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ABSTRACT

Shifts in the number of women in the workplace and a greater diversity and prestige level in their work may have an impact on the educational and occupational level to which students aspire. To examine the consequences of this shift, a comparison of the educational and occupational aspirations of high school students with the educational and occupational attainments of their parents was conducted to investigate gender differences. The participants were 272 male and 313 female high school students. They completed a questionnaire titled, "High School Students Survey: Work, Values, Interests and Skills in Career Guidance." Results showed that students aspired to significantly more education than that achieved by either their father or their mother. Also, the occupational prestige aspirations for both male and female students were significantly higher than the occupational prestige attainment of either parent, and females had significantly higher prestige aspirations than males. (MKA)

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Educational and Occupational Aspirations of High School Students

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were to compare the educational and occupational aspirations of high school students with the educational and occupational attainments of their parents and to investigate gender differences. The participants were 272 male and 313 female high school students. Participants completed a questionnaire that is based on the self-assessment section of SIGI Plus, "High School Students Survey: Work Values, Interests, and Skills in Career Guidance." Results showed that students aspired to significantly more education than that achieved by either their father or their mother. Also, the occupational prestige aspirations for both male and female students were significantly higher than the occupational prestige attainment of either parent, and females had significantly higher prestige aspirations than males.

Educational and Occupational Aspirations of High School Students

Shifts in the number of women in the workplace and a greater diversity and prestige level in their work may have an impact on the educational and occupational level to which students aspire. Previous research has questioned students' educational and occupational aspirations, specifically whether students aspire to similar education or occupation levels of their parents and if so, which parent in particular. The majority of this research, however, has focused not on high school age students but on young children (Trice & Knapp, 1991; Trice & McClellan, 1993; Trice, Hughes, Odom, Woods, & McClellan, 1995). Therefore, this study will compare the educational and occupational aspirations of high school students with the educational and occupational attainments of their parents.

Status attainment theory focuses on educational and occupational choices, and in part, investigates the influence of parental and family background. This model supposes that the social status of one's parents affects the level of schooling achieved, which in turn affects the occupational level that one achieves (Duncan, Featherman, & Duncan, 1972). It has been a common belief that boys and girls aspire to the careers of their fathers (Holland, 1962; Werts & Watley, 1972). Not until recently however, has the mother's occupational role been considered to have an influence on occupational aspiration (DeWinne, Overton, & Schneider, 1978; Grandy & Stahmann, 1974; Grotevant, Scarr, & Weinberg, 1977; Hazanovitz-Jordan, 1982; Trice & Knapp, 1991).

Using Holland's (1985) system, Trice and Knapp (1991) coded reports of parents' occupations and children's aspirations. They found that girls were more likely to aspire to their mothers' careers; whereas, boys tended to aspire to their mothers' careers at a higher rate than their fathers' careers when the careers were equal in status or when the mothers' careers had a higher status than the fathers. Some possible reasons for this shift, offered by the authors, is that over the last few decades women's jobs have become more interesting and prestigious, and therefore more desirable. Another possibility they suggest is that children know more about their mothers' than their fathers' jobs because they are more likely to have visited their mothers' workplaces.

Marini and Greenberger (1978) found that boys' educational aspirations and expectations were higher than those of girls. They suggest that the "social pressure on males to succeed in the occupational sphere produces higher aspirations and expectations among males than females for the educational attainment necessary for occupational achievement." (p. 70). Goodale and Hall (1976) however found no significant sex differences in college plans and level of aspired vocation.

The purpose of this study was to compare the educational and occupational aspirations of high school students with the educational attainment and occupational prestige level of their parents. In view of the gender differences Trice and Knapp (1991) found, males and females will be compared to each parent separately as well as to each other.

Method

Participants

Participants were 272 male and 313 female students from a suburban high school in the northeastern United States. The majority were White ($n = 416, 71.1\%$), followed by Black ($n = 62, 10.6\%$), Asian/Pacific Islander ($n = 49, 8.4\%$), Hispanic ($n = 25, 4.4\%$), American Indian/Alaskan Native ($n = 2, 0.3\%$), other/multicultural ($n = 15, 2.6\%$), and missing ($n=16, 2.7\%$). The grade distribution was as follows: 180 (31.6%) ninth grade, 165 (28.0%) tenth grade, 170 (28.9%) eleventh grade, and 68 (11.5%) twelfth grade. The mean age of students was 15.78 years (SD 1.17).

