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Submitted: 27/05/2015 - Accepted: 27/06/2015 - Published: 28/08/2015

Students' Educational and Occupational Aspirations Predicted by Parents' and Adolescents' Characteristics

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DOI: 10.26417/ejser.v4i1.p207-214

Abstract

Education plays a significant role in the future of young people. Education is considered as an essential tool that facilitates the decision making process on one's future career. The objectives of this study were to examine whether there are gender differences on students' educational and occupational aspirations as well as whether parents' and young's characteristics predicted students' educational and occupational aspirations during their high school studies. The survey was completed by N=160 where (N=64, 40%) were male and (N=96, 60%) were female students studying in private and public high schools in Tirana and Elbasan known as main cities of Albania. Scale reliability was measured which showed that Cronbach's alpha coefficient is .962. By using a T-test analysis, the results showed that males were not significantly different from females on educational and occupational aspirations ($p=.88$). Multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the best linear combination of gender, age, parents' educational level, and parents' occupational level for predicting students' educational and occupational aspirations. Results showed that the combination of these variables did not significantly contribute to the prediction of students' educational and occupational aspirations, $F(4,142)=1.09$, $p=.36$. Among all variables entered in the analysis, it was found that only parental educational level almost significantly contributed to the prediction where $p=.056$. It is recommended that more research need to be done to explore the impact of other family and child characteristics on students' educational and occupational aspirations.

Keywords: education, occupation, aspiration, parents, age, gender, adolescent

Introduction

Nowadays, education plays a significant role in the future plans of young people. Higher levels of education have been associated with a higher prestigious profession, higher income and higher standard of living. Especially a prestigious profession has become a trend in contemporary societies. A variety of studies claim that there are many factors that influence adolescents' education and their tendencies to choose a desired profession. Adolescence is a critical period when teenagers are faced with so many options where they have to make their own decision about their future. Through educational processes adolescents gain necessary skills and competencies to decide for their educational and occupational aspirations.

Aspiration is a multifactor concept that can be defined as something from abstract wishes and dreams to the realization of plans and expectations. Aspiration means a great desire to accomplish something high. According to Sirin et al. (2004), aspirations have been defined as the educational and vocational dreams that students have for their future. According to Hurlock (1973), aspiration means a longing for what one has achieved with advancement on it up to the end. Aspirations begin to be shaped in children's early years of life, but they can change depending on the environment and experience. Aspirations have a tendency to decline as children mature in response to their growing by understanding of the world and constraints obligated by earlier decisions and achievements (Mau, 1995). This decline is mainly obvious for those, who face many barriers.

Children see their parents as a great source in shaping their educational and occupational aspirations. The Expectancy-Value Model of Eccles (1993) considers parents as role models, sources of reinforcement, and providers of information, resources, and opportunities for their children. Research shows that parents play a crucial role in the education of their children and in shaping their educational and occupational aspirations. A great emphasis is given to the role of parents in transmitting their self-perceptions to their children's core ideas and mentality in shaping their future career. Parents serve as role models in shaping children's perceptions for their future in terms of their education and profession. According to the developmental theory of Super (1990), family greatly influences the way how children develop their self-concept and career maturity. Other studies also indicate that there is a close relationship between parents' perceptions on their children's academic achievement and adolescents' self-concepts of such achievements (Alexander, Entwisle & Bedinger, 1994; and Eccles & Harold, 1991). Halle and his colleagues claim that: "Parents' expectations for their children's eventual educational attainment have been related to children's own educational expectations and self-

concepts, as well as to their actual academic performance” (Halle, Kurtz-Costes, & Mahoney, 1997; Phillips, 1987).

The objectives of this study were to examine whether there are gender differences on students’ educational and occupational aspirations as well as whether parents’ and young’s characteristics predicted students’ educational and occupational aspirations during their high school studies. The research questions included in this study are as following: 1) Are there gender differences on students’ educational and occupational aspirations? 2) What is the relationship between parents’ characteristics and the adolescents’ educational and occupational aspirations? 3) What is the relationship between adolescents’ characteristics and their educational and occupational aspirations?

The hypotheses are as following: 1) There are significant gender differences on students’ educational and occupational aspirations; 2) There is a significant relationship between parents’ characteristics and the adolescents’ educational and occupational aspirations; 3) There is a significant relationship between adolescents’ characteristics and their educational and occupational aspirations.

