



The Educational Aspirations of Students from Romania at the Transition from Secondary to High School. A Longitudinal Study

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate how the educational aspirations of secondary school students, upon graduation from this and the next cycle of schooling, are influenced by personal characteristics (gender), students' expectations and their parents' level of education. Educational aspirations are students' desires to achieve higher levels of schooling or changing orientations that are influenced by a combination of structural background characteristics and an assessment of capabilities, opportunities, resources, and barriers during adolescence. The study used data collected in autumn 2011 and spring 2013 by means of a school and career orientation questionnaire applied to all 8th and later 9th grade students in Bihor County, Romania (same sample in two different stages); and data from the National Assessment. The hypotheses of the study were: with success in the national assessment, at an educational establishment and the transition to a new school cycle, educational aspirations will change upwards, the educational aspirations of pupils whose parents have a high level of education will increase and the educational aspirations of pupils whose parents have a low level of education will decrease and that female students will experience an increase in educational aspirations. In the end, the first two hypotheses of the study were confirmed, while the third hypothesis, concerning the relationship between parental educational attainment and students' educational aspirations, was refuted.

Keywords: Educational Aspirations; Secondary School students; Educational Expectations; Level of Education.

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to investigate how the educational aspirations of secondary school students, upon graduation from this and the next cycle of schooling, are influenced by personal characteristics (gender), students' expectations and their parents' level of education.

1.1 Educational aspirations

Educational aspirations are students' desires to achieve higher levels of schooling or changing orientations that are influenced by a combination of structural background characteristics and an assessment of capabilities, opportunities, resources, and barriers during adolescence [2, 7]. Quaglia and Cobb define aspirations as the ability to identify and set goals for the future while being inspired in the present to work toward achieving those goals [25]. They begin to form in early childhood and are modified throughout development by environment and experiences. As children mature, the number of aspirations decreases in response to developing understanding of how the world works and the constraints imposed by the choices that have been made and the achievements that have been made so far [4].

Educational aspirations are among the strongest predictors of educational achievement. Given the close link between these two concepts, research in this area has focused on factors such as gender, race, family background, institutional context, parental involvement in academic life, and school experiences. In addition, family socioeconomic status has been extensively examined as a predictor of low aspirations, either acting independently or through mechanisms of parental involvement in children's education [1].

It is also necessary to distinguish to some extent between educational aspirations and expectations. These two concepts have been used in the literature to denote students' educational goals and ambitions (Schmitt-Wilson & Faas, 2016) and are usually treated as if they were inseparable. Educational expectations differ from aspirations because they refer to the level of schooling the student believes they will achieve, whereas educational aspirations refer to the educational level they hope to achieve [26].

Perceived self-efficacy refers to people's beliefs about their own abilities to achieve goals and accomplish tasks. Young people who do well in school and believe they can succeed tend to have higher levels of aspiration. Similarly, young people who believe they can achieve in life and who attribute their success to hard work rather than chance have higher aspirations than their peers [4].

In this study, educational aspirations will refer to the future educational trajectory that the student would like to have, assessed at the beginning of 8th grade through the school and career guidance questionnaire, and educational expectations to the choices they will make after the national assessment, taking into account the average that students have and the probability of entering the desired (aspired) high school.

1.2 Model of the achievement of status

To better explain the concept of educational aspirations, researchers have drawn on several theoretical models.

One of the most important models used to be able to understand educational attainment and aspirations is the status attainment model [1].

The status attainment process refers to the set of events by which a person occupies his or her position in the social hierarchy of wealth, power and prestige. This model suggests that the socio-economic status of a student's family has a major impact on social aspirations and achievement. Specifically, parental income, parental education, parental place of employment, increased expectations of the child's education, and the provision of relevant academic experiences influence children's educational aspirations and determine their educational trajectory [13]. Examining the factors involved in the status attainment process, it has been observed that parents' educational expectations of their children are often more important than their educational attainment, occupation, and school involvement in shaping educational aspirations [1].

