

**Title:** *The role of family in the aspirations of young disabled people*

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## **Abstract**

Family is one of the most influential social structures in society, moulding children and impressing them with certain expectations, values and beliefs which shape their educational aspirations and career choices throughout their life course. This paper explores the role of the family in shaping the career choices of young disabled people. It reviews the literature to identify which specific family characteristics influence the development of aspirations. It focuses particularly on how family encourages and hinders the pursuit of certain career routes through expectations, support and advice. Disabled young people may not be socialised in the same way as their non-disabled peers or siblings due to the influence of medical model thinking, where the impairment is perceived as the problem. This has left many families unsure of what to expect of disabled children, thus excluding them from many important patterns of socialisation and social processes. This paper presents empirical data from a three year study with young disabled people, giving accounts of their relationships with parents and siblings, and how family structures shaped their aspirations and choices, for education and employment. Themes include parental expectations, socioeconomic background, parental occupations, and same-sex role modelling and the development of gender typical aspirations. By listening to the views of young disabled people, families and government can learn how they can contribute to the full citizenship of young disabled people and their inclusion in mainstream society.

## **Introduction**

The family is often considered as the most influential agency in the socialization of the child. The family is a unit that performs the certain specialized roles which contribute to society's basic needs and helps to transmit information, to children, about the social and cultural order of the society in which they are born.

Although there is much evidence that school plays an important part in shaping young disabled people's future selves (see Pitt & Curtin, 2004; Shah, 2007), Batchelor (1982) argues that family is still a powerful emotional system which shapes and determines the individual's life course. It has been cited as increasingly significant to the development of young people's aspirations and life choices (Cohen-Scali, 2003; Roe, 1956; Shah, 2005). Guichard (1993: 25) makes this clear:

One insisted up to now on the place the school organization in the determination of intentions for future could hold. It is obvious that school is not the only institution which provides to the young adult frames enabling him to structure its professional intentions for the future. The family, the whole socially controlled experiences of the individual, play a role.

Grounded in the narratives of young disabled people, this paper examines how they perceive their family has contributed to the development of their career aspirations. It explores the extent to which ethnicity, class and gender elicit different family dynamics and cultures, and seeks to show how these influence young people's decision making in relation to education and employment.

## **Influence of Family**

Families influence children's and young people's career-related interests in a number of ways. They are the first to communicate knowledge, representations and attitudes towards work and to shape children's preferences for certain careers. Dreams of parents and caregivers, whether successful or not, shape the career choices of their children (Jacobsen, 2000). Family provide

valuable learning experiences, through their own models, as well as by supporting or not supporting activities that assist young people in exploring a career choice of interest. Social learning theorists, Bandura and Walters (1963), and Woefel and Haller (1971) report that modeling is a powerful mode of social influence on career choices.

Further, it is within the family that young people master certain developmental tasks considered essential to the construction of a professional identity (Cohen-Scali, 2003). These include learning how to organise themselves, planning and accomplishing different projects and developing individual abilities. However the abilities young people achieve, the choices they make and the type of projects they engage with are influenced by the context of the whole family structure, including the social economic status, the relationships between family members, parental expectations, family values and traditions. These variables can facilitate or restrict young people's horizon for action and pursuit of certain goals (Hodkinson & Sparks, 1996).

### ***Social Class and Influence on Choice***

Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) shows that social class does indeed influence the choice process, as middle-class families are dominantly concerned with guiding, shaping and ensuring choices are realistic in terms of within individual's capabilities. Whereas working class families tend to delegate decision to the children, especially if it is concerned with education, because parents may perceive their limited knowledge of the education system would be a hindrance to children's progression (Reay and Ball, 1998).

Social class background also affects the types of jobs young people consider, enabling the choice of some careers while preventing the choice of others. Gottfredson (1981) argues that in most cases, youngsters will take their social class group as their reference group when evaluating their occupational futures. For example a working-class child is more likely to orient to the typical

working class careers and adopt its standards for success, and a middle-class child will orient to the more middle class career with its more demanding standards.

Further, research indicates pronounced differences between social class and ability level. A body of research (Werfhorst et al, 2003; Eysenck & Cookson, 1970) has shown that high achieving children are encountered more frequently in more affluent families where parents work in high-status occupations, and the practiced culture is one that values hard work and encourages the achievement of high-flying goals. Shah (2005) found social class background and parental occupation were also important to the career decisions and aspirations of disabled people. The work revealed that disabled people's aspirations are more a reflection of their socio-economic background than their disability status. Thus this supports the argument that disabled people, like non-disabled people, are not an homogeneous group but have different social experiences, opportunities and relationships which shape their choices and development.

### ***Parenting Disabled Children***

It can be argued that parents' attitudes towards their disabled children's educational and occupational aspirations may be influenced by the medical perspective of disability, which attributes the problem to the individual and characterises disabled children by narratives of dependence, vulnerability and exclusion (Priestley, 1998). As the problem is perceived to be with the individual rather than with society, parents will tend to focus on how to fit their child into societal structures such as education or the labour market, as opposed to adapting structures to fit their child's choices. As Shah (2005) argues, any preconceived expectations parents may have of their disabled children tends to be measured according to the child's level of impairment, and influenced by the implications of bringing up a disabled child in a predominately non-disabled world. This may be more prominent in single parent or low income families than middle class families as the former do not always have extra financial resources or time to invest in them.

According to a review of research (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1999; Russell, 2008; Sloper and Beresford, 2006), in the U.K., parents of disabled children face three times the costs of parents of non-disabled children. The JRF found that the average costs of bringing up a disabled child is £125,000 (£7,355 per year) in comparison with an average of £37,394 (£2,100 per year) for a non-disabled child. Further Lawton (1998) suggests that disabled children are more likely to be living in single-parent rather than two parent families. Sloper and Beresford (2006) argue that many lone-parent families, with disabled children, rely solely on state benefits because the child's care needs and lack of suitable alternative childcare affect parents' ability to work. However, an American study by Lee et al (2002) shows that despite the additional challenge of juggling employment with caring for a disabled child, single mothers with a disabled child have a work participation rate which is only slightly lower than single mothers with non-disabled children. In the current U.K. welfare climate, despite new policies and campaigns to improve services for disabled children and their families (such as Every Disabled Child Matters and Common Assessment Frameworks) many parents do not receive their full benefit entitlements, and even when they do it is not sufficient to meet the costs of bringing up a disabled child (Foundations, 1999), thus single mothers have little choice but to work to cover the costs. This could, however, be detrimental to the well-being of the parent, disabled child and the parent-child relationship (Lee et al, 2002). Parents with disabled children suffer from higher-levels of stress and low-level of well-being than their counterparts with non-disabled children (Sloper and Beresford, 2006), caused by a number of factors including over-tiredness resulting from combining childcare with work, lack of resources to provide sufficiently for family needs, and lack of support.

However there is also evidence to suggest that even where parents do not have any prescribed aspirations for their disabled child they still act as sources of information about educational and occupational opportunities (Shah, 2005). Nurturing children within a warm supportive environment, and respecting them as a valued individual is important for the cultivation of individual potential.

Hart (2007) contends that listening to what young people say and respecting their views has a positive impact on their sense of self.

## **Methods**

For the purposes of this work the term ‘young disabled people’ defines males and females with physical impairments relating to mobility, dexterity and speech, aged between 13-25, who are in full-time education (in school or Further Education college), and whose life development and choices have been influenced by their individual differences as well as social structures in society. Thinking of disability in this way acknowledges the importance of the embodied experiences of disabled people as well as the part played by social processes and environments.

The central part of this paper is taken from empirical research with thirty three young disabled people, recruited via teachers from a selection of special and mainstream schools in the U.K. The sample included men and women with different types of physical and sensory impairments including congenital, acquired and deteriorating conditions, and those who used a communication device in preference to speech. The school students were all aged between 13 and 19, and college students were aged between 16 and 25. Participants were from a variety of different social class, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The young people were expected to participate in educational or vocational decision-making in that they were either choosing their GCSE or A-Level options, applying for further or higher education or for jobs. The sample is illustrative rather than representative of the choices, aspirations and constraints of young disabled people.

A range of qualitative methods were used to generate young disabled people’s stories about their lives and aspirations for the future. These included classroom observation, group discussions using forum theatre workshops and individual interviews.

### *Interviewing and Life Stories*

This research aimed to give a voice to disabled young people who are frequently denied the right to express their views and participate in decision-making that affects their lives (e.g. Morris 1998b). Therefore the means of enquiry needs to be open-ended, enabling access to groups such as disabled people and children. For this, semi-structured interviews were used, with prompts and follow-up questions to generate accounts of the young disabled people's life experiences and relationships at home and school. Interviews were conducted, within the young persons' educational environment, and typically lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. With the young people's permission and, where they were under age 18, their parents, the interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Each transcript was read through carefully, content analysed and encoded. This involved identifying emerging patterns, common themes and key points which were used to distil the findings. The young people were asked to choose alternative names for themselves, for the purposes of the research, to anonymise their true identity.

### *Empathy in research*

It may be argued that the acquisition of rich quality data, during this study, was facilitated by the fact that the interviewer and the participants came from the same minority group, that is, both parties shared experiences of challenging oppression, disablement, barriers to meet aspirations and a lack of exposure to positive disabled role models while growing up. As established elsewhere (Shah, 2006; Leicester, 199; Oakley, 1981) interviewing individuals with similar experiences encourages the generation of richer material. Stanley and Wise (1993) describe this experience of knowing as an "epistemological privilege," with researchers having access to a priori knowledge of their informants' subjective realities by virtue of their shared experiences. Further, this shared culture and background generates positive role-modelling effects, encouraging the young disabled people to ask the researcher questions about her own life experiences. While the researcher

attempted to answer the questions as honestly as possible, she did so at the end of the interview, being careful not to bias the young people's responses (Shah, 2006).

### **The Influence of Family on Young Disabled People**

In this section the empirical research is integrated with existing discourse and discussed under three sub-themes: 'Family ethnic background', 'Family as sources of support and advice' and 'Family as models'.

As young people grow and develop they are generally faced with the need to make important life choices, including decisions about their educational and occupational futures. Choices and aspirations do not appear from nowhere, they are influenced by a variety of factors. Hargrove et al (2005) argue that young peoples' ability to explore, consider and make career choices is significantly influenced by family boundaries, relationships and emotional interdependencies. According to Jacobsen (2000: 66), the family provides offspring with 'A vision of human life'.

This is endorsed by Blair et al (2003) who contend that, from an early age, children's choices, behaviour and actions will be affected by the familial context. Family provides children with a learning environment and direct and indirect knowledge which they reflect on in future years. They are often the source of initial career fantasies and career information, even when nuanced and subtle (Chope, 2006) According to Michael Rutter (1989; cited in Otto, 2000: 111)

Young people tend both to share their parents' values on the major issues of life and also turn to them for guidance on most major concerns.

#### ***Family ethnic background***

A review of Latino-American literature, by Whiston and Keller (2004), suggested that parental support and involvement in children's choices varies depending on race and class. Their analysis

implied that family had more of an effect on childhood career aspirations for some White ethnic groups than for others. In the study reported here, only two young disabled people from the sample identified themselves as being from non-white ethnic minority backgrounds, so there is not the opportunity to make valid representative cross-cultural comparisons. However the stories they told do illustrate interesting issues, and demonstrate the importance of understanding how the interrelationship between personal agency and social structure shape individual lives.

Both young men expressed similar experiences of growing up within a supportive Asian family network, with specific cultural values. Their experiences were different from the young disabled people from White ethnic backgrounds. Blair et al (2000) argue that several elements of ethnic groups' specific values (e.g. religion, language, family values) may affect children's aspirations in different ways including the value they put on education, and the types of occupations to which they aspire. For instance Asian culture values hard work and emphasizes the achievement of high standards in educational and occupational pursuits. Bignall and Butt (2000) found that young disabled people from ethnic minorities valued education and saw it as a stepping stone to a particular career. The same was revealed in this study, as the two young people from minority ethnic backgrounds expressed a desire to get a good education to get the qualifications required to secure a good job:

*'I've chosen French, IT, erm, English, science, maths, just the basic subjects because they're good for the career I want to do..GCSE's next year...then A'Levels...then University...I need IT skills, communication skills because you have to interview people, um but qualifications, English is a big one, IT I need but I'm good at IT 'cos for typing it up and maybe maths to work out percentages and stuff'* (Mike, age 15)

*'I was thinking of doing sport science and IT but then I wanted to keep IT from sports. I know it keeps you fit and that but IT is my main subject and I'm gonna get a job with IT... I want to do IT and design software or like put programs on them... to get a job that I'm wanting to get I'd need kind of a good qualification really cos if your looking for a good job you need a good qualification'* (Ikky, age 15)

