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School transitions, peer influence, and educational expectation formation: Girls and boys

Megan Andrew*, Jennifer Flashman

Center for Research on Educational Opportunity, University of Notre Dame, USA

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ABSTRACT

School transitions are a regular feature of the educational career. While they are of general interest as instances of academic change, they also represent instances of peer environment and influence change. Previous theoretical and empirical work suggests peer influence is important for students' academic and educational outcomes, especially for the complex decision-making processes leading up to those outcomes. In this manuscript, we study the impact of peers on educational expectation formation at the 8th-to-9th-grade school transition. In doing so, we test a theoretical model that links institutional settings, social influence, and individual decision-making. We find the 9th grade transition likely represents a negative shock for students' college attendance expectations. Independent of this transition, however, stable peer environments further depress expectations. A more equal mixture of new and old peers in the 9th grade likely increases students' educational expectations in contrast. These effects of peer perturbations and the re-organization of social ties they imply mainly apply to female students. But, both male and female students revise their educational expectations in light of changing peer intelligence comparisons, albeit in countervailing ways.

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1. Introduction

The educational career is marked by a number of key transitions that induce organizational and academic change in a student's trajectory, particularly in the case of transitions from one school to another (Mare, 1980; Schiller, 1999). A large literature interrogates the effects of school transitions on student outcomes (e.g., Schiller, 1999; Pribesh and Downey, 1999; Weiss and Bearman, 2007; Langenkamp, 2010; Griggs, 2012; Gasper et al., 2012; Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012). But, despite that literature's size, questions remain over the extent to which such school transitions induce negative or positive changes in student outcomes, particularly vis-à-vis students' peer relationships and their influence.

The variable positive and negative findings in this literature likely hinge in part on important gender differences in the selection and relative importance of peers and their influence at key school transitions. Developmental psychologists suggest that sufficient changes or perturbations to an adolescent student's peer group in a school transition initiate a winnowing and homogenization process, particularly among girls, as a student selects a smaller and more similar friend set from among a larger or otherwise altered peer environment (Poulin and Chan, 2010). Still, boys may be more sensitive to other forms of peer

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: andrew.8@nd.edu (M. Andrew).

influence, such as indirect comparisons with peers' by academic status (Bandura, 1991) and ensuing inferences about his or her own intelligence or academic status (Ridgeway, 1991; Andrew, 2014).

In the present analysis, we evaluate the possibility that the transition from middle school to high school and associated peer environment and influence changes differentially affect adolescent girls' and boys' college attendance expectations. Given that educational expectations are theoretically prone to peer influence (e.g., Haller, 1982; Davies and Kandel, 1981; Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997; Coale, 1967; Dominitz and Manski, 1996; Coleman, 1961; Morgan, 2005) and that students' educational expectations ossify to an important degree in adolescence, (Andrew and Hauser, 2011; Downey et al., 2009), peer influence on adolescent educational expectations is vital for understanding noted gender differences in high school completion and other key educational attainments (Buchmann and DiPrete, 2006; Goldin and Katz, 2008). Additionally, we study two key mechanisms by which such school transitions matter—the reorganization of peer ties and comparisons with peers.

Overall, we find the 9th grade transition likely represents a negative shock for students' educational expectations. Independent of this transition, however, we find that stable peer environments depress expectations over time. Conversely, students who enter new peer environments characterized by a more equal mixture of new and old peers increase their educational expectations. These patterns mainly apply to female students and follow previous research in sociology and developmental psychology emphasizing the greater importance of increasing close peer support among female students in this particular period of the life course. Conversely, peer intelligence comparisons matter for both female and male students. Positive intelligence peer comparisons lead female students to increase their educational expectations. However, positive intelligence peer comparisons lead male students to decrease their educational expectations. This countervailing gender pattern may be the result of known gender differences in externalized response (Leadbeater et al., 1999).

2. Background

2.1. School transitions and their effects: the good, the bad, and the spurious

The typical U.S. student today attends various schools in a given neighborhood or otherwise circumscribed geographic area with transitions between individual schools at primary school, middle/junior high school, and high school entry. Non-organizational transitions in the educational career due to residential mobility or school expulsion represent notable, secondary types of school transitions (e.g., Griggs, 2012). These non-organizational transitions are most often associated with lower socioeconomic status and otherwise disadvantaged students. However, research both on organizational transitions as traditionally occurring elements of the educational career and on non-organizational transitions due to residential mobility, school choice, or behavioral issues has struggled to isolate transition effects given notable selection issues (Pribesh and Downey, 1999).

This struggle is exemplified by the range of estimated effects of both types of school transitions on students' academic achievement (Table 1).

While some studies underscore the negative effects of such transitions—particularly for low achievers (Coleman, 1988; Langenkamp, 2010), others suggest these negative effects are largely due to selection on student's pre-transition characteristics (Pribesh and Downey, 1999; Gasper et al., 2012). Still other research suggests school transition effects are small but positive (Weiss and Bearman, 2007).

Aside from the variable effects of school transitions, there are at least three other noteworthy observations across the studies in Table 1. First, many studies use a single indicator for a school transition and rely on inferred but wholly untested claims about the importance of peer influence changes indicated by this school transition. Second, research that considers peer changes directly still fails to consider a transition effect separate from the proportion of 8th grade peers in the 9th grade class. Previous research therefore conflates school transition and peer environment changes and influence. Finally, much of the previous research relies on between-student variation and controls for observables to isolate school transition and peer influence effects. Yet, many student unobservables may shape school transition and peer influence effects, including sociability and other social psychological measures not commonly measured in popular national studies that constitute the main data source for this literature.

2.2. Peer perturbations in school transitions: linking institutional settings, social influence, and student outcomes

To unpack the effects of peer environment and influence changes, we cast peer influence across school transitions as a two-step process. This theoretical model explicitly links local institutional contexts and peer influence and drives our parallel model specification. In the first step of this theoretical process, the various institutional settings in which students participate structure the pool of available peers—especially the institution of schools in the case of adolescents (Blau, 1977; Hartup, 1996; Coleman, 1961). In the second step of the process, youth participate in institutional settings on a regular basis, interacting with their peers generally and selecting their closest friends from among them (Kossinets and Watts, 2006). Theoretically, these peers influence students by directly offering support and information and by indirectly modeling behaviors and attributes a student compares him or herself against (Coleman, 1961; Haller, 1982; Bandura, 1991).

In school transitions, the school peer environment is re-organized—as are the peer relationships and comparisons this environment entails (Kossinets and Watts, 2006; South et al., 2007; Goodwin et al., 2012; Cantin and Boivin, 2004). Students

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