Literature Review

The Influence of Parental Characteristics on Adolescents’ Aspirations

Aspirations have a variety of theoretical perspectives on their development and their influence on adolescent’s perspectives. According to Strand and Winston (2008) there are two broad groups of factors that may affect aspirations in the first place: social dimensions and personal dimensions. The social dimensions focus on family background and resources and the second dimension focuses on the child’s characteristics. According to social dimension, the level of education achieved by one’s parents has been shown to be an essential indicator of educational perspective. Some studies show that parents with lower incomes and lower levels of education may perceive education beyond compulsory level to be beyond their reach and therefore reduce their aspirations (Sewell & Hauser 1980; and Teachman 1987).

Research shows that parents play a crucial role in the education of their children and in shaping their educational and occupational aspirations (Croll 2008; Halle, Kurtz-Costes, & Mahoney, 1997; Wentzel 1998). A great emphasis is given to the role of parents in transmitting their self-perceptions to their children’s core ideas and mentality in shaping their future career. The Expectancy-Value Model of Eccles (1993) considers parents as role models, sources of reinforcement, and providers of information, resources, and opportunities for their children. Additionally, children see their parents as a great source in shaping their perceptions for their future education and profession and in conceptualization of their educational and occupational aspirations. According to the developmental theory of Super (1990), family greatly influences the way how children develop their self-concept and career maturity. Croll (2008) claims that parental education, social class, and income, all

approximating parental socio-economic status (SES), strongly influence young people's career dreams. Parenting practices, their beliefs, goals, and expectations about their children greatly influence adolescents' educational and occupational aspirations.

Wentzel (1998) claims that parental achievement values, expectations for their children's academic achievement, and parental efficacy were independent positive predictors of parents' aspirations for their children. Other studies also indicate that there is a close relationship between parents' perceptions on their children's academic achievement and adolescents' self-concepts of such achievements (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Eccles, 1991).

Several studies show that parents' expectations for their children's eventual educational attainment and parental involvement have been related to children's own educational expectations and self-concepts, as well as to their actual academic performance (Halle, Kurtz-Costes, & Mahoney, 1997; Phillips, 1987). Thus, research highlights the fact that parents' engagement in their children's education also signify big influences on children's educational aspirations, consequently more involved parents have children with higher educational aspirations (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999).

The Influence of Adolescents' Characteristics on Aspirations

Adolescence is a critical period in terms of many transitions and developments that occur in one's life. According to Bandura and his colleagues, that is a period when adolescents among many other changes that occur rapidly in their life, they also start developing aspirations about their future which is related with positive features and outcomes, including self-efficacy and value-expectancy beliefs (Frome, Alfeld, Eccles, & Barber, 2006). Developmental theory is one among many other theories which analyzes and explains aspirations. The crystallization of aspirations during adolescence and the impact of aspirations on career achievement pursue developmental stages that attempt to match one's occupational self-concept with suitable occupations (Gottfredson, 1996; Gottfredson & Becker, 1981). Analysis and reflection about developmental nature of educational and occupational aspirations are important for several reasons. They are essential in assuring a better theoretical grasp of the role that aspirations have in determining career-related decisions made in the future by adolescents. Knowing about developmental trajectory in adolescence and what mostly influences youth, is seen as crucial for choosing the right occupational field.

Another theory which supports the importance of choice in educational aspirations is rational action theory. According to this theory, it is argued that the educational decisions made by young people are based on logical assessment of the educational options available to them, their costs and benefits, and perceived probability for development and success (Breen & Goldthorpe 1997; and Goldthorpe 2000).

Understanding and analyzing how the students' aspirations are related to their personality, interests, achievement, and socio-cultural factors is crucial in making clear how educational aspirations result in different educational outcomes.

As previously mentioned, another group of factors that may affect adolescents' aspirations in the first place are personal dimensions (Strand & Winston, 2008). The personal dimensions focus on students' perceptions of their own attributes. What are seen as key terms in here are: psychological health and self-esteem. Aspirations for an adolescent are the main source of motivation and progress. They reflect what someone would like to achieve rather than what they think they will achieve. Research also shows that there is a significant correlation between high motivation, excess energy and high aspirations (Sewell & Hauser 1980; and Teachman 1987).