Mike and Ikky both came from two parent households and identified their family members, immediate and extended, as the most significant people in the construction of their future selves. As Brown (2004) argued, the strong involvement of the extended family in directing children and adults has been viewed as reflecting the collectivistic cultures of Asian life. Hussain et al (2002) argues however, that young disabled people may not experience the same benefits from Asian family culture as their non-disabled contemporaries. Their work, with young disabled people from South Asian backgrounds, suggested that although parents wanted the best opportunities for their disabled children, the fact that they were too protective and had low expectations of what a disabled child could achieve hindered the young persons' opportunities to achieve their goals. However this is contrary to the current study, which found the young disabled people who perceived their futures being hindered by their parents' low expectations were from white ethnic single parent families. The two young disabled people from Asian backgrounds considered their family to be significant to the development of their occupational preferences in a number of positive ways. Their narratives did not include anything about overprotective parenting or low expectations suppressing their development, but only how their family supported and encouraged their choices by transmitting relevant information about education and occupations, or by acting as role models.

### ***Family as sources of support and advice***

In general the young disabled people interviewed perceived family as supportive of their aspirations, transmitting suitable information in relation to their educational and occupational

choices. This supports the work of Pascall and Hendey (2004) that found that young disabled people identified their parents as key to their transition to adulthood. Wood (1973) asserts that where parents are warm, loving, respectful to their child, and able to enhance her/his self-esteem, the child has the best opportunity to develop their personality to the full. Furthermore, the provision of such a nurturing environment permits the cultivation of individual potential. This parent-child relationship was evident in some of the young disabled people's narratives:

*'they were really like happy for me because I'm good at journalism. I've done my magazine and they know that and I always make them buy a copy, apart from that they're really like supportive...they've always said its up to you, um 'cos they know I'll pick a logical career anyway so they've always left it up to me like to make my own decision, but they always help, so if I said I want to be a journalist they'd help me like with telling me what qualifications you need and where I can get advice from, so they've never done it for me or like left me to do it all on my own'* (Mike, age 15)

*'my dad knows about it and my mum knows about it but, yeah they think its for me... they've said that whatever you're happy with, I'm happy with, so you can get on with what you want'* (Ikky, age 15)

Millie, who had aspirations to be a dancer, described her parents as supportive of her choices by collecting and transmitting information about suitable dance training:

*'They said I just should go along with what I want and my instincts and things like that... hopefully I'm starting a drama school after school, my mum's still ringing up and get my place there but it's very booked up.'* (Millie, age 13)

Similarly, Jenny, who loves performing arts at school and wants to pursue it as a career, perceives her family as very encouraging of her ambition. They support her by doing things like going to watch her perform in school shows and listen to her rehearse in her bedroom:

*'the dance shows are good, we do one or two a year. All my family came to see me... They're always really supportive, sometimes when I'm in my room singing they've been listening at the door, I didn't know they were there'* (Jenny, age 14)

Sam, who was studying for his A'Levels in preparation to go to university to pursue a degree connected with media, feels that his parents are supportive of whatever he chooses to do. He lives with his mother who, he feels is particularly keen for him to go to university, although not too far from home:

*'well my mum wants me to go to university and my dad doesn't mind what I do really he'll support me, and my mum wants me to go to X university because it's closer'* (Sam, age 17)

Similarly Steve's parents always supported him aim to do well at school and go to university. Both of his parents worked in professional jobs and thus he was exposed to a culture of a hard work and expectation to do well. There was an implicit expectation that Steve would also become qualified to work in his chosen profession. This supports work by Pascall and Hendey (2004) who found a connection between social class background and disabled people's levels of achievement. Further they suggest parents who have inside knowledge had networks that can make great contributions to the achievements of their disabled children. Such is exemplified in the study on which this paper is based. Steve's mother worked as a Teaching Assistant for disabled students in a mainstream school and thus had inside knowledge, resources and networks which may have helped to encourage and support his choices, as opposed to obstruct or change them in any way. As Priestley (1998) argues disabled people socialized within middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds have

greater access to services and facilities than their working class contemporaries. For instance, as suggested by Parish and Cloud (2006) children from professional two-parent families, are more likely to receive care and attention from their own parents who are likely to have flexibility to arrange their work schedules to share childcare responsibilities. Further, as Shah (2005) found in a study of disabled high-flyers, although middle class parents were aware of their child's impairment they were unlikely to perceive it as a barrier to opportunity. This was evident in Steve's case. He believed his parents had confidence that he would not aspire to pursue goals beyond his means:

*'it's always been a long term aim to go [to university]... I've always kind of concentrated on the things I know I can do, and erm, there won't be any problems with so'*

Fiona's decision to go to a specialist residential college, away from her home town, to pursue a course in photography, was supported by her family:

*'they're happy for me to go [to college] in a way. But, they'll miss us... They've just encouraged me to do what I want'*

Similarly, Hannah, who wants to be a photographer, initially received messages from her parents regarding what occupation they perceived as being most appropriate for her, but eventually her own aspirations were supported:

*'... I want to be a photographer and that's what I'm going to do. Now they've started supporting me a bit more'*

Bella, who had to reject her original goal, to be a nurse as a consequence of disabling barriers, felt her family were very supportive of her redirected goal to be a Deaf youth worker:

*'My family, my relatives I've told, and me grandma... They thought it was very good that I was doing that, that I wanted to work with them to help them [deaf people]... my sister was very happy about me, but then when I told her I didn't want to do that [be a nurse] she weren't disappointed,*

*she just said do what ever you want, she's very pleased with me wanting to work with deaf people'*

Although parents supported the young people's choices to do what they wanted to do and what made them happy, some perceived their child's impairment would prevent them from succeeding in their chosen career. Therefore they offered alternative occupations which they perceived to be more suitable and congruent with their child's ability and impairment:

*'I want to go to college to do either drama or media studies or computer studies... I've talked to my parents. They didn't think I could... my dad wants me to work with, umm, disabled people... Like looking after them and stuff like... But umm I want to do what I want to do, and I'll make sure I'll do it'* (Nay, age 15)

On a similar note, Hannah recalled how her dad tried to persuade her to work with computers as he perceived such a job would be easier for a wheelchair user than fashion photography:

*'my dad seemed to think I should get a job with computers, but I didn't want it I wasn't having it.'*

Other parents considered their child's choices to be unrealistic, without offering any alternative. Tim, who has very limited movement in his legs, expressed a desire to be a coach driver. Although his father communicated that this was an unrealistic idea, Tim believes there is a way he can achieve this:

*'Me dad will say its going to be a bit difficult. I've had a word with me dad actually about the coaching thing. The only problem is the leg problem. And that is really a big problem but I'm sure they will adapt'* (Tim, age 15)

Likewise Zoe, who lives in a single-parent family with an unemployed mother, was not persuaded against following her aspiration to work with babies and children, despite her mother's lack of

support: *'she [mum] always thinks I'm living in a dream world... She says 'Start living in the real world, don't live in a dream world. I often think I'm not living in a dream world if I want to do it I can do it. Alright it might take me a bit longer to do it but I'm me own person, I'll do it.'*

As Chope (2006) argues, families can restrict young people's career-related choices. One way they can do this is through their lack of or low expectations about what may happen in the future. Families with disabled children may develop low expectations of their child's future lives based on subjective knowledge and communications with medical professionals who have knowledge of the child's medical condition (Russell, 2003). These low expectations can affect a person's beliefs and can affect their behaviour during social interaction with others (Tajfel & Fraser, 1978). For instance, in the study being reported on, Zoe felt unsupported by her mother who seems to have low expectations of her, reinforced by comments like *'start living in the real world'*. However Zoe was not discouraged by these comments. Rather, they made her stronger and more determined. Her mother's unemployment and present life situation have been significant to Zoe's choices and motivation in terms of teaching her what not to be like. Further the situation possibly had a wounding effect on Zoe, but her self-belief, determination and support from significant others may have helped her learn from the experience and become stronger instead of being dragged down by it:

*'I've said to her I'm not leading, I'm not leading the life you're leading, at the minute... I always say I am going to do this, I am going to'*

Quentin, aged 15 lives with his mother and younger brother. He did not express any particular aspiration for his subsequent future, or did not mention his family in relation to shaping his choices. When prompted to talk about his family Quentin commented on how his family are often not home

when he finishes school, thus engendering feelings of neglect and isolation. He confessed that this was the thing he hated:

*'I most hate going, when the house is empty, I hate going home to an empty house so'*

