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Predicting maternal aspirations for their children's education: The role of parental and child characteristics



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ABSTRACT

The current study investigates the nature of maternal educational aspirations and factors that influence mother's aspirations for their children's education in the preschool years. Data were drawn from the Growing Up in Scotland Survey ($N = 1999$). Findings showed that while majority of mothers (74%) held high educational aspirations for their children, a substantial proportion (12.4%) only aspired for their children to attain high school education and below. Consistent with hypothesis of the transactional model (Sameroff & Mackenzie, 2003) used in this study, both parental (socioeconomic status, household size and age) and child characteristics (birth order, gender and conduct problems) significantly predicted mothers' aspirations for their children's education. The educational and policy implications of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Parental aspirations for their children's education are a key parental variable that has received considerable attention in recent years. It represents the level of education that parents would like their children to attain¹ (Spera, Wentzel, & Matto, 2009). Research suggests that such aspirations are persistent over time (Raleigh & Kao, 2010) and positively correlated with various educational outcomes for children (e.g., Chiapa, Garrido, & Prina, 2012; Gregg & Washbrook, 2009; Schoon, Martin, & Ross, 2007; Villiger, Wandeler, & Niggli, 2014). A meta-analysis of parental involvement variables concluded that parental aspirations was the strongest predictor of children's school grades, and is therefore one of the most crucial component of parental involvement (Jeynes, 2007). Several pathways account for how parental aspirations influence children's educational outcomes (see Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010 for a review). Firstly, aspirations affect the resources parents devote to supporting their children's education. Those with higher aspirations devote more time (e.g., helping with homework) and resources to school related activities (Spera, 2006; Sy & Schulenberg, 2005). Secondly, parental aspirations have an influence on children's own academic expectations and motivation and these in turn have an impact on their achievement (Benner & Mistry, 2007; Kirk, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011; Rutchick, Smyth, Lopoo, & Dusek, 2009; Villiger et al., 2014). In a nutshell, aspirations drive parental decisions, thereby creating a "self-fulfilling prophecy" in terms of children's educational

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¹ Although aspirations and expectations have sometimes been used interchangeably (e.g., Fan and Chen, 2001; Juang & Silbereisen, 2002), other writers have sought to distinguish between these terminologies (Gorard et al., 2012; Oketch et al., 2012). At the preschool age, parental aspirations and expectations may be indistinguishable (Goldenberg et al., 2001).

achievement (Wentzel, 1998). The perceived importance of aspirations has led to various government policies aimed at involving and helping parents develop higher aspirations for their children's education (e.g., Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007; Scottish Executive, 2006).

While interest in parental educational aspirations has generated several research and policy outcomes, the question of what influences differing aspirations has received limited attention and remains unclear (Rutchick et al., 2009). Understanding predictors of parental aspirations is crucial for identifying causes of lower aspirations and designing appropriate interventions to help parents develop higher educational goals for their children. Further, of the few existing studies, the majority are based on samples of parents whose children are in primary or high school and not on parents of pre-school children. Focusing on parents of older children brings into question the direction of the relationship between parental aspirations and children's educational outcomes. At this stage it is not clear whether it is the child's educational performance that shapes parents aspirations or vice versa, or whether the relationship is bidirectional. Additionally, at the preschool stage parental educational aspirations reflect hopes about future potentials which are communicated to their children in various ways. Thus, it can be argued that aspirations may be more important at this early age when they are beginning to form perceptions about themselves than in later years. The aim of the current study is to examine predictors of educational aspirations of parents whose children are in preschool. Specifically, this study focuses on aspirations of mothers and references to parental aspirations should be understood within this context.

2. Determinants of maternal educational aspirations: theoretical perspectives

Most investigations into the determinants of parental educational aspirations for their children tend to focus on discrete factors such as parental socioeconomic status, ethnicity, child's gender, and academic performance of the child (e.g., Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001; Oketch, Mutisya, & Sagwe, 2012; Spera et al., 2009). With the exception of one study (Vryonides and Gouvias, 2012), most studies reviewed did not provide any theoretical framework to account for the determinants of parental aspirations. Thus, where multiple predictors have been used by researchers, the focus was usually on a single factor while treating other factors as confounders (e.g., Oketch et al., 2012; Zhang, Kao, & Hannum, 2007). This absence of comprehensive theoretical lens makes it difficult to propose meaningful explanations without resorting to individual factors. Within this study, two overarching theoretical perspectives are considered. These are Bourdieu's social and cultural reproduction theory, and Sameroff's transactional model.

2.1. Social and cultural reproduction theory

Bourdieu's social and cultural reproduction theory attempts to explain why inequalities persist and how it is reproduced in societies (Bourdieu, 1977a, 1986a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). The theory posits that socialisation involves social groups unconsciously communicating the boundaries of the opportunities available to members of their particular communities. These opportunities and their boundaries are internalised by community members and in turn dictates how they act, think and live. As a result, the differences that we see in the values, dispositions and aspirations between social groups are due to differences in socialisation about what is possible within their communities. In a nutshell, the process of socialisation preserves the status quo and leads to reproduction of inequalities. The extent to which the theory explains parental aspirations is best understood through Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital (cultural and social). These are the key enablers of reproduction.

Habitus denotes sets of attitudes, values or dispositions (Bourdieu, 1977a, 1977b). It is argued that each social group adopt its own characteristic habitus but the dominant habitus tends to be those held by advantaged groups. An example of dominant habitus is a positive attitude towards education (Bourdieu, 1977a). According to Bourdieu (1977b), the habitus is a product of unconscious socialisation in early childhood and integrates experiences that are statistically common to members of one's social group. Social groups internalise their 'statistical fate', set aspirations and act in accordance with perceived outcomes (DiMaggio, 1979). In this respect, social background generates unconscious expectations that are based on one's evaluation of the destiny of "people like us" (Nash, 1990). This unconscious calculation of objective probabilities often leads members of lower socioeconomic groups to opt out of educational competition (Bourdieu, 1977a, 1977b). Thus, aspirations for a child's education will be couched with reference to parents' perceptions of what is possible within their particular socioeconomic group.

Cultural Capital defines an individual's familiarity with the dominant culture in a particular society (Bourdieu, 1977a) and can exist in three different forms – an embodied state (e.g., disposition of the mind), objectified state (e.g., books, pictures), and institutionalised state (e.g., educational qualification) (Bourdieu, 1986b). Parents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are familiar with the advantages of the dominant cultural capital, such as, high educational credentials. They will therefore be more inclined to set higher educational aspirations for their children knowing very well that such qualifications will help their children secure a dominant position within the society. *Social Capital* on the other hand relates to networks of relationships and social connections which individuals can mobilise to achieve particular goals (Bourdieu, 1986b). Those from dominant classes tend to possess more dense social capital as a result of mutual acquaintances, kingship relations, schools attended and membership of select groups (Bourdieu, 1986b). Parents from socioeconomically advantaged groups will therefore set higher educational goals for their children knowing that they will be able to draw on networks and

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