



Emotional engagement, educational aspirations, and their association during secondary school

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has demonstrated the link between school engagement and academic attainment, but there is less understanding of the relationship between school engagement and educational aspirations. Using the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), this study examines the association between emotional engagement and educational aspirations during secondary school, covering ages 14 to 16. On average, emotional engagement increased over time. A significant proportion of adolescents shifted from expressing uncertainty to aspiring to continue in education. Males were more likely than females to shift from aspiring to continue in education to planning to leave school early. Greater emotional engagement was associated with a lower likelihood of having low or uncertain aspirations, especially for high-achieving, ethnic minority, and male adolescents. Findings highlight the importance of emotional engagement, particularly for those at risk of uncertain educational aspirations and those least likely to continue in education following post-compulsory schooling.

A key developmental task during adolescence is to negotiate the demands of the school system, to develop goals and aspirations - and ways to achieve them. Yet, the progression through secondary school is characterised by ubiquitous uncertainties that can undermine goal pursuit and subsequent attainment. While there is ample evidence to suggest that high educational aspirations in adolescence are associated with later education participation and academic attainment (Anders & Micklewright, 2015; Croll, 2009; Marjoribanks, 2005; Reynolds & Johnson, 2011; Schoon & Ng-Knight, 2017), there is less understanding regarding uncertainty in student's educational expectation. For example, although most British young people have aspirations to attend university (Schoon, 2010), recent research has shown that a sizeable percentage are either uncertain about their future educational plans or plan to leave school early; which, in turn, are associated with a lower level of educational attainment, a reduced likelihood of participation in higher education (Croll, 2009; Gutman, Sabates, & Schoon, 2014), and more precarious employment transitions (Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2016; Vuolo, Staff, & Mortimer, 2012). School engagement may represent a possible antidote to early school leaving, as well as a crucial factor in supporting educational aspirations and attainment (Eccles & Roeser, 2004; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). However, research on the linkage between educational aspirations and school engagement during adolescence is limited, especially for uncertain educational aspirations.

This study examines the association between school engagement and educational aspirations during secondary school, i.e. from ages 14 to 16. In particular, we focus on emotional engagement and uncertain or low expectations about whether or not to continue in education past compulsory schooling age (16 years). Our study draws upon a nationally representative cohort of adolescents born

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in 1989/90, the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE). For this cohort, compulsory school leaving age was 16. The cohort members came of age during a long period of economic growth in England and by 2005 (when most were 16), aspirations to stay on in education beyond 16 years were increasingly becoming the norm (Schoon, 2010). However, one in ten young people between the ages of 16 and 18 were not enrolled in education, employment, or training (Office of National Statistics, 2010), placing them at risk of poor labour market opportunities later in life (Bynner, 2005; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017).

1. Socio-ecological model of agency development

The study is guided by a socio-ecological framework of the study of human agency (Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2017; Schoon & Ng-Knight, 2017). Within psychological theories of motivation, agency is conceptualised as a multi-dimensional construct, enabling the individual to navigate through a complex world (Bandura, 2001). Agency involves the formulation of intentions or goals, good judgements about one's own capabilities, appraisal of socio-structural opportunities and constraints, and regulation of behaviour and perceptions accordingly (Bandura, 2006). Recent attempts to reconceptualise the notion of agency within a life course approach acknowledge that individual action is circumscribed by structural constraints and attempt to identify the processes supporting or hindering the expression of agency (Bandura, 2006; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Hitlin & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2015; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2016, 2017; Schoon & Ng-Knight, 2017). This study builds on these endeavours and aims to specify the processes shaping adolescent agency over time.

We examine two dimensions of agency including forethought, when individuals set goals and anticipate future events, and self-reactiveness, which includes processes of self-motivation as well as emotional states that influence self-regulatory efforts (Bandura, 2006). For forethought, we focus on educational aspirations, differentiating among adolescents who anticipate leaving school, those who want to continue in education, and those who are uncertain about their plans. Regarding indicators of self-reactiveness, we focus on emotional engagement, involving self-reactions, which support or undermine school motivation (Bandura, 2006). This study contributes to our understanding of the link between these two crucial aspects of adolescent agency over time, taking into consideration key structural constraints, i.e., family background, gender, and ethnicity.

2. Emotional engagement

Engagement has been described as “energy in action” reflecting the connection between the person and the task (Connell, 1990; Finn & Rock, 2007). Being shaped by experiences in the school context, school engagement is presumed to be malleable and responsive to variations in the school environment, interpersonal relationships, and intellectual endeavours (Fredricks et al., 2004). Changes in school engagement may capture the gradual process involved in students' (dis)connection with school and learning, which is related to later decisions regarding dropping out versus continuing in education (Finn, 1989).

As a multi-dimensional construct, engagement has been conceptualised as having two or three components including behavioural and affective dimensions (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008) and cognitive engagement as a third dimension (Fredricks et al., 2004). Here we focus on emotional engagement, which is characterised by positive or negative reactions to school, learning, and schoolwork and a personal sense of school belonging and valuing of education (Fredricks et al., 2004). Evidence suggests a strong connection between emotional engagement and students' achievement and school-related behaviours (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009).

Previous research has shown that emotional (dis)engagement in school is not a static event, but rather a gradual and changing process (Tuominen-Soini & Salmela-Aro, 2014; Wang & Eccles, 2012, 2013). Emotional (dis)engagement evolves over the years in response to the relationship between the students' needs and expectations and the demands and benefits of the school environment (Eccles et al., 1993; Finn, 1989; Schoon & Ng-Knight, 2017). On average, emotional engagement has been shown to decline from elementary to secondary school, with students reporting school as less enjoyable and less valuable, becoming more overwhelmed and anxious about school with the passing years (Tuominen-Soini & Salmela-Aro, 2014; Wang, Chow, Hofkens, & Salmela-Aro, 2015; Wang & Eccles, 2012). However, using person-centered approaches, studies from the US and England have shown both increasing and stable trajectories of positive engagement among students during secondary school as well as distinct pathways of disengagement, which were linked to academic and psychological outcomes (Archambault et al., 2009; Janosz, Archambault, Morizot, & Pagani, 2008; Li & Lerner, 2011; Symonds, Schoon & Salmela-Aro, 2016). In England, trajectories of disengagement have been shown among White British young people and those with low levels of prior academic attainment (Symonds, Schoon, & Salmela-Aro, 2016).

3. Educational aspirations

There is ample evidence to suggest that educational aspirations are associated with later education participation and academic attainment (Anders & Micklewright, 2015; Croll, 2009; Schoon & Parsons, 2002). More recently, researchers have gained interest in understanding the associated processes and outcomes of young people who are uncertain about their future educational or occupational plans (Croll, 2009; Gutman et al., 2014; Gutman & Schoon, 2012). Using the British Household Panel Survey, for example, Croll (2009) found that while 70 per cent of children at age 13 were certain that they wanted to stay in school after compulsory schooling age (16 years), 20 per cent were uncertain and 10 per cent were certain that they wanted to leave school (Croll, 2009). These intentions were highly predictive of whether they were enrolled in education three years later. Using the LSYPE, Gutman, Sabates, and Schoon (2012) found that adolescents who were uncertain about continuing in school had lower scores on their school exams at age 16 and were less likely to be enrolled in school at age 18. Together, these studies suggest that having uncertain

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