



Longitudinal links between career adaptability and academic achievement in adolescence

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary youth spend increasingly longer time in the educational system, where their career pursuits become closely intertwined with their educational goals. As career development is a life-long process, adolescents start working on their careers long before they engage in actual work behaviors. Therefore, in order for school to adaptively prepare youth for their future work lives, career adaptability and academic achievement should be reciprocally and positively linked throughout adolescence. To date, more longitudinal proof for these relations is needed. To address this shortcoming, we investigated cross-lagged associations between these two constructs in a three-wave longitudinal study, testing the moderating role of adolescents' gender, school type, and age. Participants were 1151 adolescents (41.3% boys), who completed the same paper-and-pencil measure three times across an academic year. Results showed positive reciprocal associations between career concern and academic achievement (i.e., Grand Point Average). This indicates that adolescents with a strong future orientation, who were already invested in career planning activities tended to perform better in school and vice-versa, high academic achievement further strengthened adolescents' positive outlooks on their vocational future. We also detected positive unidirectional links from academic achievement to career control and career confidence across one academic year. Interestingly, we did not find significant longitudinal links between career curiosity and academic achievement. These patterns of longitudinal relations applied equally to boys and girls, to those attending university-preparatory and work-bound schools, and to early-to-middle and middle-to-late adolescents. Research and applied implications of these findings are detailed.

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1. Introduction

A core axiom of educational systems is that school prepares youth for their future life, which includes preparation for their career. School represents the main "job" adolescents have, and it is a long-term protective environment for personal and vocational development. Hence, education can be viewed as a form of social capital (Coleman, 1988), as it guides the acquisition and improvement of strategies to approach authority figures (e.g., teachers) and learning tasks, gradually crafting adolescents' life pursuits, learning patterns, and identities. As youth spend increasingly longer time in the educational system, their career goals become closely intertwined with their educational goals (Heckhausen & Tomasik, 2002; Negru, 2012; Negru, Pop, & Opre, 2013).

One of the main educational goals is academic achievement. Academic achievement is a multidimensional construct (Stipek & Weisz, 1981), most often operationalized through the grades adolescents receive in school, more specifically their Grand Point Average or GPA (Poropat, 2009). Academic achievement has a strong influence on the occupational paths students take as they make

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the transition to adulthood (Schnabel, Alfeld, Eccles, Köller, & Baumert, 2002; Strenze, 2007) and it directly impacts their motivation and global learning strategies (Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012). Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that adolescents' readiness and resources in approaching career issues (i.e., their career adaptability, Savickas, 2013) are also linked to their level of academic achievement. To date, more longitudinal proof for these relations is needed, in order to provide an in-depth understanding of how career adaptability is associated with academic achievement across time. To approach this shortcoming, we investigated the cross-lagged associations between academic achievement and career adaptability in a three-wave longitudinal study, including the moderating role of adolescents' gender, type of schooling, and age.

2. Understanding the links between career adaptability and academic achievement

When conceptualizing career development as a life-long process, one must take into account the fact that young people start working on their careers long before they engage in actual work behaviors (Hartung, Porfeli, & Vondracek, 2008). Therefore, school, as a dominant social environment in adolescence, provides strong cues (e.g., perceived competence in different academic areas, personal interests that are linked to school activities) for adolescent career socialization (Roesser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). These cues gradually channel important vocational choices (e.g., choice of a university or of occupational preparatory training programs). For instance, longitudinal studies have reported that adolescents' GPA shapes their educational and vocational aspirations and their career goals (Dubow, Huesmann, Boxer, Pulkkinen, & Kokko, 2006; Vuolo, Mortimer, & Staff, 2014). Adolescents with a higher GPA during high-school tended to aspire and commit to university-degree careers, transitioned more effectively from school to work, and entered jobs that matched their educational background (Vuolo et al., 2014). These findings suggest that high academic achievement (i.e., high GPA) is related to adolescents' career adaptability, viewed as their readiness and resources for coping with career issues (Savickas, 2013).

One core set of psychosocial resources with high impact on career self-regulation refers to career adapt-abilities (Savickas, 2005), which adolescents actively use in constructing their careers and in approaching age-appropriate developmental tasks and transitions (e.g., choice of an educational track, engagement in work-preparatory behaviors). These adapt-abilities, also called the 4Cs of career adaptability, are: concern (i.e., one's preoccupation with the future, viewed as the personal value attached to preparing for tomorrow), control (i.e., a focus on making career choices in a conscientious and responsible manner), curiosity (i.e., one's inquisitiveness regarding possible vocational paths, through an exploration of different alternatives), and confidence (i.e., a strong belief in one's capacity to overcome career barriers and a focus on success when approaching these barriers). Adapt-abilities play an important role in preparing young people for important career decisions (e.g., perception of fewer career barriers, Soresi, Nota, & Ferrari, 2012), in ensuring a high level of satisfaction and well-being, and in empowering them to pursue adaptive goals (e.g., Hirschi, 2009; Stringer, Kerpelman, & Skorikov, 2012; Wilkins et al., 2014). As the student role is the dominant social role during adolescence, it is important to further investigate how career adaptability may be linked to academic achievement.

Academic achievement validates personal competencies (e.g., an adolescent considers he/she has strong Math skills because of the high grades in this school subject), strengthens pre-existing career goals (e.g., high academic achievement confirms one's choice of going to university after high-school graduation), and guides the planning of new vocational paths (e.g., high grades in a new school subject may make an adolescent consider new options for an occupation in this field). Thus, academic achievement influences career development in a myriad of ways. For instance, in a longitudinal study on employees, Zacher (2014a) reported that education (i.e., the highest level of educational attainment) positively predicted career concern. In this respect, longitudinal proof of the relation between career adapt-abilities and academic achievement (i.e., adolescents' GPA) would close a "missing link" and bring important input on how academic achievement influences their resources and strategies for building their careers.

This would be a valuable addition to vocational interventions in educational settings. Specifically, it could help career counselors make good use of adolescents' pre-existing career adapt-abilities and/or academic achievement in order to increase their intentionality in approaching educational and career issues (Savickas et al., 2009). Also it would ground career interventions on empirically-driven relations between the two variables. Still, to date very few studies have analyzed the relation between career adaptability and academic achievement in adolescence, especially from a longitudinal perspective.

3. The present study

We analyzed how career adaptability and academic achievement influenced each other across one academic year using a three-wave longitudinal study.

The study measured academic achievement through the Grand Point Average or GPA, which is the mean of grades a student receives for all school subjects. The GPA is a dominant and reliable operationalization of academic achievement (Bacon & Bean, 2006; Poropat, 2009; Richardson et al., 2012). It is a strong predictor of multiple positive outcomes of adolescence and adulthood, like university attendance and graduation (Vuolo et al., 2014) and consequently achievements in the work-place (Roth, BeVier, Schippman, & Switzer, 1996). As the school context provides a stable ground for the development of multiple personal and social attributes (see Poropat, 2009 and Richardson et al., 2012 for extensive reviews), it is sound to assume that it also informs the development of career adaptability in adolescence. As previously detailed, career adapt-abilities are positive psycho-social resources and strategies that help people cope with vocational issues (Savickas, 2005). In adolescence, most career issues are related to one's education, as school is the dominant context of development in this time-frame. In this context, the GPA has a strong

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