The spectre of poverty in distant futures without university: reflecting on aspirations for their pre-adolescent children among parents from deprived neighbourhoods in Glasgow

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RESEARCH NOTES

ABSTRACT

This research note argues that emerging research on poverty and education in Scotland needs to adopt a longer-term focus. Drawing on the work of Glasgow Caledonian University's *Caledonian Club*, it reflects on evidence that one-third of parents who consider that their primary and nursery school children will not attend university when they are older also perceive that the cost of a university education will be a barrier to participation.

TACKLING POVERTY THROUGH EDUCATION IN SCOTLAND

The wider body of global initiatives (World Education Forum, 2000; UNESCO and Education for All, 2015) and UK analysis (JRF, n.d.; Sutton Trust, 2014) that has examined the inter-relationship between poverty and education, is being complemented by an emergent field in Scotland that is exploring the challenges that present locally through reviews (Pirrie and Hockings, 2012; Sosu and Ellis, 2014), commentaries (McKendrick, 2013; McKinney, 2014) and empirical research (McKinney *et al.,* 2012; Wilson *et al.,* 2014) Significantly, much of this work is a collaborative endeavour, bringing education researchers and practitioners alongside poverty researchers and anti-poverty practitioners, e.g. Save the Children's FAST work with West Dunbartonshire (Watters *et al.*, 2015), the Child Poverty Action Group's collaboration with Glasgow City on the cost of schooling (CPAG Scotland, n.d.) and the multi-disciplinary Poverty and Education Network of the Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA, n.d.).

Given the extent and depth of poverty in contemporary Scotland (McKendrick *et al.,* 2014; Kenway *et al.,* 2015) and given projections of significant increases in child poverty toward 2020 (Browne *et al.,* 2013; Social Mobility and Child Poverty

Commission, 2014), it is to be expected that much of this research effort in Scotland is focused on the immediacy of poverty and its impact on contemporary educational experiences. However, It is equally important for this work to develop a longer-term focus, particularly where one of the key objectives of educational interventions is to enable children from disadvantaged backgrounds to avoid poverty in adulthood by improving educational outcomes.

EARLY AND SUSTAINED INTERVENTION THROUGH GCU'S CALEDONIAN CLUB

Glasgow Caledonian University introduced the Caledonian Club in 2008 as a long-term partnership through which it would work with five of the twenty-three 'learning communities' across the city, engaging pupils at seven key points in their nursery, primary (P2, P5 and P7) and secondary (S1, S3, S5/6) education, with a view to raising their aspirations, improving their key skills and better understanding what makes a difference in attaining positive educational outcomes. When the Caledonian Club was being conceived, almost one fifth of young people in Glasgow were not progressing from school into a positive destination (17% in 2006/07, third-highest in Scotland behind Midlothian and West Lothian), and a low proportion of Glasgow's school leavers were progressing to university (22% in 2006/07, lowest in Scotland) (Scottish Government, 2008). Positive destinations and progression to higher education were particularly low for those schools with which GCU subsequently entered into partnership as a Caledonian Club school.

Caledonian Aspirations 2020, a dedicated team within GCU, is responsible for monitoring and appraising the impact of the Caledonian Club. Although it will be many years before the impact of the full Caledonian Club model can be measured, interim research and evaluation is routinely undertaken to understand the effectiveness of Caledonian Club activities and the immediate impact of these interventions on children's self-efficacy, understanding of university, and aspirations toward post-school education.

Parent or guardians accompanying nursery school children on their visit to GCU are asked to complete a survey. A similar survey is sent to parents of Primary 2 and Primary 5 children who participate in a Caledonian Club project. These 'parent' surveys aim to better understand three broad themes: (i) parents' own experiences of school and post-school education; (ii) parents' hopes and aspirations for their children; and (iii) parents' perceptions of factors that might determine outcomes for their children.

Parents are asked to consider the likelihood of their child going to university or college on leaving school. Parents who indicated that their child was 'not likely' to go to university were asked whether they were likely to go to college. Those parents who thought their children would not go to university were also asked to indicate what factors may prevent this from happening. Five years' data have now been accumulated from the parental surveys.

IMPOVERISHMENT AND PARENTAL ASPIRATIONS

Just over one half of parents consider it to be likely that their child will go to university when they finish school, well in excess of the proportion of Caledonian

Club school leavers currently progressing to university. Most of the remainder considered university to be a 'possibility' for their child (40%), although one quarter of all parents (26%) do not think it is likely that their children will progress to either college or university on leaving school[1].

