

Exploring the career aspirations of primary school children from around the world

drawing the future

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Summary

Only in recent years have the career aspirations which children begin to form in their primary and early years received any serious consideration from policymakers. This is despite studies over recent decades which have all come to the same, resounding conclusion; the perceptions children have about certain jobs and careers are formed and sometimes cemented at a young age. These studies have emphasised that children's aspirations are often shaped, moulded and restricted by gender stereotyping, socio-economic background and, importantly, who they know. These factors can, and do, go on to influence the academic effort children exert in certain lessons, the subjects they choose to study and the jobs they end up pursuing.

This international survey offers an opportunity to explore who primary-age children ideally want to become, and, what shapes (and often limits) their career aspirations and dreams for the future. The *Drawing the Future* survey used a simple template to combine drawing alongside a number of key questions to better understand what may be shaping the aspirations which some children hold.

Specifically, the survey asked children aged between 7 and 11-years-old to draw what they wanted to be when they were older, and asked where they heard about that job, for instance was it through their parents or someone they knew? Alternatively, were they influenced by other non-familial and local influences such as the internet, television and/or social media?

UK findings:

Most popular jobs

- By a considerable margin (over 10 percentage points), the most popular job for children in the UK was either a sportsman or sportswoman with a total of 21.3% of children drawing it as the job they would like to do when they were older. This was followed by teacher, vet and social media and gaming.
- The outlook seems positive for STEM-related professions. In our sample, STEM-related careers ranked highly as some of the top jobs which children aspired to become. Vet, Doctor, Scientist and Engineer (civil, mechanical, electrical) were the 3rd, 6th, 7th and 11th most popular jobs respectively.
- A number of children in our sample also aspired to one day have a health-based job, though the percentage share is significantly lower than either a sportsperson or teacher, with nearly 5% of young people wanting to become Doctors and a further 2% wanting to become Nurses/Health visitors and less than 0.5% wanting to become dentists, midwives and physiotherapists.
- There also seems to have been a shift in the aspirations of children, built largely upon new communication methods and the growth of online and console based gaming. For more and more children and young people online celebrities and YouTube gaming 'vloggers' have taken the place of TV and movie stars.

Gender stereotyping exists from the age of 7

- Across the sample, children's aspirations appear to be shaped by gender-specific ideas about certain jobs. Boys overwhelmingly aspire to take on roles in traditionally male dominated sectors and professions.
- Gendered patterns also emerge in STEM-related professions. Over four times the number of boys wanted to become Engineers (civil, mechanical, electrical) compared to girls. Moreover, nearly double the number of boys wanted to become scientists compared to girls in our sample. However, strikingly, two and half times the number of girls wanted to become Doctors compared to boys, and nearly four times the number of girls want to become Vets compared to boys.
- Conceptions of traditional femininity, specifically ideas around 'nurturing' or 'caring' roles, may also explain the difference in the number of girls wanting to become a teacher or doctor compared to boys. In our sample,

nearly nine times the number of girls wanted to become Teachers compared to boys. It may also be influenced by the teachers the children see, with the majority of primary school teachers being female.

Aspirations are influenced by social background

- Using the Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility of the pupils in a school, there is some evidence of children in less deprived schools being relatively more likely to have aspirations in higher-earning professions. While the FSM measure cannot accurately tell us about a child's background and familial wealth, it does give an indication that the school, and therefore its pupils, may live within a disadvantaged socio-economic area.
- Relative to those in higher deprivation schools, boys are more likely to choose engineer than mechanic, more likely to choose manager than retail sales assistant, and more likely to choose lawyer than police. There is also some evidence that certain creative professions with very high barriers to entry are more popular to boys in less deprived schools, such as being a singer/musician, actor/actress and author. Among girls, architects, engineers and vets are more popular in less deprived schools, whereas hairdresser, nurse, retail sales assistant and beauty therapist are more popular in the more deprived schools.

How young people heard about the jobs they drew

- Among young people who did know someone, the analysis found that parents and other extended members of the family (siblings, grandparents etc) were the most influential in defining children's career aspirations. The least influential person or people was a member of the local community.
- Among young people who did not know someone who did the job they drew, most young people indicated that they heard about the job through TV / Film / Radio, this was followed by personal experiences or encounters, for example visiting a doctor, seeing a train driver on the way to school.
- Less than 1% of children stated they heard about the job from a volunteer from the world of work coming in to school.

There is a major disconnect between aspirations of children and the predicted jobs of the future

- Similar to our report in 2013, *Nothing in Common*, our research finds a major disconnect between the careers that primary-age children are most interested in and those that the economy needs.
- A similar misalignment is also evident among young people in secondary schooling, contrary to arguments that career aspirations of children are transient, changing and should ultimately be ignored.

International findings:

- While aspirations, and the influences on these aspirations, vary by country, there are a number of global trends which emerge from the data
- In terms of gender stereotyping and gendered career expectations, aspirations do tend to lay in stereotypical masculine/feminine roles across the sample. One of the most popular jobs for boys across our sample is often police and armed forces while teaching emerges as one of the most popular professions for girls.
- The trends for STEM related aspirations is largely similar. In keeping with popular theories around masculine and feminine roles, boys in our samples have preference for working with things, for example working as an Engineer or Scientist whereas girls seem to aspire to jobs working with people/caring professions for example working as a teacher, nurse, doctor or vet.
- In all countries in our sample, Maths or Science is in the top two favourite subjects among children (for girls and boys), apart from children in Australia and China.

- The general trends suggest that in some developing countries children have more practical and high professional ambitions (Doctor, Teacher), whereas in developed countries aspirations are often formed around celebrity culture (e.g. Sports person, a career in social media and gaming).
- Parents, and other members of extended family, are often the biggest influencer if the respondent indicated that they knew someone personally who did that job. The exception is in developing countries such as Uganda and Zambia, where teacher is often the biggest influence. If a young person did not know someone personally who did that job, TV/Film is the biggest influencer, again with exception of Uganda or Zambia. In *all* countries in our sample, less than 1% of children state they had heard about the job from a volunteer from the world of work coming in to school.

What can we do about it?

- A future career seems a long way off for most primary-age children. Making a connection between what they learn in primary school and the jobs they might one day pursue is not easy, particularly for those from challenging backgrounds, where local unemployment is high and horizons may be set low.
- Early intervention can be a very cost effective targeted way of raising children's' aspirations and broadening their horizons. The evidence suggests that giving children the chance to meet volunteers from the world helps them to see the meaning and relevance of the subjects they are studying at school work. Embedding experiences of the real-world in learning and the school curriculum can lead to increased motivation resulting in increased educational attainment. When they engage with children, volunteers are routinely perceived as speaking from a vantage point of real authority: who better to testify how numeracy is used outside of the classroom, after all than someone who earns a wage to apply it in a workplace? Volunteers from the world of work can also play a key role in providing children with role models and tackling stereotyping around gender and ethnicity and help ensure that children at a young age don't start ruling out options for themselves. Instead the aim is to show children the vast range of opportunities open to them and ensure they don't; start ruling out options for themselves at young age. This is at the heart of [Primary Futures](#) developed by Education and Employers – giving primary schools access to a vast range of volunteers from the world of work.



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Since 2012, Bank of America Merrill Lynch has been lead corporate supporter of Inspiring the Future and founding corporate partner of Inspiring Women, initiatives run by UK not-for-profit, Education and Employers.

Currently more than 39,000 volunteers are signed up to give career insights and inspiration to students across the UK and Ireland. This includes more than 1,000 employees from Bank of America Merrill Lynch who provide careers advice to students, and to young women in particular.