

The Absurdity of Aspiration within Further Education in England: Where Much is Said but Little is Done?

Abstract

In the last 20 years, considerable research and ideological focus has been placed on aspiration initiatives in Further Education (FE) in England. Unfortunately, the label of “aspiration” is often misunderstood, and the liberal overuse of the term is largely offered as a panacea for improving the academic and life outcomes of young people, which has resulted in a paucity of studies that examine application of the concept. This discussion paper explores how current aspirational doctrine plays out within FE in England and suggests that, although student aspirations are widely lauded as important, there is a lack of understanding of the practical application of aspirational strategies. We suggest the notion of “raising aspirations” has been condensed to little more than an incitement to action that oversimplifies complexities and ignores the burden of historical social influencers on students. Consequently, we argue that a more sophisticated analysis of aspiration is needed, as well as a wider debate involving relevant stakeholders on the practicalities of what constitutes aspirational strategy.

Keywords: aspiration, widening participation, further education

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