Parents who indicated that it was 'possible', 'not likely', or that they 'didn't know' whether their child would progress to university on leaving school, were also asked to suggest what things might prevent them from going to university. Six possible barriers were suggested (in addition to an 'Other' and 'don't know' option) and parents were invited to indicate all of the barriers that they considered to apply. Typically, parents identified one or two barriers that were expected to prevent their child from progressing to university (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: PARENTS' PERCEPTION OF FACTORS THAT MIGHT PREVENT THEIR CHILD FROM GOING TO UNIVERSITY (FOR THOSE NOT EXPECTED TO GO TO UNIVERSITY)
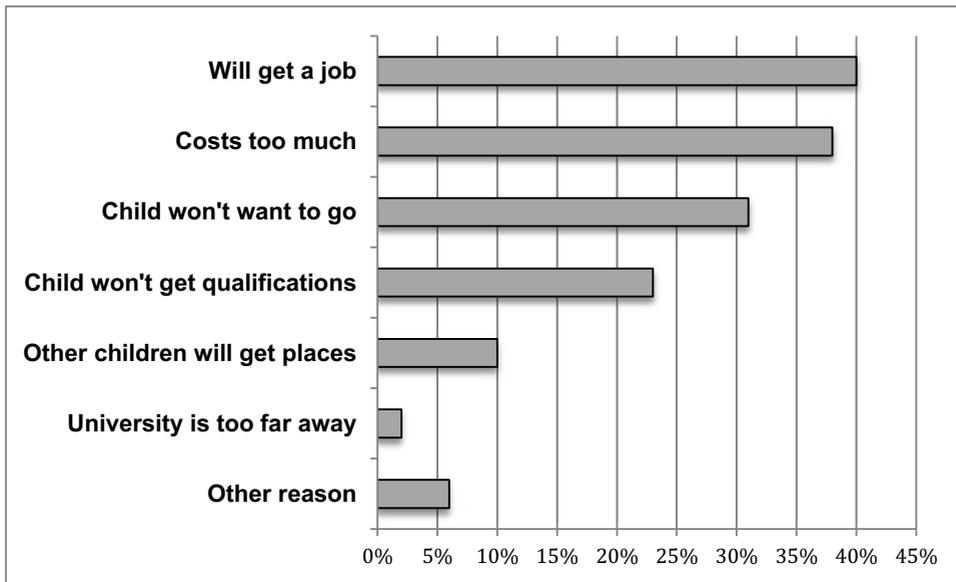
Notes: Aggregate results from 896 parents across three age-stages (Nursery, P2 and P5) for three school years

It can be argued that the most common 'barrier' to university study that parents identified is not necessarily negative. Thus, of those parents who did not think it 'likely' that their child would go to university, the most common reason to explain this was that their child would 'get a job' (40%), which is considered by the Scottish

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[1] For clarification, one quarter of parents did not think that it was either "very likely" or "likely" that their child would progress to either college or university after leaving school; these parents perceived that it was either "possible", "not very likely" or that they "didn't know" whether their child would progress to either college or university.

Government to be one of the 'positive destinations' for young people leaving secondary schools. Almost one third of this group also thought that their child would 'not want to go' to university (32%).

On the other hand, a significant proportion of those parents who did not think that their child would progress to university thought that the cost of a university education would be a barrier (37%). On one hand, this demonstrates that the current system of financing the university studies of students from disadvantaged backgrounds is not perceived by their parents to facilitate participation; such concerns may be heightened if the proposal by the UK Government to replace subsistence grants with loans for the lowest income households is introduced in Scotland (Britton *et al.*, 2015). However, this finding is also significant in terms (and therefore indicative of the wider importance), of a long-term perspective in the analysis of poverty and education. The children of the vast majority of parents surveyed would not be expected to progress to university for, at least, another ten years. That such a large proportion of parents of young children perceive that their financial well-being will not improve to the extent that it would not prevent their children progressing to university studies is suggestive of the depth to which poverty pervades the lives and restricts the horizons of people living with it.

GCU's Caledonian Club is now introducing more direct work with parents in an attempt to challenge misconceptions that university is not a realistic prospect for their children, to support parental skill development, and to enable parents to achieve more with the skills that they possess and acquire. More generally, the emergent field of poverty and education studies in Scotland, in addition to focusing on contemporary issues, must also acknowledge, and then work toward challenging, the ways in which poverty conditions expectations and limits horizons, if it is to achieve its longer-term goal of overcoming the barriers that poverty presents to a successful education in Scotland.

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