One of the models used to explain the status attainment process is the Wisconsin model. According to this model, the socio-economic status of parents, consisting of parental occupation and education, family income level, social class and minority status have a considerable effect on aspiration formation. Family socio-economic position creates some limits on the individual's interaction with significant others (parents, friends, teachers, etc.), which influences their educational outcomes and leads to higher educational aspirations [18, 6, 24, 9]. In addition to the influence of status, parental support for education is a powerful variable that mediates between a child's socio-economic background, their intelligence, and the educational aspirations the child has [17, 12]. Specifically, parents will choose the best schools for their children, offer them private lessons with the best teachers and from an early age, and encourage children (especially in the early years of school when they can still influence them in this way) to interact with students they see as positive role models.

In contrast, students from low socio-economic backgrounds do not have access to significant resources and are not as adept at harnessing available resources as students from high socio-economic backgrounds [22]. Parents who have low financial resources tend to have lower aspirations for their children, and young people from disadvantaged social backgrounds tend to have lower aspirations than young people from more advantaged backgrounds [16]. Often parents in this category are more concerned with how they can obtain financial resources to support their family and lack the funds to provide their children with the best academic resources, private lessons, access to technology, etc. In addition, they prefer to enrol their children in schools where they perceive their students to be of similar socio-economic status, thus avoiding requirements that they feel they cannot meet, or, due to geographical and financial limitations, being able to access other educational routes.

Parental expectations and parental support appear to be important variables influencing students' aspirations to attend college, even early in high school, and they make the difference between those who have attended college and those who have not [8, 23]. A UK study found that 78% of high-income parents wanted their children to go to college, while only 43% of low-income parents had similar aspirations [4]. In this case, socio-economic status may also influence college attendance. University education involves tuition, transportation fees, etc. that were not required in undergraduate education [11].

Of course, there are also studies that argue that parents' aspirations influence their children's educational

achievements even without considering their socio-economic background. Strand concluded that children whose parents had high educational aspirations for their children, provided them with a computer or private lessons, engaged in more school activities and rarely argued with their children; had high aspirations even without considering their family background [21]. This approach is however an unrealistic one since parents with low socio-economic status cannot afford or can hardly afford to purchase a computer or pay for private lessons and engage in school activities. Furthermore, we know from numerous studies that parents with low income do not have as high educational aspirations for their children as parents with high income. It is therefore necessary to take into account the socio-economic status of parents in any study of children's educational aspirations.

1.3 Personal characteristics - Gender of students

Often it is not enough to look only at external factors such as socio-economic status. In the past, discrimination in education particularly affected female students because while girls were trained for domestic occupations and received a minimal education, boys attended school for several years and thus developed skills needed for a future career. Today and in developing countries, mainstream education incorporates almost all young people, both male and female, into identical educational structures and offers them the same training programmes. Thus, we are witnessing a reversal of the situation of the past, in secondary school and beyond, girls perform significantly better than boys in some subjects [5].

There have always been and will always be some gender differences in social support, perception of opportunities, educational and professional aspirations and expectations among young people. While in early childhood we cannot yet speak of high or low aspirations, with advancing age the gender gap in terms of developing and changing aspirations becomes clearer.

When we look at aspirations purely through the lens of gender, the research is quite diverse and, one might say, controversial. Although many studies argue that women tend to have higher educational and occupational aspirations; higher social support from both family and other sources; higher perceptions of future opportunities; and higher educational and occupational expectations than men, men still have higher occupational status, advance faster in their careers, and have higher paying jobs than women [4, 3].

In the United States, for example, women tend in greater numbers than men to have higher educational aspirations, to be more present in the school environment and even to obtain a master's degree. But nevertheless, they tend to narrow their range of potential occupations at a fairly young age (23, 15, 3), whereas men are more open to many kinds of occupations and later in development, they choose occupations even if they are not necessarily "appropriate" for their sex (stylist, cook, educator, etc.).

