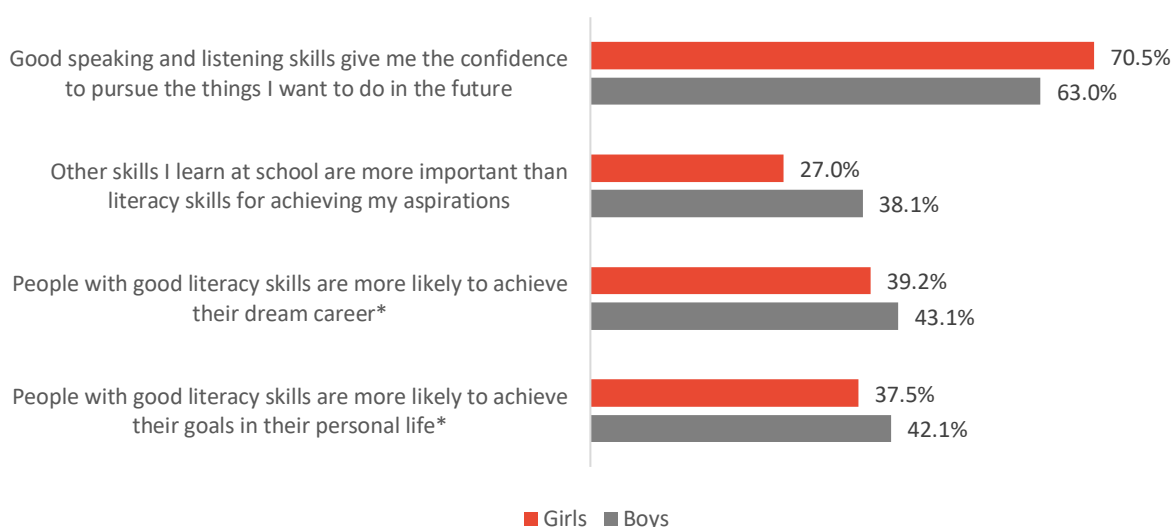
Figure 18: Whether young people think that having good literacy will help them achieve their aspirations by gender



Girls in particular feel that good speaking and listening skills will give them the confidence to pursue their aspirations. As Figure 19 shows, 70.5% of girls agreed for this to be the case, compared with just 63.0% of boys. This aligns with the earlier findings where we saw that girls are considerably more likely to agree that they need good speaking and listening skills to achieve their aspirations

Figure 19 also highlights that boys are more likely than girls to agree that other skills they learn at school are more important than literacy skills for achieving their aspirations (38.1% vs. 27.0%).

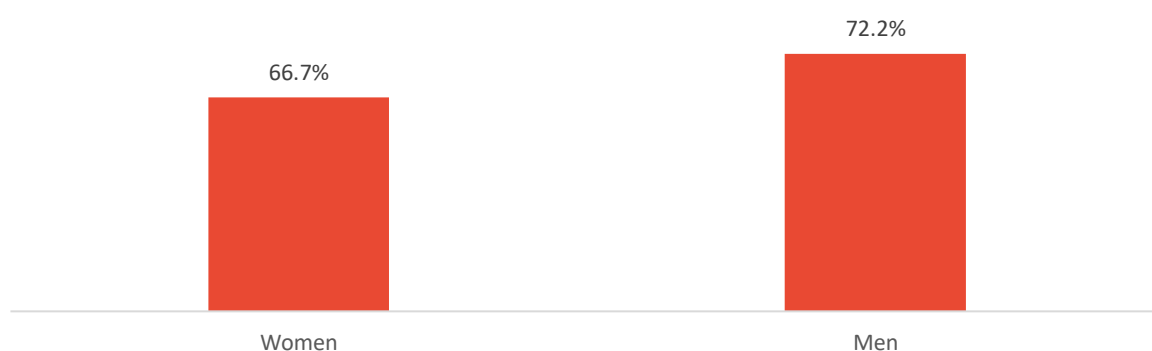
Figure 19: Young people's agreement to literacy supporting aspirations statements by gender



**non-significant statistical difference*

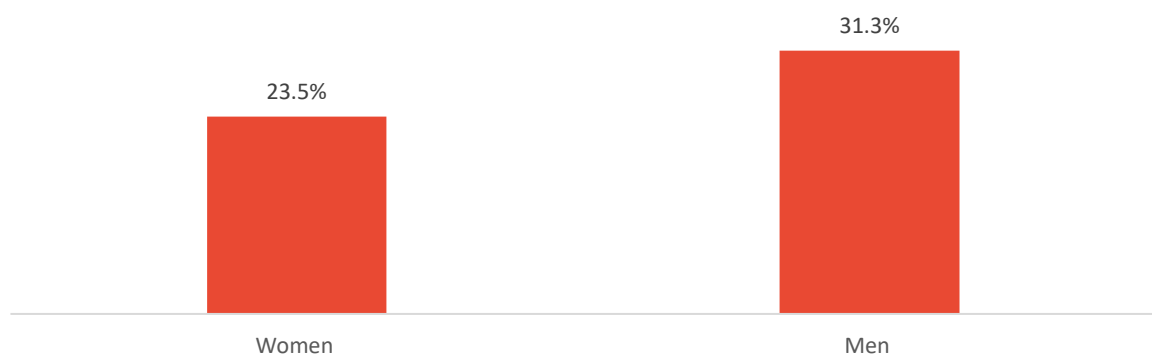
While the results with young people showed that girls are more likely to see literacy as helping them to achieve their aspirations, there is no gender difference with adults in whether they see literacy as important for achieving aspirations, whether they think speaking and listening skills give people the confidence to pursue aspirations or whether they think people with good literacy skills are more likely to achieve their career aspirations. Interestingly, however, men are more likely than women to see the value of good literacy skills in people's personal lives (see Figure 20).