According to Gottfredson (1981, 2005), children develop their occupational aspirations through a process of circumscription and compromise in regard to their interests, social status, perceived skills and gender. As children grow into adolescents, their personal identities and external environment shape their occupational aspirations. During adolescence, there is a developmental path of being involved in the construction of a vocational identity to reaching an achieved one (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2007). Findings of a study show that adolescents who are committed to a career path are more likely to show positive adjustment and wellbeing (Hirschi, Niles & Akos 2011). Many studies show that high school students all over the world are usually faced with a dilemma in making a career choice decision in their lives (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli 2001; Issa & Nwalo 2008; Watson, McMahon, Foxcroft & Els 2010). Super (1969), indicated that adolescents are in a crucial stage of "exploring" and "crystallizing" their occupational options. Decisions made in this stage of life are crucial for upcoming years in the future. According to American School Counselor Association students have competence in career decision making (ASCA, 1997). Since students find it difficult to make the right decision about their career, they need the assistance of the school counselor to facilitate this process. One of the school counselors' roles is to inform students properly by influencing positively with their guidance to help them accomplish the mission of enhancing student choices.

Another fundamental factor that affects students' occupational and educational aspirations is their academic achievement. Students with high academic achievement generally show high educational attainment (Sewell & Hauser, 1980). These students are seen as highly motivated about their future education and occupation.

Methods

Sampling and procedure

This study was conducted to provide a broader understanding of how different factors may influence adolescents' educational and occupational aspirations. As

shown in Table 1, a total of 160 high school students where (N=64, 40%) were male and (N=96, 60%) were female participated in this study.

Table 1: Distribution Categories by Gender

Distribution	Frequency	Percent
Male	64	40
Female	96	60
Total	160	100.0

The questionnaires were distributed to the students of three private (N=80, 50%) and three public (N=80, 50%) high schools in two main cities of Albania: Tirana and Elbasan. Participants were from 10th (N = 37, 23.1%), 11th (N=63, 39.4%), and 12th (N=60, 37.5%) grades as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Distribution Categories by Grades

Distribution	Frequency	Percent
10	37	23.1
11	63	39.4
12	60	37.5
Total	160	100.0

Prior to the application of the questionnaire, the students were provided brief information about the aim of the study, they were assured confidentiality and they were thanked about their willingness to participate in this study. They were also told that they can terminate their participation at any time. The survey took about 20 minutes to be completed during after school time in a classroom environment.

Measurement tool

A close-ended survey was used to obtain information about the family background, students' characteristics and educational and occupational aspirations of the students. The items of this survey were forced choice and a five-point Likert type scale (from 1="strongly agree" to 5 ="strongly disagree") was used to measure the respondent's level of agreement with the statements related to educational and occupational aspirations. The statements included in the questionnaire were clearly stated and aimed at obtaining the needed information about the students' opinion related to educational and occupational aspirations. The questionnaire consisted of two parts where the first part included demographic information related items and the second part consisted of 28 items about students' educational and occupational aspirations.

Scale reliability

For the internal consistency and reliability, Cronbach’s alpha was measured, which is a method of estimating internal reliability. As shown in Table 3, Cronbach’s alpha coefficient is 0.960 for all the items. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient shows that the scale has a high reliability.

Table 3: Scale reliability

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.960	28

Measures

Educational and occupational aspirations. Educational and occupational aspirations is an important variable predicted by academic achievement. It is considered as a crucial component in academic achievement motivation. Occupational aspirations are the thoughts and goals that students form for their future occupation. Education and occupation oriented aspirations were measured with a close-ended questionnaire including items that measure educational aspirations such as: *“I would like to pursue a Master’s degree or a PhD”* and *“Education is very important for my future life”* and other items measuring occupational aspirations such as: *“I strongly believe in my career success in the future”* and *“It is important to me that I work in a job that my parents approve of.”* The answers ranged (from 1=*“strongly agree”* to 5=*“strongly disagree”*).

Parental characteristics. Parents are considered as fundamental in children’s perceptions of their educational and occupational aspirations. Parental educational level has an impact on children’s aspirations. Johnson et al. (1983) found that mothers’ and fathers’ educational level and fathers’ occupational status were positively related to their children’s adulthood occupational status. There are positive relations between parents’ levels of education and parents’ expectations for their children’s success (Davis-Kean, 2005). Parental educational level was measured by asking the students about their mothers’ and fathers’ educational level through these options: 1. *High school diploma*, 2. *University bachelor’s degree*, 3. *Master’s degree*, 4. *PHD*. Mothers’ and fathers’ occupation as well may influence children’s aspirations. Parents with prestigious professions may encourage their children to aspire for such professions. This information was obtained by asking the respondents about their mothers’ and fathers’ occupation through these options: 1) *Unemployed*, 2) *Retired*, 3) *Working in public sector*, 4) *Working in private sector*, and 5) *Owning a business*.

