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## Synthesis

# Aspiration interventions<sup>i</sup>

Very low or no impact for moderate cost, based on very limited evidence

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By aspirations we mean the things children and young people hope to achieve for themselves in the future. To meet their aspirations about careers, university, and further education, pupils often require good educational outcomes. Raising aspirations is therefore often believed to incentivise improved attainment.

Aspiration interventions tend to fall into three broad categories:

1. interventions that focus on parents and families;
2. interventions that focus on teaching practice; and
3. out-of-school interventions or extra-curricular activities, sometimes involving peers or mentors.

The approaches used in these interventions are diverse. Some aim to change aspirations directly by exposing children to new opportunities and others aim to raise aspirations by developing general self-esteem, motivation, or self-efficacy. For interventions that focus on self-efficacy and motivation specifically in a learning context please see Metacognition and self-regulation.

## How effective is it?

The relationship between aspirations and attainment is complex but, on average, interventions which aim to raise aspirations appear to have little or no positive impact on educational attainment. This may seem counterintuitive but there are three main reasons why this might be the case.

First, evidence suggests that most young people already have high aspirations, suggesting that much underachievement results not from low aspiration but from a gap between aspirations and the knowledge, skills, and characteristics required to achieve them. Second, where pupils do have lower aspirations, it is not clear that any targeted interventions have consistently succeeded in raising their aspirations. Third, where aspirations begin low and are successfully raised by an intervention, it is not

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clear that an improvement in learning necessarily follows. As a result it may be more helpful to focus directly on raising attainment. In aspiration programmes which do raise attainment, additional academic support is generally present.

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## Latin American Evidence<sup>ii</sup>

Research on aspiration interventions is scarce in Latin America and the Caribbean. Some studies identify how socioeconomic and family factors are associated with future expectations and aspirations among students. For example, one study conducted in Colombia found that aspirations are important drivers to foster post-secondary participation. However, they are not the main driving force. The study also shows that social class and the quality of education received are critical factors when young people have to develop the academic habits and practices to realize their expectations.

Another study, conducted in the context of a public school in Chile, investigated the relationship between parental involvement, parents' level of expectations and the academic performance among students in primary education. Using mixed methods, the analysis shows a positive and significant relationship between academic performance and socioeconomic variables, participation and educational expectations of parents. Along with that, this study highlights the dynamic role that socioeconomic barriers play as mediators between expectations and parental involvement.

However, there are no studies looking specifically at interventions designed to improve attainment by raising aspirations. Research on aspiration interventions and the impact they can have on learning outcomes requires more local studies.

## How secure is the evidence?

The evidence base on aspiration interventions is very limited. More rigorous studies are required, particularly focusing on pupil-level rather than school-level interventions. There are no meta-analyses of interventions to raise aspirations that report impact on attainment or learning. There are two relevant systematic reviews. These indicate that the relationship between aspirations and attainment is complex and that the evidence for a clear causal connection between learning, changing aspirations, and attitudes to school is weak.

This lack of strong evidence does not mean that impact is not achievable, but schools considering aspiration interventions cannot assume that raising aspirations will be straightforward or will necessarily increase attainment.

## What are the costs?

Costs vary widely and it is difficult to estimate them accurately, but, in general, they are estimated as moderate. After-school programs, parental involvement programs or tutoring programs are some alternatives that have been evaluated.

## What should I consider?

Before you implement this strategy in your learning environment, consider the following:

1. The relationship between aspirations and attainment is not straightforward. In general, approaches to raising aspirations have not translated into increased learning.
2. Most young people have high aspirations for themselves. Ensuring that students have the knowledge and skills to progress towards their aspirations is likely to be more effective than intervening to change the aspirations themselves.
3. The attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours that surround aspirations in disadvantaged communities are diverse, so avoid generalisations.
4. Effective approaches almost always have a significant academic component, suggesting that raising aspirations in isolation will not be effective.
5. Have you considered how you will monitor the impact on attainment of any interventions or approaches?

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