The majority of students ($n = 446, 75.7\%$) have had a job. As for occupational plans, 164 (27.8%) know exactly the kind of occupation they want, 288 (48.9%) are trying to decide between two or three different occupations, 85 (14.4%) are considering more than three different occupations, and 49 (8.3%) do not have any specific occupations in mind at this time. Many students have participated in various career exploration activities: 53.0% said they have read about occupations, 49.6% have talked with people in the field about occupations, 40.1% said they have talked with a guidance or career counselor about further education, 40.1% have talked with a guidance or career counselor about careers, 13.8%

have attended a career planning or guidance workshop, 4.6% said they attended a job search strategies workshop, and 4.1% stated they had taken a career guidance course.

Procedure

Participants anonymously completed a questionnaire, "High School Students' Survey: Work Values, Interests, and Skills in Career Guidance" during their social studies class. The questionnaire, based on the self-assessment section of SIGI PLUS, consisted of demographics, work values, interests, and activities.

Students were asked to indicate the educational attainment and occupational category of their parents and their own educational and occupational aspirations. The items were based on the educational and occupational items in the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS, 1988). Educational level was coded on a six-point scale ranging from less than a high school diploma to doctorate or professional degree. Only students who indicated an educational level for both parents and an educational aspiration for themselves were used in the analyses for education. Occupational categories included the following: laborer, service worker, machine operator, farmer, sales, office worker, tradesperson, protective service, owner of a small business, technical, manager, school teacher, professional I (occupations requiring either a bachelor's or master's degree), and professional II (occupations requiring a doctorate). Representative occupations were listed as examples for each category. The 1989 General Social Survey (GSS) mean prestige score for each occupational category was used. Students who gave more than one occupational aspiration were given the mean prestige score for their choices. Only students who gave an occupational category for both parents and indicated their own aspiration were retained for analyses. The occupations for homemaker and military were not used in the analyses because they do not have an occupational prestige score.

Results

Table 1 shows the distribution of educational aspirations for the students and the achieved educational level of their parents. Educational aspirations/achievement was treated as a continuous

variable and a repeated measures design using the MANOVA approach, as described by Lewis (1993), was employed. Table 2 shows the mean ratings for students' educational aspirations and their parent's achieved educational levels. The within-subject factor of educational aspiration/achievement was significant, Pillais-trace = .49, $F(2, 482) = 235.76$, $p < .001$. Post hoc tests using Tukey HSD test revealed that students aspired to significantly more education than that achieved by either their mother or their father. Additionally, fathers had significantly more education than mothers did. The gender by educational aspiration/achievement interaction was not significant, Pillais-trace = .01, $F(2, 482) = 2.22$, $p = .110$.

Table 3 shows the occupational prestige level aspirations of the students and the occupational prestige level achievement of their parents. To compare students' occupational prestige aspirations with their fathers' and mothers' achieved occupational prestige, the GSS mean prestige scores were used and a repeated measures design using the MANOVA approach was employed. Table 4 shows the occupational prestige means and standard deviations for students' aspirations and their parents' achievements. The within-subject part of the design yielded several significant results. The gender by occupational aspirations /achievement interaction was significant, Pillais-trace = .03, $F(2, 448) = 7.19$, $p = .001$. This was followed by six t-tests, using the Bonferroni inequality ($.05/6 = .0083$) to control for Type I error. For both male and female students, occupational aspirations were significantly higher than the achieved occupational prestige of either their fathers or mothers. Additionally females had significantly higher prestige aspirations than males.

The main effect of occupational prestige aspirations/achievement was also significant, Pillais-trace = .34, $F(2, 448) = 117.61$, $p < .001$. Post hoc tests using Tukey HSD revealed that averaged over gender, students aspired to significantly higher prestige occupations than those achieved by either fathers or mothers. No significant differences were found between fathers' and mothers' achieved prestige levels.

Discussion

Results of this study showed that both male and female students had higher educational aspirations than the attained level of their parents. One explanation for these higher aspirations may be the greater emphasis placed on post-secondary education by the job market. A greater number of today's higher-earning occupations require post-secondary education, and these jobs are expected to grow faster than those requiring less education or training (Silvestri, 1997). Additionally, students now place greater emphasis on their education (Green, Dugoni, & Ingels, 1995). In 1992 for example, 78 percent of seniors reported that they would attend a post-secondary institution immediately after high school graduation, compared to 59 percent in 1971. Further research is necessary to determine if the educational aspirations reported here are realistic and longitudinal studies might conclude if students attain their desired education level.

Results also showed no gender differences in students' educational plans. This result supports Goodale and Hall's (1976) finding of no gender differences but contradicts Marini and Greenberger (1978) who found that boys' educational expectations were higher than those of girls.