There are also studies that contradict these findings and argue that boys have higher educational and occupational aspirations than girls and that, conversely, girls are interested in a much greater number of occupations than boys even later in development [24]. Or there are cases where there are no reported differences between the two sexes in the level of aspirations and expectations [10, 15].

One possible explanation for these conflicting results is that the aspiration levels of young people, both female

and male, have different trajectories throughout their lives, with boys having higher aspirations at one age and girls at another. Compared to girls, boys start with relatively low aspirations at the beginning of secondary school but these increase at a fast pace during the course of secondary school and then decrease again once this cycle is completed. In the case of girls, this increase is much slower but also more consistent and stable over time. Moreover, girls with higher academic achievement in high school tended to have much higher aspirations during and after high school, whereas girls with lower academic achievement did not experience a considerable increase in aspirations during this period [19, 20].

Considering the existing theory, we launch the following three hypotheses:

1. With success in the national assessment, at an educational establishment and the transition to a new school cycle, educational aspirations will change upwards.
2. The educational aspirations of pupils whose parents have a high level of education will increase and the educational aspirations of pupils whose parents have a low level of education will decrease.
3. Female students will experience an increase in educational aspirations.

2. Method

The study used data collected in autumn 2011 and spring 2013 by means of a school and career orientation questionnaire applied to all 8th and later 9th grade students in Bihor County, Romania (same sample in two different stages); and data from the National Assessment. The questionnaire investigated, among other things, the personal characteristics of the pupils, the level of aspirations of the pupils (through the question "Up to what level do you want to continue your studies?"), the educational capital of the parents (through the question "What is the occupation of your parents?") and which is the school unit where they want to continue their studies (in the questionnaire for grade VIII).

2.1 Participants

The sample used in this study resulted from crossing two different samples, namely students in grade VIII (4538 subjects) with the same students in grade IX (2589 subjects), filtered by the results of all students in Bihor county at the National Assessment. The result was a sample of 1927 subjects, namely those students who completed the questionnaire in both grade VIII and grade IX and who participated in the National Assessment in that year.

The questionnaire used in the study was intended to be applied to 5550 students, representing the total number of 8th grade students in Bihor County. Due to absenteeism, refusal to complete or erroneous completion of the 5550 pupils, only 4538 pupils were included in the study, approximately 82% of the total number of 8th grade pupils in Bihor County. There were no other selection criteria in addition to their level of education. A year or so later, the same sample of pupils was given an adapted version of the school and career guidance questionnaire and due to the same reasons as above, a sample of 1927 pupils was obtained. The large discrepancy of subjects

between the two phases of the study is also due to school dropout, with more than 30% of students stating that they do not want to continue their studies or are not yet decided to do so (Avrigeanu, 2013).

Of the 1927 students, 45.4% (874) are male and 54.6% (1053) are female. The vast majority declared themselves to be Romanian, 77.1% (1485), 20.7% (399) of Hungarian ethnicity, 1.3% (25) of Roma ethnicity and 1% (18) of another ethnicity. In grade 8, 39.5% (761) of the students were domiciled in Oradea, 13.4% (258) in other cities in Bihor county and 46.7% (899) in rural areas. In grade 9 40.9% (788) said they were domiciled in Oradea, 13.5% (261) in other towns in the county and 44.8% (864) in rural areas. A migration to urban areas can be observed, due to the fact that the majority of secondary schools are located in urban areas. We can observe the beginning of the migration from rural to urban from high school.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the sample and the answers given by the subjects to the questions in the questionnaire.

When we look at the data from the 8th grade, and more specifically the aspirations of the students related to the educational unit and the profile where they want to continue their studies, we see that only 56.1% of them have reached the option they aspired to, the remaining 43.9% either did not enter the desired high school or adjusted their aspirations according to the results of the national assessment. Why do we say that? Because if we look at the 9th grade data, and more specifically at the question whether the current school was the first option, we see that 87.1% of students answered "YES", so 31% of students "adjusted" their educational aspirations, they became rather educational expectations, mediated by the results obtained in the national assessment and the entrance averages in each profile in previous years. As far as aspirations regarding the level of schooling are concerned, it can be seen (Figure 1) that there are no major differences, but there is a tendency for them to stabilise and slightly increase, and the percentage of those who are undecided is decreasing, as they have a better perceived self-efficacy and can assess more accurately the level of schooling they can achieve.

