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FlashReports

Incentivizing education: Seeing schoolwork as an investment, not a chore

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ABSTRACT

Most American children expect to attend college but because they do not necessarily spend much time on schoolwork, they may fail to reach their imagined “college-bound” future self. The proposed identity-based motivation model helps explain why this gap occurs: Imagined “college-bound” identities cue school-focused behavior if they are salient and feel relevant to current choice options, not otherwise. Two studies with predominantly low-income and African American middle school students support this prediction. Almost all of the students expect to attend college, but only half describe education-dependent (e.g., law, medicine) adult identities. Having education-dependent rather than education-independent adult identities (e.g., sports, entertainment) predicts better grades over time, controlling for prior grade point average (Study 1). To demonstrate causality, salience of education-dependent vs. education-independent adult identities was experimentally manipulated. Children who considered education-dependent adult identities (vs. education-independent ones) were eight times more likely to complete a take-home extra-credit assignment (Study 2).

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Introduction

Sports, video games, or homework? A variety of choices compete for children’s time and attention. Children are unlikely to succeed academically if schoolwork consistently fails to be chosen, yet they may under invest in schoolwork even while desiring school success. For example, when asked how far they expect to go in school, most children in their last year of middle school report expecting to attend college, but this expectation does not predict the coursework they plan for the coming year (Trusty, 2000). These results, from national survey data, hold equally for low-income and minority students (Mello, 2009). Indeed, African American and Latino low-income children value education (e.g., Harris, 2008; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992) and expect to attend college (Mello, 2009) yet do not necessarily expend sufficient school-focused effort to attain such “college-bound” imagined future selves, on average investing less time in schoolwork (Steinberg et al., 1992) and being more likely to fail (Orfield, 2004).

To understand why this gap occurs we turned to identity-based motivation theory, which postulates first that people prefer to act in ways that feel identity congruent and second that the identity-to-choice linkage is often unclear (Oyserman, 2007, 2009; Oyserman, Fryberg, & Yoder, 2007). Identities feel stable but they are highly sensitive to contextual cues. Which identities come to mind,

what these identities mean and which behaviors feel congruent with them are highly influenced by situational cues. Thus, an identity is more likely to matter for behavioral choices when it is salient and meaningful in the moment (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006).

With regard to the gap between college-bound identities and school-focused behavioral choices, the identity-based motivation model yields the following predictions. First, having a college-bound imagined future does not necessarily predict behavior because this possible future identity may not be salient when choices are made. Second, children are more likely to expend effort on school if this effort feels like an investment toward attaining an education-dependent future identity, and not like a future identity-irrelevant chore. Because adolescent future identities are career and wage-earner focused (Erikson, 1963), when these future identities feel, consciously or nonconsciously, education-dependent they are more likely to incentivize effort in school. In contrast, future identities perceived as education-independent will not cue school-focused choices.

For several reasons, having a chronically or situationally salient education-dependent future identity is unlikely for low-income and minority children. First, these children are likely to grow up in neighborhoods with higher than average unemployment and poverty (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Such neighborhoods are often segregated, providing very limited exposure to adults who are college graduates (Adelman & Gocker, 2007; Krivo, Peterson, Rizzo, & Reynolds, 1998), making salient instead the possible adult identity of becoming a paid worker who can earn a living and support a family (Bowlby, Evans, & Mohammad,

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1998; Mickelson, 1990; Pahl, 1988). Second, these neighborhoods are “media saturated”, providing vivid models of adult identities that seem education-independent, such as professional athletes and entertainers (Roberts, 2000). Low-income minority children watch more television than higher income white children (Christiansen, 1979) and report drawing future identities from television personalities and the roles they play (Boon & Lomore, 2001; King & Multon, 1996). As a consequence, their college-bound possible identities are unlikely to be contextually cued and cued adult identities are unlikely to feel education-dependent. Indeed, there is some evidence that for minority students, school focus decreases when primed with education-independent rather than education-dependent media icons (Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, & Stone, 2008). Following the identity-based motivation model, having a college-bound possible identity is unlikely to matter if it is never salient and more chronically salient adult identities, including careers, will only evoke increased investment in school if they are conceptualized as education-dependent (see Figs. 1 and 2).

Two studies demonstrate the effect of salient education-dependent vs. education-independent adult possible identities on current education-focused choices. Replicating survey results, Study 1 demonstrates that low-income children expect to attend college. Moving beyond prior research, Study 1 then demonstrates that when education-dependent adult future identities are chronically salient, children’s school outcomes improve. Study 2 uses a subtle experimental manipulation to demonstrate the causal impact of salient adult future identities. Children led to focus on a future identity that feels dependent on education should engage in school more than children led to focus on a future identity that feels independent of education.