Figure 20: Percentage of adults who agree that people with good literacy skills are more likely to achieve aspirations in their personal life by gender



In addition to exploring adults' views on the importance of literacy in achieving aspirations overall, we also asked adults explicitly whether they think that there is a link between aspirations, literacy and gender. Over a quarter (27.4%) of adults agree that men are more likely than women to have the speaking and listening skills needed for achieving their aspirations. Interestingly, as Figure 21 shows, more men than women believe that men are more likely to have the speaking and listening skills needed to achieve their aspirations. This might indicate that men think their speaking and listening skills are superior to women's, which might have implications for women's confidence in their skills.

Figure 21: Percentage of adults who agree that men are more likely than women to have the speaking and listening skills needed for achieving their aspirations by gender



Conclusion

This research explored young people and adults' aspirations, the role of literacy in achieving them, as well as gender differences in both areas. It showed that young people's aspirations are commonly career- and education-related goals combined with a personal aspect, such as having money, owning a house or having a family. This suggests that definitions of aspirations need to be wider than just focused on careers and education. This includes moving away from narrowly defining 'high' aspirations as the intention to go to university and aim for managerial professions. Supporting young people to achieve their aspirations should therefore adopt a broader view of them.

The findings also show that young people perceive various barriers to achieving their aspirations. Most commonly confidence, other people's negative attitudes and a lack of opportunities were highlighted as potential barriers for achieving aspirations, indicating that support is needed to tackle these in particular. It is encouraging to note that all these barriers can be overcome with support, suggesting that approaches can be developed to address these by building confidence, building resilience and self-esteem, and providing a wide range of opportunities.

Confidence in particular emerges as a theme throughout the report. The findings show that it is not only a commonly perceived barrier for both young people and adults, but nearly 3 in 4 young people indicate they need confidence to achieve their aspirations. Our findings suggest that confidence might be a particular issue for girls and women who are more likely than boys and men to perceive confidence as a barrier. Girls are also more likely than boys to indicate that confidence is what they need to achieve their aspirations.

Literacy may have the potential to address confidence and the other barriers. It is clear that most young people see the value of literacy in achieving their aspirations. This is true for speaking and listening skills in particular as nearly 2 in 3 young people feel that they need good speaking and listening skills to achieve their aspirations, and believe good speaking and listening skills will give them the confidence to pursue the things they want to do in the future. We also saw that girls in particular feel that they need speaking and listening skills to achieve their aspirations. Together, these findings indicate that supporting literacy skills, in particular speaking and listening skills, may give young people the skills as well as the confidence they need to achieve their aspirations.

Approaches focusing on speaking and listening skills may also be particularly useful in supporting girls to build the confidence they need to achieve the hopes, dreams and goals they have for their future. Providing young women with adequate literacy skills and confidence will allow them to pursue their goals and express themselves confidently, potentially mitigating the perceived inequality in the workplace that might prevent many women from entering certain jobs and leadership roles, and help them reach their full potential.

Words for Work: Women in Leadership

In September 2018, the National Literacy Trust launched its Words for Work: Women in Leadership programme in partnership with Lancôme and their global Write Her Future literacy initiative. The aim was to challenge known inequalities in employment opportunities for young women from disadvantaged communities. As the findings of this report suggest, practical solutions are particularly needed to address the barriers girls face in achieving their aspirations. Therefore, approaches such as Women in Leadership are an ideal solution to support young women to develop the skills and confidence they need in the world of work.

Working in areas of deprivation where young women are less likely than their peers to gain the qualifications they need to access further education and employment, the programme aims to equip young women in post-16 education with the literacy skills, leadership abilities and confidence they need to achieve their potential. In its first year, the programme was delivered in three secondary schools and colleges serving deprived communities in London, Manchester and Nottingham. It directly improved the literacy skills and employability outcomes of 75 young women and provided 600 young women with the opportunity to attend panel events where they heard from 17 inspirational women in leadership roles.

Evaluation of the programme in the first year showed that overall the programme improved young women's literacy and communication skills for the workplace, increased young women's confidence in the skills they need for work, and improved young women's leadership abilities, raised aspirations and boosted preparedness for work.

More specifically, the evaluation findings from the first year showed that:

- 97% of young women said they now know how to give a speech and how to communicate in the workplace
- 80% of young women said they have a better understanding of what may be expected of them in a job interview
- 73% of young women said they now know how to write a formal email in a work context
- Young women were more than twice as likely to be confident working in a team after taking part in the programme (increasing from 38% to 93%)
- Young women were three times more likely to be confident going in to a job interview after taking part in the programme (increasing from 26% to 73%)
- The programme resulted in a 42% increase in the number of young women who were confident writing in a workplace context, such as writing a CV or email (increasing from 54% to 77%).
- 96% of young women now feel more prepared to enter employment
- 84% of young women feel that they can now reflect and evaluate their team's approaches to tasks and carefully influence them to get better results
- 81% of young women now feel they can better adapt their leadership style depending on the situation
- 78% of young women now know what skills they will need for the job they want

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About the National Literacy Trust

We are a national charity dedicated to raising literacy levels in the UK. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy. We run projects in the poorest communities, campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians and parents, and support schools.

Visit literacytrust.org.uk to find out more, donate or sign up for a free email newsletter. You can also find us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter.

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