This suggests that there may be a relationship between low socioeconomic status, detached parenting styles and young people's lack of aspirations. McLoyd (1990) argues that low socioeconomic status often engenders economic stress, in turn leading to unsupportive and hostile parenting practices which have been found to be negatively related to career aspirations (McWhirter et al, 1998; McDonald & Jessell, 1992). However, it can be argued, as mentioned before, that some lone mothers with disabled children have little choice, due to unmet service needs, but to go to work to meet the cost of bringing up disabled and non-disabled children. Further, leaving the children to supervise themselves may be the only option for some parents given the obstacles associated with securing childcare provision for young disabled people. For example, few nurseries or child-minders are based in physically accessible buildings, and many are unlikely to be managed by staff with appropriate training and expertise (Kagan et al, 1998). Where childcare services are accessible for disabled children, they are three times more expensive than services for non-disabled children (Daycare Trust, 2008).

Lower socioeconomic levels may limit the type of information available to young people about career options, and restrict the quality of educational opportunities and the availability of role models (Conger et al, 1993; Schulenberg et al, 1984). This is especially the case for young disabled people, who may often be excluded from mainstream childcare, play and leisure services (Azaad, 1994) due to the services, or transport, being unaffordable or physically inaccessible. Excluding disabled children and young people from mainstream play and leisure environments limits their opportunities to interact with non-disabled peers and obtain information and experiences to shape career aspirations and other life choices. It also puts pressure on single parents, presenting them with the dilemma of being full-time unemployed carers on welfare benefits which do not

compensate for the cost of disability and loss of earnings, or being involved in paid work and in danger of appearing unsupportive and neglectful of their disabled child. Although there is no explicit data in this study to support this, it is possible that Quentin's 'latch-key kid' experience could have been influenced by the aforementioned dilemmas, which in turn had a damaging effect on his prospective choices. As Parish and Cloud (2006) contend lack of parental care has some negative effects on the child's development in terms of generating adverse developmental outcomes, and the potential for suffering emotional harm.

Although Quentin did not mention his family in relation to shaping life course in a positive way, his narrative suggests that he had alternative agents of social influence, namely his link worker who provided him with the support and role modelling effects other young people received from their families:

*'I like going out with my link worker... he takes me out every other weekend... To town, the library or bowling... does reading with me and that...I'm a James Bond fan and so is he'*

This was similar to two young females, Zoe and Tyson, who both lived in single parent families with unemployed mothers who, they perceived, were unsupportive of their aspirations. Like Quentin, they both identified alternative support networks and significant others who influenced the development and pursuit of their individual choices. For instance, Tyson was restricted, by the fact she could no longer rely on her mother to provide her with the practical support she required to become involved in a Saturday drama group to get the experience of leading drama workshops:

*'I used to lead them due to my family changes I got taken out... I left due to mum's health, that's what I left for.. it was too much commitment on a Saturday morning... mum is basically getting old. Right with her having cancer at a very like difficult point in my life...'*

However her aspiration was supported and encouraged by two teachers:

*'one of the teachers who's left now, he got connections that's how I got to know about it [the Saturday drama group]*

*\*'Tina [drama teacher] says you have not got a label just because you're in wheelchair you are not labelled'*

Zoe mentioned teachers and peers as significant to her choices:

*'Friends, um, and 'cos they've then seen me with children they often, they often say to me do you want to get a job here'*

### ***Family as models***

Another way in which family influence aspirations is by example. Role models are important in shaping young people's future expectations about their occupational choices. According to Kidd (1984) role models influence by direct communication and interaction, informing the young person about the occupational role in terms of what it involved and also the extent to which their person specifications will match the requirements of the occupational role. Jans (2003) suggests that it is through role modeling effects that young people develop a sense of their own potential, self-esteem, awareness of a variety of careers and realistic expectations about possible challenges. However Jans (2003) also argues that young disabled people may lack frequent exposure to disabled people in work and careers. Although they can be greatly inspired by non-disabled parents or siblings, non-disabled people will not be able to impart information about what it will be like to grow up as a disabled adult (Shah, 2005). In the current study, Zoe thought it was very important for young people like herself to see disabled adults in top jobs:

*'... I can do it [work with children] 'cos one of my friends has got a disabled sister-in-law She's a lot worse off than me. I've never met her but I can picture her. And she's working for a very rich company apparently... every year there's disabled person working in the outreach office'*

Other young people in the study, especially girls, were interested in the disabled researcher's biography in terms of her personal and professional life course. For these young people the researcher was a model who could share insightful experiences about growing up with a physical impairment, encountering barriers and adopting strategies to achieve personal and professional goals in a disabling world. Their thirst for learning about the disabled researcher's life course could possibly be triggered by the lack of positive disabled role models available to young disabled people. Further, it is possible that the only information they may receive about growing up with an impairment is based on medical model stereotypes of disabled people being passive, dependent and different, and not on the actual positive real lives of disabled people. The lack of positive disabled role models may be a barrier to young disabled people having high expectations for themselves and developing a positive self-concept (Jans, 2003).

