

# An empirical test of a model of academic expectations among youth in residential care



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## ABSTRACT

In the last decade accumulating evidence across many countries points to the poor educational outcomes of youth formerly placed in care and their under-representation in higher education. Academic expectations in late adolescence are considered a key marker for educational attainments in young adulthood. Although these expectations were studied extensively, they have seldom been examined among youth in substitute care. The goal of the present research was to develop and test a model to predict academic expectations of Israeli adolescents placed in residential facilities. The study sample consisted of 1360 adolescents from 34 youth villages who responded to self-report questionnaires tapping their academic expectations, current academic achievements and various aspects of their family, school and facility's environment, expected to be associated with their academic expectations.

Structural equation modeling indicated that parents' level of education was indirectly related to youths' expectations, an association mediated by youth's current academic achievements and parents' aspirations for their children's educational success. Higher levels of teacher and staff support were also found to contribute to higher academic expectations; however, whereas teacher support effects were mediated by youth achievements, staff support was found to have direct, as well as moderating effects, on achievement-expectations relationship.

The findings suggest the importance of an integrative approach in the efforts to promote educational expectations among adolescents in residential facilities. Such an approach, encompassing the multiple adult functions responsible for youth development within such settings, could be an important step in enhancing the chances for future academic success of this vulnerable group.

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## 1. Introduction

Accumulating evidence across many countries points to the poor outcomes of youth formerly placed in care. Many of them, who as children had been placed in state custody with the aim of providing them a better growing environment than their birth homes, continue to face major risks that include unemployment, homelessness and poverty (Courtney et al., 2011; Dinisman, Zeira, Sulimani-Aidan, & Benbenishty, 2013; Stein & Munro, 2008). Of special concern is the fact that only a small number of care leavers pursue and acquire higher education (Okpych, 2012; Zeira, Arzev, Benbenishty, & Portnoy, 2014). For example, data from the Midwest Study conducted in the U.S.A, shows that by the age of 26 only 8% of youth formerly placed in care had earned a bachelor's degree compared to 46% of their peers in the general population (Courtney et al., 2011).

Academic attainments and post-secondary education are important because they impact the integration into the labor market and may offer an escape from the 'poverty cycle' (Lee, Hill, & Hawkins, 2012). Compared to those with only a high school diploma, college degree holders earn a salary 60% higher (Planty, Provasnik, & Daniel, 2007), have better health and are more socially involved (Baum & Ma, 2007). In light of this data, it is important to identify factors that may promote the integration of youth in care into post-secondary education (Jackson & Cameron, 2012).

Academic expectations are considered a key marker for later educational and occupational attainments in young adulthood (Ashby & Schoon, 2012; Beal & Crockett, 2010; Mello, 2008). The expectations an individual holds for the future serve as the basis for exploring future options, setting personal goals and undertaking commitments towards their fulfillment (Nurmi, Poole, & Seginer, 1995), thereby playing an important role in guiding individual behavior in the present. Adolescents generally tend to view their futures positively (Nuttin & Lens, 1985) and their expectations, particularly those of risk populations, often exceed actual abilities (Melkman, Refaeli, Bibi, & Benbenishty, in press). Under such

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circumstances, adolescents may find it difficult to meet their own expectations and aspirations. Nevertheless, expectations remain the primary element of planned behavior. Based on Ajzen's theory (1985, 1991) and numerous corroborating findings (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Khattab, 2015), one would hypothesize that youth with higher aspirations regarding their future academic studies are more likely to engage in behaviors leading to such academic pursuit. Indeed, large-scale longitudinal studies have established that adolescents who have higher educational expectations while in high school have higher probability of enrolling in college, earning a college degree and obtaining a high status or professional job (Dubow, Boxer, & Huesmann, 2009; Schoon, Martin, & Ross, 2007).

For this reason, academic expectations of disadvantaged adolescent groups have been studied extensively, informing interventions aimed at promoting education among these disadvantaged populations (e.g., Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012; Carranza, You, Chhhuon, Hudley, & 333, 2009; Driscoll, 2013; St Clair & Benjamin, 2011). Such studies, however, were not conducted among one of the most vulnerable groups: youth in out of home care. The goal of the present research was to develop and test a model focusing on academic expectations of Israeli adolescents placed in residential youth villages.

