Critical perspectives on agency and social justice in transitions and career development.

Type of contribution: paper

Title:
The impact of individual, family and school level factors on the educational aspirations of Finnish lower secondary school students

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Abstract:
In this study, impacts of individual, social and school level factors on Finnish lower secondary students’ educational aspirations are explored. Empirical data utilized in the study consist of a survey and achievement test results (PISA 2012 literacy test). The data were collected within an international research project International Study of City Youth (ISCY, www.iscy.org). The target group of the study was 15-year-old students living in the Turku sub-region, Finland. Altogether 12 of the region’s 27 lower-secondary schools from eight municipalities participated in the study. These schools had a total of 2,489 ninth graders of which 1,058 (42.5 %) students answered to the questionnaire and participated in the achievement test. Various statistical methods such as cross-tabulations and two-way analysis of variance are utilized in analyzing the complex interplay of individual, family and school level factors in determining adolescents’ educational aspirations.

Key words: Educational aspirations, lower secondary school students, equality, equity

Relation to the conference theme

The starting point of the study is the contradiction between meritocratic ideals of equal educational opportunities and research findings highlighting the significance of socio-economic background in determining one’s educational attainment and aspirations.
Educational choices adolescents make and aspirations they have when leaving comprehensive school are crucial in their career development.

**General description**

In this study, impacts of individual, social and school level factors on Finnish lower secondary students’ educational aspirations are explored. School systems of developed nations are largely built on the meritocratic idea of equal educational opportunities, meaning that factors such as gender, social class and ethnicity should not narrow down one’s educational opportunities and access to higher levels of education (Coleman, 1968; Espinoza, 2007). Instead, one’s educational opportunities and attainment should be determined by individual ability and motivation. Despite this objective, the impact of one’s social background on educational aspirations and attainment has proved to be one of the most consistent findings in the sociology of education (Reay, 2010; Weis, 2010; Biggart, Järvinen, & Parreira do Amaral, 2015). However, what is less studied is the interplay of individual ability and one’s socioeconomic background in determining educational aspirations of adolescents. If it is the case that many of the gifted low-SES students voluntarily give up achieving higher levels of education, education system is not only unequal but inefficient. Due to a potential self-exclusion of gifted low-SES students, a nation loses a large share of its talent potential. Further, explaining and understanding individual aspirations becomes even more complex, when students’ gender and various school level factors are taken into account in the analyses. With the aim of reaching a more comprehensive understanding of the topic, the present study is built on the idea of the complex interplay of individual, social and institutional level factors in determining adolescents’ educational aspirations. Theoretically, the study draws on Bourdieu’s (1977; 1990) work, his concepts of ‘habitus’ and ‘field’ in particular, as well as on Bourdieu-inspired careership theory by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997, Hodkinson, 2008).

**Methods:**

The data utilized in this study consist of a survey and achievement test results (modified version of PISA 2012 literacy test). The data were collected within an international research project *International Study of City Youth* (ISCY, [www.iscy.org](http://www.iscy.org)). The survey was targeted at 15-year-old students living in the Turku sub-region, Finland. Altogether 12 of the region’s 27 lower secondary schools from eight municipalities participated in the study. These schools had a total of 2,489 ninth graders of which 1,058 (42.5 %) students answered to the questionnaire and participated in the achievement test. Variables and factors included in the analysis are 1)
students’ short- and long-term educational aspirations, 2) gender, 3) socioeconomic background (ISEI-88 classification), 4) school SES (socioeconomic profile of a school’s student population) and 5) school culture (as experienced by students). Various statistical methods such as cross-tabulations and two-way analysis of variance analysis are utilized in data analyses.

Expected results:

Based on previous research and adopted theoretical viewpoints, the following hypotheses are set. Firstly, there is a connection between students’ socioeconomic background and their educational aspirations. Secondly, this relationship is more significant among boys than girls. Thirdly, adding achievement test results to analyses will not significantly affect the relationship between socio-economic background and one’s educational aspirations. However, based on previous studies, it is more challenging to predict in which way the adding of the school level factors to analyses may affect the associations between students’ ability, socioeconomic background and their educational aspirations. If it will turn out that school level factors are significant in this respect, the finding emphasizes the significance of local educational arrangements and individual schools in the pursuit of educational equality and equity.

References:


