

# Customer Voice Research Aspirations and the Children and Young People Segmentation (Part 2)

Sherbert Research



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DCSF-RR180**

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*Aspirations and the Children and  
Young People Segmentation (Part 2)*

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## **Research objectives**

To explore, by segment, the aspirations of young people including how they are developed, influenced, shared and communicated.

This research has provided the DCSF with insights on the aspirations of the four remaining segments of young people, following Aspirations part 1 research carried out in June 2009. These insights aim to support the development of strategic communications and relevant policy targeted at children and young people.

## **Research methodology**

16, one and a quarter hour friendship paired depths (two friends per depth) with children and young people aged between 11 and 17 (Year 6 to Year 12). Eight sessions were with girls and eight were with boys.

32 children and young people in total, from the following segments:

- Growing and learning
- Happier at home
- Weakening links
- Exploring independence

Attitude statements were used to help recruit young people into the right segments.

16 young people completed a pre task before coming to the sessions. The task involved a short journal relating to their aspirations.

Research took place across England (rural, suburban and city locations) during the weeks commencing: 28 September and 5 October 2009.

## **Key findings**

The research methods used and sample size of this project was designed to gain detailed understanding of the aspirations of young people in the segments outlined above. While the insights gained were both rich and fascinating, the sample size itself was not 'robust', yet attitudes were consistent within each segment to varying degrees. Some similarities and clear differences emerged about aspirations across the segments, which complement the findings from Aspirations part 1, and give rise to some interesting implications for policy and communications.

### **Growing and learning**

#### **Overview**

This segment of young people seemed to have a positive outlook on their lives and recognised the importance of learning and skills development for their futures. They had positive family and social relationships and most aspired to having better careers than their parents. They tended to get on well with school, both socially and academically and expressed their commitment to taking responsibility for themselves and doing their best. Most Growing and learning reported struggling with the transition to secondary school, as they felt the experience lowered their confidence and subsequently they did not enjoy

speaking in class. They reported feeling comfortable in a structured learning environment, behaving appropriately in lessons and thriving on constructive feedback. However, this group of young people lacked a deep seated confidence, which made them feel self conscious of their achievements and they appeared passive and reactive when seeking out opportunities. They weren't self promoters, nor 'Gifted and Talented' nor at risk of exclusion, which means they could be at risk of becoming 'invisible' in the system. Most Growing and learning young people said they planned to take a range of GCSE subjects and were thinking about A-levels.

Parents were reported as encouraging them rather than putting them under pressure.

Young people in this segment also reported feeling frustrated by their immediate environments and financial situations. For many, where they lived (rural or urban) and the extra-curricular opportunities offered in their local area combined with medium to low family incomes, could be barriers to them achieving their ambitions of going to university and having 'good' careers. It seemed that the more affluent and connected Growing and learning young people would be more likely to thrive as they would have opportunities and connections to help them develop through life.

### **Policy and communications recommendations**

Growing and learning need to be noticed and encouraged at school, to help them progress through the system and reach their full potential. As their confidence dips in the early stages of secondary school it is suggested that input would need to start in Year 7 and continue throughout. Growing and learning would benefit from support offered in a structured way and claimed they would make good use of any extra advice or help they are given to succeed. They reported that they responded well to constructive feedback from teachers as it allows them to take more responsibility for themselves and make progress. They are likely to respond well to a range of inputs, such as help with CVs, application forms, mock interviews to help build their confidence, as well as a range of work experience. However any support they receive needs to feel within their reach and avoid pushing them too far beyond their comfort zone, which could have the opposite effect and knock any burgeoning confidence. Family are important in supporting Growing and learning's sense of self, their input in education and planning for the future would be welcomed.

This segment of young people is most likely to be responsive to communication campaigns targeted at their age group, particularly if the tone is empowering rather than authoritarian and excitable.

### **Happier at home**

#### **Overview**

Happier at home young people risked not fulfilling their potential due to a range of factors: family, environment, confidence and engagement with school and learning. Compared with other segments, Happier at home young people seemed less inspired about life and learning. They confessed to having little desire to seek out new experiences or take part in extra-curricular activities and they appeared to look at life with a short term perspective. Most seemed uncertain and some were daunted about their futures, highlighted by their lack of desire to make plans or take responsibility for themselves. They did not seem to have high hopes for themselves and imagined their futures mirroring the lives that their parents currently lead, although this was not expressed in any negative way.

School seemed to be a predominantly unfulfilling experience for Happier at home young people as they are less academically engaged. They struggled to find relevance in subjects and did not thrive on the social buzz which other young people reported enjoying. They found the transition from primary to secondary difficult, particularly changing from what they perceived as a nurturing and caring environment to a rather intimidating place. However, they appreciated teachers who respected them and gave specific feedback, as this was positive attention. Some also liked practical learning. The over 15s were excited at the thought of leaving school, but most were unsure about their next life stage. They perceived themselves as having no skills and found the idea of further study unappealing. However, they recognised the value of further qualifications. Happier at homes did not want to go to university, their decision motivated by a fear of being away from home and not making friends. Their parents did not seem to push them in any particular direction, and seemed unaware of the range of opportunities available to them, so they encouraged the 'whatever makes them happy' route. It could be said that some parents fostered dependence, making it harder for young people to believe they could rely on themselves and have an independent future.

### **Policy & communication implications**

It is important for Happier at home to feel emotionally supported at school, particularly in early secondary school when struggling with the transition from primary school, this could be mitigated through the introduction of mentors or older students as buddies, as this will help the environment feel familial. Happier at home will also benefit from being inspired about learning, having practical lessons, skills development and confidence building opportunities. It is essential that initiatives are executed at an early age (Year 6/7/8), in order to help them feel motivated at school. They would also need to be made aware of the relevance of subjects and how these contribute to their future. This could be enhanced if they are exposed to other people's experiences so that they have an insight into the bigger picture. This could help them to feel better equipped to make informed choices about leaving school.

Family are central for encouraging Happier at home to develop themselves. However, as they may also undermine any sense of independence by diluting young people's efforts to take responsibility for themselves; communication with family is as important as with the young person. In terms of tone, communication needs to empower young people to make their own decisions about courses and careers. Parents need to be informed about enabling and empowering their children early on in their child's school career.

In order to motivate Happier at home young people regarding their futures it would be valuable for them to learn about themselves beyond the lens of school and family. They would also benefit from practical work experience, having the chance to see what they like and can do in a range of environments could help to motivate them. However, they would need plenty of hand holding such as help with CVs, application forms, and mock interviews.

### **Weakening links**

#### **Overview**

Young people in this segment had very little self belief and looked at life with a short term view. They confessed that looking at life longer term felt depressing and caused some to feel anxious. Those who were under 15 appeared to have already given up trying and did not feel supported by the adults in their lives, including teachers and parents. Those over 15 were filled with regret, most had left school and were either at college or were unemployed, taking e2e courses.

The majority of Weakening links were disengaged with school and formal learning. It did not seem relevant to their lives currently or their futures. Most felt that teachers did not understand them and did not work with them in positive ways. It seemed that they craved being understood and sought affirmation from their peers.

The Weakening links who were still at school said they looked forward to earning their own money, which could be a barrier to them furthering their education.

Some over 15s were taking vocational courses e.g. Diploma in construction, which appealed as the learning was more practical and felt relevant to them. They felt there was little point for them considering university because it is too expensive and they do not like formal learning, although a couple liked the idea of living away from home and with friends.

In the world of Weakening links, family relationships tended to be unconventional and families reportedly played a limited positive role. They felt misunderstood and rejected by their families and consequently were unlikely to seek advice or support from other adults such as teachers or authoritative figures. This meant they were more likely to seek peer support and approval to make up for the absence of adult role models. Most wanted to move out of home and to be independent, but did not anticipate moving far away.

Most under 15s were unsure about the differences between a job and career. They had some idea of what they wanted to do when they were older but had not researched how to pursue their ideas. The older Weakening links reported having career aspirations up until year 8, but they bowed to peer pressure and their aspirations seemed left by the wayside, which some admitted filled them with regret and remorse.

### **Policy and communications implications**

Throughout their secondary school experience, Weakening links need to be developing their confidence and building their skills. Not only could it enable them to make more informed, confident choices about leaving school, it could also help them stand up against peer pressure, which can be formidable.

It is particularly important to catch Weakening links at the transition stage from primary to secondary, so they continue to feel a sense of belonging and motivated to learn. This will help to cultivate their identity positively and away from more vulnerable, risk taking behavior. Weakening links crave emotional support, particularly from people like them, so an older student or mentor could help them at school.

As they are disengaged with school and learning, it is crucial that this segment of young people can understand the relevance of subjects and how they may contribute to their future. It would also be important to engage them in a range of exciting ways as many tend not to respond to conventional teaching and learning methods. They are likely to benefit from being exposed to and inspired about a range of options for their futures early on at secondary school. This would help them feel motivated about school as lessons and learning would feel relevant to them.

Family cannot be relied upon as the sole source of support and guidance for young people in developing their aspirations. This segment of young people is dependent on a stronger input from impartial and reliable sources. Therefore bringing in positive, relevant models into the education environment and building confidence through emotional literacy and skills development could help some of the vulnerable Weakening links resist negative peer pressure. They would benefit from having a range of ways through which to define their identity, derive confidence and explore how they could make the most of themselves.

They are likely to listen to advice about careers from someone to whom they can relate, who appears similar or shares similar interests. They would also value practical work experience opportunities to see what they like, and can do (range of environments). Those who are slightly older (Year 8/9) with clearer notions about their future would need the correct guidance and relevant work experience so that their dreams are more likely to come to fruition. They will need a lot of hand holding and practical help with CVs, application forms, mock interviews etc. to help them reach their potential.

## **Exploring independence**

### **Overview**

This segment of young people were happy with life and could be seen as being archetypal 'rounded' people, expressing the core belief that in life they will reap what they sow. They had high self esteem and made the most out of opportunities they were given in and out of school. They wanted to get good qualifications, so they worked hard when it mattered. They also took part in extra-curricular activities, clubs, school trips; thriving on the camaraderie, learning new skills and having new experiences. They reported having a stable support system of friends and family. Their parents played an advisory role and supported them when they needed it. Most felt that they were not put under any unnecessary pressure.

All of the young people in this segment aimed to go to university. They were pragmatic when it came to thinking about university courses, aiming for courses that were within their reach. Above all, they felt that university would give them more independence and they look forward to the social aspect of university life.

Exploring independence aspired to having careers and believed they would continue to develop themselves throughout life. They were happy to seek advice and support about their futures from teachers. They felt that they could reach their career goals by getting their qualifications and going to university, however, they also thought work experience and extra-curricular activities would help them gain more experience. Some worried that they may not be able to afford university but they did not worry that they would not find a course they were interested in.

### **Policy and communications implications**

It is important that the education system encourages Exploring Independence to stay rounded, so they remain engaged in a range of activities and stay committed to formal education. Exploring independence will make the most of all IAG they are offered. As they are sociable and benefit from peer support, providing input on aspirations, skills and careers within the peer set is likely to work very well and help make it fun. They would love opportunities to explore their futures beyond their current environment e.g. business, work experience, talks, making themselves more employable. They would also appreciate help with CVs, application forms, mock interviews. As university is important and exciting, they would like to speak to experienced people who can guide them about university courses and culture.

Including parents in the conversation would be important, as this segment relied on their family for guidance and parents reportedly helped them to feel confident in making their own decisions.



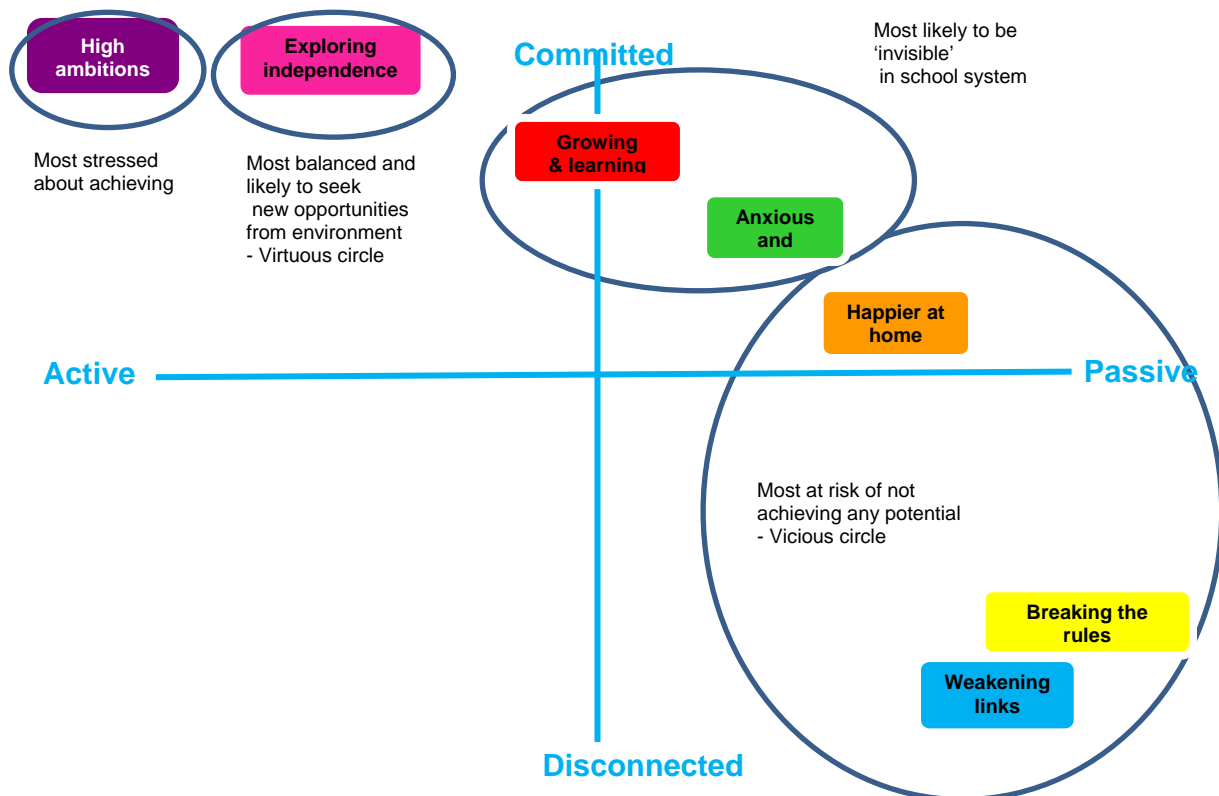
## Summary

This research, coupled with Aspirations part 1, revealed the importance of offering a range of interventions to young people throughout secondary school to appeal to their different needs. Some young people, such as High ambitions and Exploring independence are more likely to seek out opportunities themselves - yet Exploring independence will do this in a more balanced way, whereas High ambitions would be more stressed about their futures. Both of these segments would benefit from ongoing constructive support as outlined earlier.

