Thinking about young people and aspirations: What do we know, what do we need to know?

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One of the most important questions that we ask young people is, "what do you want to do when you are older." It always seems like a simple and straightforward question that is meant to guide young people into thinking about what they want to do for their future occupations. This seemingly straightforward question, however, is really loaded with a great deal of social expectations and a judgment about whether the young person is being realistic or either shooting too high or too low. Very often, the person asking the question, an adult or teacher, or someone with some kind of authority, has an expectation of how a young person will answer the question. This leads to an important dilemma in research on young people, which is how do we understand to what and how it is that young people aspire, without asking them to fulfil the adult expectation that usually consists of professional occupations like being a lawyer, doctor or engineer.

What we know about aspirations often falls into two categories: what do young people say about aspirations, and how are teachers and parents advising young people about aspirations. It is important to think of the advice about career choices as linked to a language of *opportunities*, primarily by the opportunities provided by the place in which the aspirations are formed, or what Furlong and Cartmel (1995) call "opportunity structures." One supposition is that presenting a range of possibilities to individuals may help adolescents to make career choices. For example, if young people are fully aware of the kinds of occupations or education programmes available to them, they might have higher and clearer aspirations. However, knowing the options available for occupations can also send a different kind of message, which includes guiding some young people towards or away from professional occupations.

Another part of what we know about how aspirations are formed for young people stems from the literature on career advising. One key problem that is pointed out by Hoyt (1981) addresses the training of teachers, as he argues that classroom teachers are not universally supportive of career education because the benefits of career advising are not always apparent for teachers. Stewart et al (1989) suggest that personal attributes related to achievement in school, like self-concept, influence occupational aspirations, but that occupational aspirations are also "mediated by environmental factors like parental and teacher support and advice". One thing that is consistent throughout all of the literature is that the relationship between aspirations

and career advising provides an important starting point for understanding how young people form aspirations in the context of schools.

However, it is also important to remember that advice is not neutral and the guiding principles are often based on the perception of what is in a young person's best interest. The concept of having a career is often fixed, both in the ways we look at development and in school curriculum, as there are no real alternatives to growing up and getting a career when we think of teaching about the transition to adulthood.

This question of what we need to know about how young people form aspirations has become central to how I see my role as a researcher in New Brunswick. I start from the position that we have a common sense understanding of wanting young people to have high aspirations, to want to be doctors, lawyers and engineers. However, what we know is that not everyone can have a professional career. This is based on a variety of reasons, some of which include, ability, knowledge about the labour market, and the money to attend postsecondary education. Research in this area needs to consider the ways in which adult and career identities are formed as young people are finishing secondary school and choosing pathways towards work or postsecondary education.

We need a better understanding of where career aspirations originate and therefore how best to situate educational interventions. There is a great deal of pressure on high school students as they start to choose a career and this choice often works as a binary construction of adulthood for young people: adults know what they want to do for a career, and adolescents are expected to find out. In order to achieve a "successful" adulthood, students are expected to choose careers and know how to go about achieving them. Research in this area must have both academic and policy applications, and should be utilized by teachers and policy makers in the province. My hope is that continued research on career aspirations will serve as a starting point for critical discussions about the relationship between career and adulthood.

References:

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