A FAIR CHANCE IN LIFE
and is 'unleashing aspirations' enough?

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Unleashing Aspirations **- commissioned by Gordon Brown - describes bad things happening in Britain's opportunity structure. We have a natural interest - it is about who gets to do what in society. It is also about why it is so unfair.**

The report documents how top jobs in law, medicine, politics and the media go to people who are privately educated. 'Privately educated' is as much a marker for good life-chances as 'free-school-meals' is for bad ones.

This article probes:

> what's going on;
> making sense of the findings;
> what to do about them; and
> where careers work figures.

Careers work does figure. No ethical careers worker can fail to wonder what we should be doing about this - and why we haven't done it better.

There is a clue in a distinction that the report doesn't make: between:

1. thwarted aspiration - which, maybe, we can help to unleash; but there is also...
2. suppressed aspiration - which, somehow, needs to be re-ignited.

Neither is easy. But, Bill argues, if we are serious about re-igniting squeezed off hopes, we need to think again about the career-development models we use to shape our work.

This article points to why this is so, how the report helps, and what you can do about it.

Unleashing Aspirations is a critically important report, addressing one of the most pressing issues for contemporary society - 'why is access to opportunity so unfairly distributed?'. No ethical careers worker can afford to ignore it.

The work is chaired by former Blairite cabinet minister Alan Milburn. The report is provocative. It speaks as though nothing of any interest was said before it came along - yet it reports little that we didn't already know. It avoids addressing underlying structural issues for the abuse of wealth - where the most basic problems lie. And it is woefully unfair to Connexions - but there's nothing new about that.

Nothing wrong, either, with being provocative - and this report is as important to our work as anything that has come out of government. It puts social stratification firmly on this - and

any future - government's agenda. You should act on it - but for your reasons, not Alan Milburn's.

what's going on? The facts are startling. Fewer than one-in-fourteen of our children get private schooling. But that seven percent produces 32% of the Commons, 45% of top civil servants, 54% of top journalists, 55% of solicitors, 62% of peers, 68% of barristers, 70% of finance directors and 75% of judges. It doesn't say what percentage comes to us for information, advice and guidance.

More facts: in the UK the richest fifth of the population are more than seven times better off than the poorest. In Sweden, not exactly a hotbed of revolution, they are less than four times better off. In general, more-equal societies are happier - including people on the higher tax rates (the report doesn't mention this, but it's true).

Indeed, we already knew much of this: the UK poor don't get much of a look in; this has as much to do with who you know as with your capability; it's as tough to move out leafy suburb into sequestered luxury as it is to escape inner-city entrapment; in all these respects we have, for several decades, done little to redress the balance; and that makes our record the worst in Europe.

We should be deeply worried. But, in order to know what to do about it, we need to get a grip on the factors.

making sense of the findings: And *Unleashing Aspirations* rightly points to causes in cultural as well as in economic realities. We increasingly live in cultural enclaves, marked out by post-coded neighbourhoods, bookmarked websites, and shared experiences. Each enclave has its own way of seeing: life looks different from gated community, leafy suburb and run-down neighbourhood. It makes us strangers to each other - at best unfamiliar, at worst distrustful. And that fragments career narratives.

So, in some neighbourhoods people look for luck in life's lottery; in others they feel able to attribute success entirely to their own efforts. For some getting by is good enough; others will push aside any obstacle to get ahead. Going to university feels out-of-place - unnatural - in some stories; while, in others, any suggestion that you don't is met with an incredulous stare. These are beliefs, values and expectations, and they shape access to opportunity. People learn them from experience, and experience is a persuasive teacher.

The Milburn report gets some of this - but maybe not as fully as it might. There's more than one thing going on here:

aspiration thwarted by particular conditions - where people might say..	*...'we have always nursed hopes for a better future - but it just seems that there is never enough money, or confidence, or contacts to make them come true'*
aspiration suppressed by long-term experience - where people might say...	*...'we see other people succeed, but they are not the-likes-of-us, so it doesn't do to get our hopes too high - there's no future in getting above yourself'*

But the report does have a two-way strategy: 'targeted' for the few, 'universal' for the many. Sound familiar? - the 'excluded' must somehow be different from the rest of us. But I've never met anyone who has not needed to deal with both thwarted aspiration and suppressed hope. It's part of the human condition. Which is why more-than-a-century of careers-work repeatedly shows that, once a programme for the 'targeted' proves effective, the 'universal' take it over.

The point of the distinction is not to assign different help to different people, it is to realise that what you do about the one need, might not help much with the other.

what to do about it: Alan Milburn's team have come up with eighty-eight things to do. Many are not new. Here's a taste. The report doesn't sort them out like this, I do.

	...we could...
to help with **thwarted aspiration...**	...improve gifted-and-talented programmes ...re-jig work experience ...acknowledge volunteer time ...provide more on-line information ...give more attention to records of achievement ...offer more money to live-at-home students ...fund scholarships bridging apprenticeship to university ...get transparency in admission procedures ...discriminate in favour of poor families
to help with **suppressed aspiration...**	...develop more mentoring programmes ...launch a 'yes-you-can' campaign - featuring role models ...set up a national data-base of volunteer helpers ...develop a work-taster scheme ...bring in exploratory programmes from the early years ...help families with no experience of university

The people whose hopes are being thwarted get more air-time than those who have lost hope. Enhancing middle-class access to opportunity receives a lot of attention.

There is also a call to dump quangos - like the former Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), which has done a lot to support developments that will really help. And the bulk of this report's recommendations are for a new system - linking government, professions and employers in joint action.

But, even there, nothing is recommended for what that system is in the best position to deliver. No mention, for example, of what to do about the mal-distribution of wealth, the privileged status of private schools, or the buying of queue-jumping access to favoured schools.

Instead, there is list of what the system should lever you and your colleagues into doing better. So the system is not asked to do what it can do best, but to develop opinions on what it is in no position to understand. The QCA gets that. Politicians don't.

The thing about policy is that it is political. All of these feature of the report are vote-catchers. There are some constituencies that must not be offended. The hopeless-poor are not among them.

That is politics. This is careers work. Here's the challenge: the beliefs, values and expectations which suppress aspiration are learned over time. They form habits-of-mind...

beliefs
'this is how things are...

values
' ...this is what's worth the effort...'.,

expectations
'...and this is as good as it gets.'

And, if these are the habits, then social mobility would not mean more decision-making, it would mean more decision un-making - based on seeing things from other points-of-view, and holding out the possibility of a change-of-mind. Working for social mobility means enabling that kind of flexibility: possible selves, in possible futures - and a possible change-of-direction.

What is learned over time must be re-learned over time. The call for more work in primary schools acknowledges this. It may have been neglected, but it isn't new. More than a decade ago career-related learning in key stages one and two was set out as a product of career-learning theory. (The thinking was later incorporated into the CPI model as 'P-for-processes'.) This was not primary-school careers-education-and-guidance, but active learning - to enable finding things out, sorting them out, checking them out and working out what we can do about them. The DCSF is currently developing its own version of primary-school work. It will need to call on newly-liberated primary creativity. And that imagination must enable children to learn from stories in a way that equips them to tell - and re-tell - their own. We'll see.

An overall conclusion of the Milburn report is to turn all of this over to a social-mobility commission, engaging in research, advice and the dissemination of best practice. The commission should be small and supported by a handful of staff. Could it be that, having spoken, the team does not expect anybody to be able to add much to what it says?

You may know better than that.

where we figure in this: Vested interests will spring into action over this. They will claim that unleashing aspiration is what they do. They might calculate that they can get some working-class kids into at least some of the seven-million new professional jobs predicted for coming decades.

But we should be careful about what we claim. Our record does not offer much support for the view that we help most the people who most need help. It is hardly surprising: we have called for too long on a career-management model set up in the 1970s. It sets out what it is worth talking about when you're talk about career: an informed decision, based on reliable awareness, made by a free-standing individual... in a social vacuum. It's not how people live their lives - not the 'universal', nor the 'targeted'.

The model has been revised several times over - the most recent of which makes more of social relations. (It is in the CPI model as 'C-for-coverage'.)

Careers workers cannot change the way wealth is distributed, they have little leverage on the procedures by which systems assign privilege, and they don't have a hand in how economies crunch. Changing systems is not down to careers workers, it's down to policy and its constituencies.

But careers workers can help people to learn. And, when it comes to educating for both renewed and realised aspiration, we must dig deep. Six year-old learning can widen horizons and work on new narratives. But, at 15 years-of-age, not doing what you expected to do - and what other people still expect you to do - is conflicted, and needs deeper and more sustained help. It deals with emotional-and-social pressures, appreciates other points-of-view, links thoughts and feelings, works on what to let go and how to move on, takes on unanticipated risks, tries things out, makes that new way of seeing its own, and imagines how it will play out in a future narrative. It interrogates experience, pushes boundaries, assigns and re-assigns credibility. It changes beliefs, values and expectations. This is not tick-box or edge-of-timetable careers education. It is a well-integrated programme firmly embedded in a curriculum which gives purpose to learning. It is not policy talk, it is learning talk. Connexions and the QCA have given it more than a nod.

A line-of-thinking for career-management in a social context was first mapped by community-interaction theory. (It, and more recent work, have been incorporated into the CPI model as 'I-for-influences').

One of the features of this approach is how people need to take one thing with another: thought and feeling, work and home, family and friends, getting and giving. Connexions was set up to enable these connections to be integrated in one life. It never got the support it deserved, least of all from some careers people. And now, the report is urging that Connexions be abolished. It is bizarrely misplaced: there is no Connexions service to abolish. It is also unfair: if advisers are to be located in schools - as they should, and as the report recommends - then they will do well to hold on to what they learned in Connexions. Hopes springs when people are treated as whole people, not as career-developing abstractions. And when that works well for the 'targeted', the 'universal' will clamour for it.

There will, of course, be performance indicators of more working-class youngsters in the higher professions. A truer careers-work target is more subtle. Suppose a working-class young woman is - for the first time - confident that she can make it as a barrister. But, all the same, she knows she will stick to her earlier decision - to train as a child-care social worker. That decision will not add anything to meeting whatever indicators may be set. But she knows that social work needs people bright enough to deal with barristers - and she's up for that. It's a brave decision, and a good one - she knows she could have done something else.

And you can take pride in the support you give to working things through in that way - whether they meet ready-made targets or not.

There really is not enough detail in the report's recommendations to guarantee this or any other kind of result. There are not many people out there who know enough. But you are needed to be one of the few. So the most hopeful aspect of this report is not what politicos and their apparatchiks do. It is what you and your partners - dealing with this same evidence - do. And do soon.