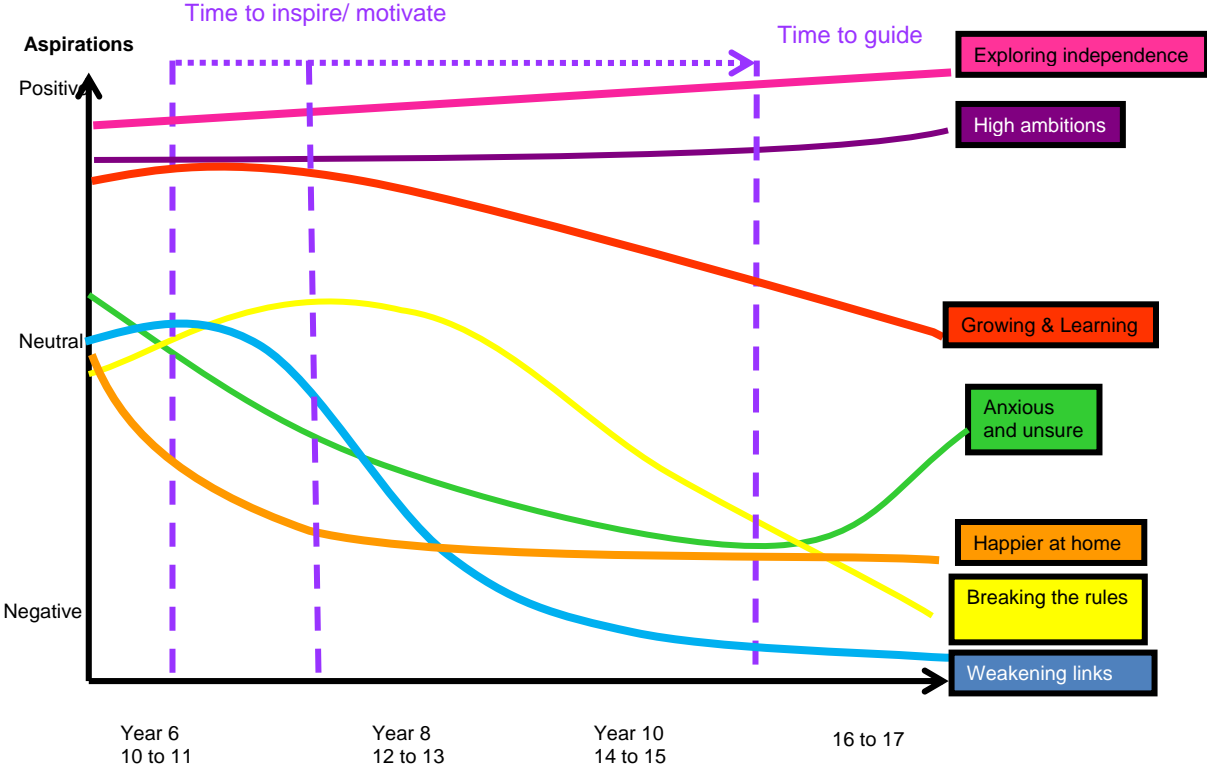
In contrast Breaking the rules, Weakening links and Happier at home struggle with their self esteem and confidence and are less likely to seek out support, unless it is delivered in accessible ways. It needs to be fun, engaging, highlight the relevance of school and offer a realistic picture of their futures. Input and support needs to begin at the transition stage of their school career and continue throughout it. If they are not given the right support these segments are unlikely to achieve their potential and may be at risk of ending up in a vicious circle of underachievement and unhappiness.

Growing and learning and Anxious and unsure are likely to respond well to interventions target at boosting their self esteem. Currently they are most likely to be 'invisible' within the school system and would benefit from interventions that would give them the confidence to make the most of opportunities around them and develop their skills and interests. Like the other segments, this would be most valuable at the transitions stage of school and continue on a regular basis throughout secondary school; helping to shape their identities and carve out their futures.

## Mapping their feelings about their future - Parts 1 and 2



# Their aspiration journey - Parts 1 and 2



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