Only one young person in this study had a disabled relation. Noalga had an older brother with the same impairment as him who had attended the same special school two years earlier. At the time of interview his brother was studying multimedia at a local Further Education college. Noalga considered his brother as a role model, and was going to follow his example:

*'my brother came here [X school] before me. Now he is doing multimedia at college. He has inspired me to do that too after X school'*

The fact that Noalga perceived his older brother as role model supports White et al's (1992) theory that, in many cases, the older sibling is viewed by the younger as stronger, more competent and capable of executing relevant behaviour to meet his aspired goals. It is likely that the younger sibling will attempt to adopt similar behaviour to the older sibling in order to meet similar goals (White et al, 1992).

### ***Same-sex role models***

A number of young disabled people's narratives suggested effects of same-sex role modelling and significant sibling relationships. However, apart from Noalga's brother mentioned above, the role models were non-disabled members of the young disabled people's family who were considered to play an important role in the development of their subsequent occupational preferences. For instance, Ikky was inspired by same-sex relatives, particularly his cousin and uncle who both worked in the field of I.T., and his older brother who studied I.T. These relatives influenced Ikky's choices by their example:

*'I heard from my cousin from London, he's like, he's an IT expert, I think he's like one expert {on a team}...he says the money is good, he can fix computers, any problem they've got with computers'*

*'My uncle [gave me the idea of becoming an IT expert]...he is...he did get a good qualification'*

*'I've got one older brother...he goes to college, does IT the same'*

The young disabled people mentioned a number of different ways their siblings influenced their career aspirations including being a role model, or supporting their choices by assisting with/participating in certain activities with them. For instance Xavier, who is a big fan of computer games, discussed his aspiration to his younger brother:

*'my brother knows that I like doing games and stuff like that 'cos he's a fan of games as well... we play 2 player games all the time. Except he always beats me'*

Similarly Jenny, who wants to pursue a career in performing arts, says

*'I do drama and a bit of singing with my sister'*

Mike, who wants to be a journalist, currently runs the school magazine with his younger brother:

*'Um, well its me and my brother run it [school magazine], well he just says he runs it but I run it properly and he's trying to sack me at the moment'*

The data presented here is consistent with the work of Small and McClean (2002) which found same-sex relatives have a greater influence on young people's life course than those of the opposite sex. Further work by Ouchman (1996) and Trankina (1992) suggest that same-sex role models have a more positive impact on self-esteem than other-sex role models. Bochner (1994) suggests that same-sex models are particularly influential to adolescents' choices in later life, despite their significant attraction to the opposite sex. However, as Wohlford et al (2004) argues, males are more likely to choose same-sex role models than females because there are fewer same-sex role models for women, particularly in high-status occupations, than for men.

Several of the young disabled people involved in the research identified with same-sex relatives, including parents, siblings and extended family from varied ethnic backgrounds. Sabrina and Bella, both from a white ethnic background, were inspired by female members of their extended family. Sabrina's aspiration to be a language interpreter in French and Spanish stemmed from her close relationship with her aunt who went to university in France and speaks French:

*'I find the French language very good um very interesting , better then the English language... my aunty is very very good in French she went to university in France, she's good she's very good...I would like to go to university in France...my uncle passed away but my aunty still lives nearby, I see her quite a lot'*

Bella's childhood dream to become a nurse was inspired by her sister-in-law who worked in the profession

*'when I was little I wanted to do nursing... my sister-in-law is a nurse, So that's why I wanted to do, follow in the family [role]...'*

However, out of the fourteen females in the sample, only two considered female family members as role models. There was more direct linkage between fathers' occupation and boys' aspirations. Trice et al's (1995) explains this as an effect of children being concurrently exposed to situations and talk related to parental work. Experiences such as helping parents with work-related problems and having personal involvement in their occupations are considered to have a crucial influence young people's career aspirations (Chope, 2006)

