Social

DETERMINING FACTORS OF STUDENTS EDUCATIONAL AND OCCUPATIONAL ASPIRATIONS

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ABSTRACT: *The paper surveys some of the determining factors of students' personal, socio-educational and family-related educational and career achievement levels. The findings are that educational aspirations are primarily determined by family background, particularly during childhood and adolescence periods. School's role is being presented via the possible biases that affect career choices.*

Keywords: *educational aspirations; occupational aspirations; Educational inequities; family background;*

Introductory notes

While there is a general consensus that education is a form of capital, the inter-generational transmission mechanism of this capital is being debated, because unlike wealth or gene pool, education is not implicitly transmissible to the next generation [Monaghan, 2016]. A substantial body of study found that family background (including the socio-economic status), the level of involvement and the parental expectations have material influence on the educational and professional trajectory of students [Kim 2014]. Weiss and Steininger (2013) claim that the impact of students' social origin – operationalized as parental education – is rather under- than over-estimated in field's literature. The makeup of owns' family is considered essential for students' expectations of school and professional achievements [Kim 2014, Chung, Loeb and Gonzo 1996, Marjoribanks 1997, Sawitri, Creed and Zimmer-Gembec 2014]. Many studies of expectations of academic and career success identify the socio-economic status, family involvement and parental expectations as being influential to that matter [Kim 2014, Dumont, Klinge and Maas 2019]. Jacob and

Weiss (2010) found that young students' career decisions are determined by the parental occupational status and by parental education [Jacob and Weiss 2010 apud Weiss and Steininger 2013]. Slightly more nuanced, Doren and Grodsky study (2016) shows that maternal abilities seem to intermediate the association between the educational level achieved by children and family wealth and income, especially for elite college levels. Also in Sawitri, Creed and Zimmer-Gembec work (2014) one finds that parents play a central role in the act of cultivating children's career aspirations and in encouraging them to explore educational and career pathways. This parental role manifests itself regardless of the cultural peculiarities of a society (i.e. collectivist or non-collectivist) and has a significant effect on children's career evolution [Sawitri, Creed and Zimmer- Gembec 2014].

Although a vast body of literature argues for the crucial role family background plays in education, there also are some that claim the role of the family is being overstated, other factors being underestimated - like the psycho-social ones of identity and self concepts, social expectations and group identity [Bornholt, Maars and Robinson 2009].

Numerous other studies suggest there is an open list of biases that affects educational choices and which manifest themselves not only among teachers, but among other institutional actors involved in the educational act as well [see Drasgow 1987, Huff and Cooper 1987, Hambleton, Merenda and Spielberger 2004, Ernberg 2004, Blumberg 2008, Groot, de Groot, and Veneri 2012, Bernardi 2012]. The experimental study of teachers and student counselors' biases is illustrative in that regard, finding that they perceive students of low socio-economic level as having a less promising educational future and poorer math skills than those with higher levels. Girls are also perceived as less mathematically gifted. "In general, teachers are likely to develop negative attitudes toward low-socioeconomic status students, but especially boys" [Auwarter and Aruguete 2008a, 2008b].

Family Background and Educational Inequality

The specialty literature examines the family background as a source of educational inequities from several subject matter perspectives. Numerous studies argue that inequities quickly turn into discrimination which in turn, leads to negative determinants of educational pathways and career choices. A study undertaken in Denver, Colorado for instance [Denice and Gross, 2016] revealed that the educational stratification and segregation was associated with area of residence.

Students' academic achievements are marked by inequalities determined by factors like social status, parents' educational expectations [Yand 2007], family well-being (Marcenaro-Gutierrez and Lopez-Agudo 2016), or by school context, and are also related to family socio-economic status [Langenkamp, Carbonaro 2018]. The role the social class plays in the timely completion of high-school was analyzed in a study by Zarifa et. Al (2018) who found that graduating high-school on time was conditioned by a certain socio-economic family level. The lower the level, the less likely it was for students to graduate high-school on time.

Other studies show the negative effects that stereotyping can have over academic performance, examples being the case of obese white girls in England [Branigan 2017], or the disproportionate number of school principal referals of girls of color (Morris and Perry 2017).

Racial segregation – frequent in US. schools - is also an important source of educational inequities, which when examined through the psychological lens amount to structural problems in US. schools [Billingham, Chase and Hunt 2016].

The relationship between educational inequality and academic performance was analyzed in a PISA 2012 data-based trans-national perspective for three Asian countries (Taiwan, Japan and South Korea) and three Western ones (US, Germany and The Czech Republic), using family background and school factors as explanatory variables determined by the different educational systems of these countries [Tsai et al. 2017]. Both models showed that in considering family background, the simple number of books in a home explains the relationship between equity and academic performance. As to the school factors it clearly stands out the type of chosen educational route (general high-school or trade).

Students' Educational and Occupational Aspirations

Social cognitive career theory, developed by Lent and colleagues [*apud* Rodriguez, Inda, Fernández 2016] amounts to an effort of understanding the process through which people form interests, make choices and achieve various levels of success in their educational evolution. According to this

theory there are three groups of cognitive factors: personal, contextual and social. Personal factors constitute the core determinants for choices and success: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, interests, and goals. Alongside with the publication of this theory in 1994, a series of empirical studies emerged which confirmed, contradicted or adjusted the model [Rodriguez, Inda and Fernández 2016]. One should also mention some other career development theories that analyzed students decision-making process and a number of aspects that influence their career and success expectations. The patterns of students' career choosing process have been interpreted from various perspectives, including the concept of self efficacy and the person-environment relationship [Kim 2014].

The study of teenagers' educational and occupational aspirations in relation to the family background and to the childhood and adolescence social capital lead to the conclusion that the variations should be examined through parents' and children's perception of social and cultural capital and variations of academic capital [Marjoribanks 1996]. The study of Khattab (2003) also revealed that the family's social capital influences the choice of school.

According to several studies mothers appear to have more influence on the academic aspirations of students; at the least, it indicates a certain level of interest in the subject [Monagham 2017, Jackson and Tein 1997]. Mothers' education and their expectations of children's career choices appear to be the determining factors in the formation of the aspirations and the choices students later make. The maternal influence on children's aspirations and academic achievements in relationship to their career aspirations has been the subject of a study that examined mothers' expectations of the suitability of the educational programs of their children's career path. The study found that where mothers believed that the programs were suitable to their children's direction, children's performance was superior to those cases where their mothers' believed them to be less so. Mothers that believed their children would be getting the appropriate education for the ideal job displayed higher parental responsibility scores [Powell and Peet 1996].

In a study at Black College, Chung, Loeb and Gonzo (1996) found that aspirations for higher educations were predicted by six variables: being of female gender, having lower self-assessment of social competence, higher placing of career autonomy, a lack of grants or of personal/ familial financial resources, and anticipation of more community/ political involvement in college. They reached the conclusion that males had lower educational aspirations than females.

The educational aspirations are also determined by students perception of the meaning of education. The meaning of education is determined by variables like materialism, intrinsic aspirations and the meaning of life. One found that students with more materialistic view look at education as a pathway to more independence and more relationships but also as a source of stress - as opposed to those with more intrinsic reasons that have a more diversified outlook of it, seeing it as an opportunity for career preparedness, independence, exploration, learning, personal development, an opportunity for establishing relationships and even for changing the world, but also for escaping future responsibilities [Henderson-King and Mitchell 2011].

Socialization is also important in the formations of educational aspirations, but also in school adjustment for better academic performance. This determination is particularly important to early adolescents for whom the circle of friends is a decisive factor in social adjustment. The preference for a certain group of friends, communal goals and the social development purposes is closely linked to markers of positive school

adjustment [Dawes 2017]. The influence of friends appears to be more decisive in the case of boys rather than girls in choosing STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) subjects [Raabe, Boda and Stadtfeld 2019].

As for career aspirations, gender and socioeconomic background were more predictive in the case of adolescents and college students [Farmer and Chung 1995]. In a longitudinal study undertaken between 1989 and 1994 there were no gender-based differences recorded, but the parental roles appeared to be assumed in different ways. The results were discussed within the context of gender disposition [Looker&Magee 2000].

The relationship between adolescent and parental career expectations (parent congruence) was explored in a study that explained the important role the two variables play in adolescents' career aspirations [Sawitri, Creed and Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014]. A review of the research of adolescent occupational dispositions reveals the variables with greatest impact being self-esteem, socioeconomic status, and cognitive vocational maturity [McDonald and Jessel 1992].

Conclusions

At the least from the perspectives mentioned here, the family appears to have the most significant role in the educational and career aspirations of children. The parental model is an important factor, but not always.

More likely appears that the overall family context in which the child grows up and is being educated positions him/her in a more or less favorable position for achieving higher educational levels.

Factoring child's personality also matters and a particular socio-economic family status may lead to different outcomes in an otherwise equal educational opportunity system.

For children with strong intrinsic motivation, high educational and career aspirations can manifest in the very family environments that may not provide the compensations for self-esteem and for personal achievements based on higher level of schooling.

Notwithstanding the important role the school plays in shaping a child's educational path, the role of the family remains the most central still to the educational aspirations of a child, particularly in his/her early development stages. The academic performance however depends more or less on family background, being more likely driven by the social and educational context the child develops in. The school and the circle of friends appear to grow with time in influence on academic outcome.

The factors determining career aspirations of students are also diverse, but still tightly linked to the educational ones, ranging from family to personal ones, the perception of student's self-worth and his/her relationship with the extended social environment being critical to the outcome. The school may affect biases like gender.

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