### 1.1. Study context: Israeli youth villages

In Israel, unlike many other countries, most children in out-of-home placements live in residential facilities and not in foster care (National Council for the Child, 2011). This study focuses on youth villages. Supervised by the Ministry of Education, these are large institutions, typically providing services to several hundreds of children (Grupper, 2004). They include high percentages of immigrant adolescents as well as adolescents from underprivileged families, mostly from the geographical or social periphery of Israel (Mash, 2001). Whereas a small group of these families are highly functional and see the placement in the youth village as a means to better fulfil their child's educational potential, most others are struggling with considerable financial challenges and have problematic relationships with their children (Zeira & Benbenishty, 2011). Still, the large majority of adolescents in youth villages maintain regular contact with their families and go out for home visitations every other weekend and on holidays. Many adolescents enter these facilities after having academic difficulties in their community schools (Grupper, 2013). A central feature of the youth villages, distinguishing them from other types of residential facilities, is that school is an integral part of the institution and the students are considered "living at school" (Arieli, Kashti, & Shlasky, 1983). This arrangement blurs the borders between the school and its teachers and the residential facility and its staff (Grupper, 2004). Thus, students in the youth villages experience unique conditions of being surrounded by multiple adults who can provide them with many possibilities to receive emotional and educational support. Israeli youth villages can therefore provide an important arena to investigate how relationships with multiple adults may impact educational expectations. The only study that has addressed the issue of academic expectations among youth in foster care in the U.S., identified prior academic performance and self-perception and parental support for education as the best predictors of expectations (Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011). In the context of youth villages in Israel, effects of additional environmental supports, such as teachers or staff, may be enhanced because school is located on premise and adult interactions with students are more intensive and personal than is the case for foster students in community schools. Thus, the current manuscript examines teachers and residential staff as possible sources of academic support.

### 1.2. Predicting the academic expectations of adolescents in youth villages

Status attainment models have been the research paradigm of choice for the inquiry of post-secondary academic expectations (Ashby & Schoon, 2010; Cooper, 2009; Farmer, 1985; Mau & Bikos, 2000). Focused on social mobility patterns of individuals, early status

attainment research has focused on the contribution of socio-economic status to adolescents' academic expectations and subsequent educational and occupational attainment (Blau & Duncan, 1967). Extending the model to include personal agency and environmental influences, researchers later added to the status attainment framework social-psychological constructs such as academic achievement and encouragement from significant others (e.g., parents or school personnel) (Sewell, Haller, & Ohlendorf, 1970). Extensive empirical work has provided consistent support to these hypotheses (Cooper, 2009; Mau & Bikos, 2000; Ou & Reynolds, 2008; Tynkkynen, Tolvanen, & Salmela-Aro, 2012). Based on this theoretical and empirical framework, the model developed for this study is based on the status attainment model within the unique context of residential settings, and in particular those of Israeli youth villages.

The aim of the model is to predict academic expectations of adolescents in residential care. It includes family and adolescent characteristics, and the perceived influences of school and facility staff (Fig. 1). The following sections describe the model components and review previous research related to these factors.

### 1.3. Factors associated with academic expectations

#### 1.3.1. Family background characteristics

**1.3.1.1. Immigration status.** The underrepresentation of ethnic minorities, who are first or second generation immigrants, in higher education is well documented and often linked with lower educational expectations while the students are still in high school (Behnke, Piercy, & Diversi, 2004; Carranza et al., 2009). Language problems, changes in personal and familial values due to the move to a new country, role expectations change, and reduced economic resources are some of the immigration-related stressors that may be responsible for this state of affairs (Valencia & Johnson, 2006). In the current study, the issue of immigration is of special relevance as approximately half of the adolescents living in youth villages are immigrants, most of them from the former USSR and Ethiopia, while their proportion in the general population is much lower (Zeira & Benbenishty, 2011). This over-representation reflects the difficulties they face in the community.

**1.3.1.2. Parents' level of education.** In line with the status attainment model, research has tied parents' level of education to the academic achievements and expectations of their children (Davis-Kean, 2005; Dubow et al., 2009; Sieben & De Graff, 2001). Parents with lower levels of education have less educational experience and resources to draw upon when helping their children with educational school tasks or when advising them on the benefits of further education. Parents' limited academic-relevant knowledge is often compounded by scarce financial (e.g., expendable income for learning supplies and educational experiences outside the classroom) and time (longer and more rigid

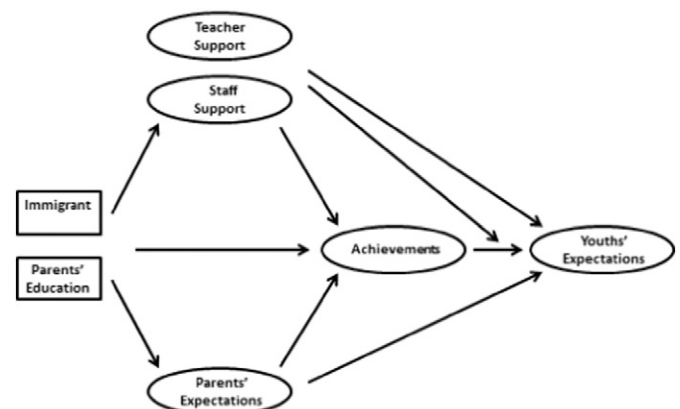


Fig. 1. A proposed model of the academic expectations of adolescents in youth villages.

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