This study also demonstrates that both male and female students aspire to occupations of greater prestige than their mothers' and fathers' occupational attainment. This trend may be due to the recent surge of technology and the downsizing of management. In recent years, technological advances may have introduced new jobs to students that were not available to their parents and downsizing may have eliminated those jobs their parents once held. Other research indicates that factors such as academic performance (Sewell, Haller, & Ohlendorf, 1970), personality characteristics (Jencks et al., 1972), mental ability (Sewell & Armer, 1966), parental expectations (Sewell & Shah, 1968), peer influences (Haller & Butterworth, 1960), and even family size (Rehberg & Westby, 1967) also affect occupational aspiration.

Sewell & Armer (1966) found that children of higher social class origins are more likely to aspire to higher educational and occupational goals than children of lower class origins. Since this study centers on a predominantly middle class sample, additional research that includes students from lower class

backgrounds might reveal differences in educational and occupational aspirations. Status attainment theory holds that a child's educational and occupational achievements are based on his or her parents' social status. Therefore, it is important for career counselors to stress the importance of formal education to students of lower socio-economic status. It is also important for counselors to recognize that, because of their parents' possible unfamiliarity with certain educational and occupational opportunities, students who aspire to education and occupation levels higher than their parents may need additional guidance. If counselors work to identify family background and aspiration levels of their students, they can possibly raise the educational aims of children who or may, otherwise, fall behind. This, in turn, may advance their occupational attainments.

This research shows the importance of the career counselor and his or her role in helping students set and reach their educational and occupational goals. Although NELS data show that the number of seniors who expected to pursue some further education (but not finish college) declined from 31 percent in 1972 to 25 % in 1992 (Green et al., 1995), some students are not reaching their goals. Counselors need to understand why 25 % of our students think they will not pursue further education and what can be done to help them meet their educational aspirations. Intervention at the educational level can affect occupational level achieved.

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Table 1

Educational Aspirations/Achievement Levels

	Students' Aspirations	Fathers' Achievement	Mothers' Achievement
Less than high school	1.0%	4.3%	3.5%
High school diploma	1.9%	19.6%	22.1%
Less than a 4-year degree	7.8%	19.8%	28.2%
Bachelor's degree	24.1%	23.7%	23.9%
Master's degree	35.3%	20.0%	19.0%
Doctorate	29.9%	12.6%	3.3%

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Students' Educational Aspirations and Parents' Achieved EducationLevels

	Students' Aspirations	Fathers' Achievement	Mothers' Achievement
Males (N = 228)	M = 4.70 (SD = 1.16)	M = 3.78 (SD = 1.47)	M = 3.43 (SD = 1.19)
Females (N = 257)	M = 4.90 (SD = .98)	M = 3.69 (SD = 1.37)	M = 3.42 (SD = 1.24)
	M = 4.80 (SD = 1.07)	M = 3.73 (SD = 1.42)	M = 3.43 (SD = 1.22)

Table 3

Students' Occupational Aspirations and Parents' Occupational Prestige Level

	1989 GSS Prestige Score	Students' Aspirations		Father's Achievement	Mother's Achievement
		Males N=205	Females N=246		
Laborer	29.44	0.0%	0.0%	6.6%	0.4%
Service Worker	30.46	0.5%	4.1%	2.9%	9.9%
Machine Operator	34.10	1.0%	0.0%	4.4%	1.8%
Farmer	35.57	1.0%	0.0%	1.8%	0.7%
Sales	35.77	2.0%	0.8%	5.5%	3.8%
Office Worker	38.16	2.0%	4.1%	4.2%	26.9%
Tradesperson	38.51	4.9%	0.8%	8.4%	0.9%
Protective Service	48.50	5.4%	1.2%	3.5%	0.9%
Owner of small business	50.64	4.9%	1.6%	10.2%	4.2%
Technical	51.21	14.1%	2.0%	6.4%	3.3%
Manager	53.52	3.4%	2.4%	13.2%	8.2%
School Teacher	64.38	3.4%	11.8%	1.5%	14.6%
Professional I	64.38	30.7%	35.8%	18.1%	19.2%
Professional II	64.38	19.5%	31.7%	13.2%	5.3%
More than one Career choice		7.3%	3.7%		

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations of Students' Occupational Aspirations and Parents' AchievedOccupational Prestige

	Students' Aspirations	Fathers' Achievement	Mothers' Achievement
Males N =205	M =56.92 (SD = 9.53)	M = 50.88 (SD = 11.89)	M = 48.35(SD = 13.35)
Females N= 246	M = 60.44 (SD = 9.22)	M = 49.50 (SD = 12.70)	M = 50.90 (SD = 12.96)
	M = 58.87 (SD = 9.50)	M =50.16 (SD = 12.33)	M = 49.73 (SD =13.21)



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