Child characteristics. Demographic information was collected including: age, gender, grade of studying, and type of school.

Results

The data were analyzed by using SPSS 21.0 and descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample. The data were analyzed using the independent samples *T*-test of SPSS for windows to compare the level of agreement of items measuring educational and occupational aspirations, and to check if the differences between the mean values of the test variable for one group differ significantly from the mean value of that variable for the second group with regard to gender.

The results from the *T*-test analysis showed that there are no significant differences between male and female students on their educational and occupational aspirations where $t=-.04$, $(df)=158$ and $p=.88$.

To look at the relationship between parental and child characteristics multiple regression analysis was conducted. The aim of using this statistical technique was to determine the best linear combination of gender, age, parents' educational level, and parents' occupational level for predicting students' educational and occupational aspirations. Results showed that the combination of these variables did not significantly contribute to the prediction of students' educational and occupational aspirations where $F(4,142)=1.09$, $p=.36$. Among all variables entered in the analysis, it was found that only parental educational level almost significantly contributed to the prediction where $p=.056$.

Discussion And Conclusions

This study was conducted to reveal more about the factors such as parental and child characteristics that influence adolescents' educational and occupational aspirations. Aspirations for an adolescent are the main source of motivation and career development. Parents are considered an essential source in guiding and supporting their children toward their educational and occupational aspirations.

Research shows conflicting findings with respect to gender differences especially in occupational aspirations (Patton & Creed, 2007; and Powers & Wojtkiewicz, 2004). This study found no significant differences among male and female students on their educational and occupational aspirations. In line with our findings, other studies also show that there are no sex differences on students' aspirations (Kao & Tienda, 1998). However, some findings of previous studies show that male students aspire more about their education and career. The reason behind this may be the under-representation of girl students in educational settings (Danziger, 1983; and Wall, Covell & MacIntyre, 1999) Contrary to this result, some studies showed that girls aspired to higher levels of education and careers that required more education than did boys (Howard, Carlstrom, Katz, Chew, Ray, Laine, Caulum, 2011; and Mau, 1995). Moreover, Patton and Creed (2007) found that male high school students were more likely to aspire to professional occupations and girls to semiprofessional occupations. Additionally, ethnic minority studies show that both males and females encounter many barriers toward their education and career (McWhirter, 1997).

The findings of this study revealed also that parental and child characteristics did not significantly contribute to the prediction of students' educational and occupational aspirations. However, results showed that only parental educational level almost significantly contributed to the prediction of students' educational and occupational aspirations. Previous studies show that parents from higher socioeconomic status report higher educational and occupational expectations for their children than parents from lower socioeconomic status (Eccles, 2006; and Schoon 2010). Parental expectations may also be higher for adolescents who do well in school, whereas they may be lower for those who have poor school performance (Mau & Bikos, 2000; and Schoon, 2010).

According to the findings of previous studies, child's academic achievement is among the most important factors that influence educational and occupational aspirations. Thus, students with high academic achievement generally show high educational attainment (Sewell & Hauser, 1980). Contrary to expectations, the results showed that the relationship between parental education level and occupation and students' educational and occupational aspirations was not significant. Since it is well-established in the literature that adolescents are more under the influence of the peers in many aspects, thus, many of their developmental areas such as the development of aspirations may be under the influence of their peers as well (Felsman & Blustein, 1999; and Kracke, 2002).

This study comes along with some limitations. Firstly, the measurement tool we used had a high reliability. However, there could have been included a higher number of items to grasp a deeper understanding of adolescents' educational and occupational aspirations. Next, only self-reported questionnaires were used in this study. There could have been used parent-reported and teacher-reported questionnaires about their role and function they have once these children start shaping such aspirations. Lastly, since Albania is diverse in terms of the regions of the country, more schools from other cities as well could have been included in the study.

Regarding these limitations we suggest that more research is needed to be conducted on this topic in the future. A further investigation should be conducted to grasp a deeper understanding of the factors affecting students' educational and occupational aspirations, and the role of parental characteristics on students' choices for their future career. Policymakers of pre-university education should pay attention to both the role of the school and the family in shaping educational and occupational aspirations of the students. Next, scholars of this field should focus in the parent-child relationship, student-teacher relationship and peer relationship to create a better understanding on what influences students' educational and occupational aspirations.

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