Discussion about the influence of a father's occupational status over their son's subsequent choice is not recent. As Blau and Duncan (1967) contend a father's occupational status not only influences his son's career achievements by affecting his education and first job, but it also has a delayed effect on achievements that persist over the life course. A number of young males in this study were greatly influenced by their fathers' occupational status and strived to do something similar. For example, Joe had an aspiration to fix heaters like his father:

*'I want to work with my dad, fixing people's heaters ... I want to work in dad's store, when he wants me he presses 24 and I pick up the phone and say 'hello P stores' and I write things down'*

Similarly Harry developed an initial interest in computers as a consequence of his father's profession:

*'I live with my dad, he's good with computers...my dad's a computer analyst and puts all the programmes on a computer'*

Allan's father is also a computer analyst *'for the X bank'*. Although not explicit, Allan's narrative suggests that his father's occupation may have had some influence on his aspiration to work in *'something to do with computer games'*.

Mothers were perceived as having more of a supporting and caring role. This echoes Blair et al's (2003) work which found that, among Asian and White families with non-disabled children, fathers were likely to influence their children's aspirations more substantially than mothers. It is possible that the girls in this study did not identify mothers as directly influential to their aspirations (i.e. as role models) because many were housewives and not employed. However, as mentioned previously, mothers of disabled children are often deterred from seeking employment due to the lack of sufficiently flexible work which would allow them to respond to family needs. Further young disabled people are likely to encounter more barriers and inequalities than their non-disabled peers, in their transition to adulthood, and there is a tendency for them to remain with their family for longer (Hendey and Pascal, 1998). Despite New Labour's policies to increase tax credits which can be used to buy childcare for non-disabled children, mothers of disabled children still face obstacles to taking on employment because of the lack of after-school support for young disabled people. This was expressed in parents' stories reported in the work of Kagan et al (1998:3):

I think he's going to need that kind of help for longer... for later than most children do, and I don't know how that will go, because now he's nearly twelve, he's started secondary school. In another sort of year or so you'd expect that most kids would just come home with a key for the two or three days and that it would be reasonably safe, but we're not sure how that will go yet.

## **Conclusion**

Through the lens of teenagers with physical impairments, this paper explores how family structures influence their aspirations and choices for their future selves. Analysis revealed that family history, socioeconomic background, ethnic background and relationships with individual family members

have an important impact on the development of the young disabled people's education and career related aspirations.

This paper suggests that as for non-disabled people the ethnic background and socioeconomic status of the family has a marked effect on progression and trajectories of young disabled people. Although Hussain (2002) found Asian families with disabled children practiced over-protective parenting which became oppressive and obstructing, this paper suggests that the support and involvement of extended family in a culture which prizes hard work and high-status achievement can have significant positive effects on the future vision of young disabled people. Families were perceived as providing necessary support and advice in relation to education and career goals.

Further families provided powerful role modeling effects. Several young people identified with same-sex family members in particular educational and occupational environments. However most of the role models were not disabled and therefore did not have the insight and understanding about how to achieve professional and personal goals as a disabled adult. The lack of positive disabled role models poses a problem for young disabled people aspiring to meet their goals while maintaining a positive disability identity (Jans, 2003). Without the right information and guidance about how to negotiate barriers to achieve successful adulthoods, young disabled people may be in danger of conforming to the passive dependent image of a disabled person traditionally conveyed by medical model interpretations of disability.

Class appeared to have a significant effect on parents' perceptions of what their child could or could not achieve. The young people's narratives suggested single parent low income families were unsupportive of their aspirations, and indeed sometimes this was perceived as a potential barrier to progression. However these perceived unsupportive parenting styles could be attributed to the barriers encountered by single parents with disabled children who have diminished earning power due to truncated or delayed benefit entitlements, and have to combine caring for their disabled child

with working to cover the high cost of disability. This pressured situation inevitably results in a poor quality of life for low income families, including the parents and disabled children alike, and thus may engender a negative perception of disability. The research reported in this paper has identified the importance of families in the development of young disabled people's career aspirations. However sometimes, families themselves require support from professionals, be it emotional, physical or financial, before they can support their disabled child to achieve full citizenship. Although some efforts are being made to provide professional input to families with disabled children (for instance, under the Every Child Matter's Common Assessment Framework for Children and Young People, Childcare Act 2006 and Every Disabled Child Matters campaign), there is a need for more multi-agency working to ensure families' needs are assessed.

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