Study 1

We hypothesized that children would invest more effort in school and attain better grades over time if education-dependent rather than education-independent adult identities were salient. We operationalized salience as education-dependent (vs. education-independent) descriptions of adult possible identities, testing our hypothesis with two outcome variables – time spent on homework and end-of-term grade point average, controlling for prior grades.

Sample and procedure

Eighth graders from three Detroit middle schools ($n = 266$, 72% African American, 17% Latino, 11% White) serving high poverty (54.1% of households below poverty line; two-thirds receiving free/reduced price school lunches) and high unemployment neighborhoods (43.4% of adults were employed, US Census Bureau,

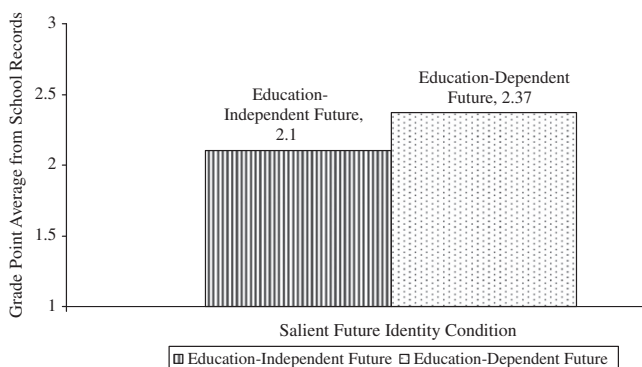


Fig. 1. Association of salient future identity with academic achievement.

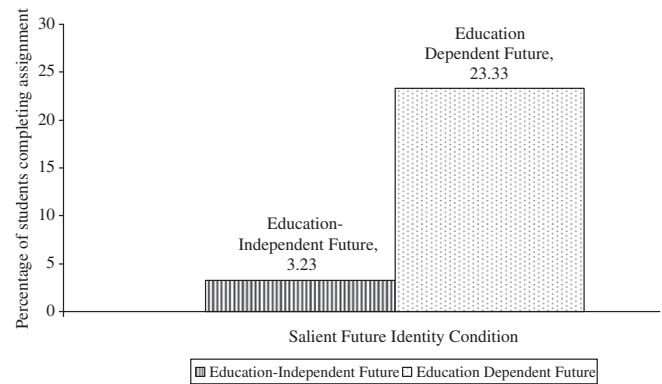


Fig. 2. Effect of salient future identity manipulation on effort in school.

2000) participated as part of a larger study. Students encountered the following prompt: “The next questions are about the job you see yourself having as an adult. Think about yourself as an adult, what job do you think you’ll have (if more than one, you can answer for the job you feel you will be most likely to have). What will you be doing in 10 years?” Responses were content coded to distinguish education-dependent adult identities that mentioned school (e.g., “Going to college and starting a new career as an engineer”) from education-independent adult identities that did not mention school (e.g., “I will be playing professional soccer or football”).

Children indicated weekly homework time (8-point response scale: 0 = 0 h a week, to 7 = more than 10 h a week, $M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.91$, 4 = 2–3 h a week of homework) and how far they expected to go to in school (1 = attend high school, to 6 = attend 2-year or community college, 7 = attend 4-year college 8 = attend graduate or professional school, $Md = 8$, $Mode = 8$, $M = 7.00$, $SD = 2.00$). Baseline and end-of-term grade point average (GPA) were obtained. Data were collected at the start of the academic year. Therefore at baseline school records could not be used. The baseline measure (“What grades do you usually get”) was self-reported on a 9-point response (0 = mostly F’s to 8 = mostly A’s, $M = 5.63$, $SD = 1.53$), where 6 = mostly B’s. End-of-term GPA was obtained from school records (0–4 point scale, $M = 2.22$, $SD = .78$, where 2.0 is a C).

Results and discussion

Replicating national survey responses, almost all children had very high educational expectations. Nine of 10 (88.8%) expected to attend at least a two-year college. Very few (8.8%) expected to attain a high school degree or less. However, only half of children (46%) expected an education-dependent adult identity (54% expected an education-independent adult identity) and this difference mattered. Children invested more time on homework and got better grades over time when their adult identity was education-dependent rather than education-independent. Though statistically marginally associated with planned effort (education-dependent $M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.81$ vs. education-independent $M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.98$), $F(1, 264) = 2.74$, $p = .10$; the effect of education-dependent future identity ($M = 2.37$, $SD = .73$, vs. education-independent $M = 2.10$, $SD = .80$) on grades was statistically significant ($F(1, 264) = 7.83$, $p < .01$) even when controlling for baseline grades ($F(1, 263) = 5.19$, $p < .05$). Children who envisioned an education-dependent adult identity were more likely to invest current effort in schoolwork than those who did not and these efforts paid off in better grades.

Study 1’s strengths were in yielding important findings about the spontaneous salience of education-dependent adult identities

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