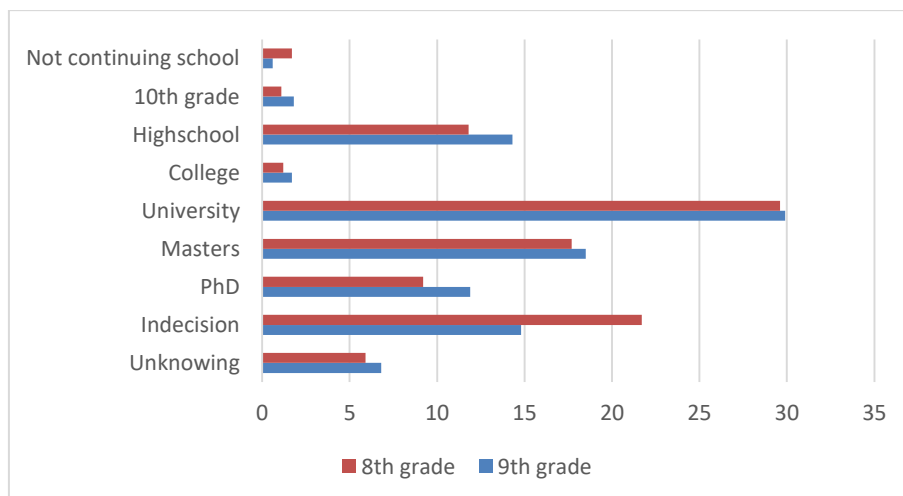


Figure 1

We can thus conclude that the hypothesis that success in the national assessment, at an educational establishment and moving to a new school cycle will change educational aspirations upwards is confirmed.

The second hypothesis related to the gender of the participants and more specifically to the fact that girls will experience an increase in aspirations. Following the Chi-square test to verify this hypothesis, it can be seen in the table below that there are significant deviations of over 2.0 in terms of increased educational aspirations and female gender, which confirms this hypothesis.

Table 1

	Changing of options					
	Constant uncertainty	Decrease of aspirations	of Increase of aspirations	of Constant aspirations	Decrease of uncertainty	of Increase of uncertainty
Boys	1.8	0.4	-3.5	-1.4	2.3	1.1
Girls	-1.8	-0.4	3.5	1.4	-2.3	-1.1

The final hypothesis of the study argues that the educational aspirations of students whose parents have high educational attainment will increase and the educational aspirations of students whose parents have low educational attainment will decrease. Using the whole Chi-square test, the following was observed: a very low level of mother's education leads to an increase in aspirational level, while a high level of mother's education leads to a decrease or maintenance of aspirational level.

Table 2

	Uncertainty	Changing of options					
		Decrease of aspirations	Increase of aspirations	Constant aspirations	Decrease of uncertainty	Increase of uncertainty	
Last school graduated by the mother	Unschool	-0.4	-1.1	5.6	-2.5	-1.3	0
	8th grade	3.4	-2.3	0	-1.8	1.2	0.6
	12th grade	1.8	-0.3	-2.8	-1.4	2.7	0.7
	Highschool diploma	-0.6	-1.2	1.1	-1.3	1.5	0.6
	Professional school	-1.4	0.4	0.5	-0.4	0	0.6
	Technical school	0.7	1.4	0.6	0.4	-2.2	-0.9
	University	-2.9	2	0.2	5	-3.9	-1.9
Postgrad	-1.3	1.6	-1	1.6	-1.1	-0.4	

If we look at the father's level of education things are similar, a low level of father's education is linked to an increase in aspirational level, a medium level of father's education to a decrease in aspirational level and a high and very high level of father's education leads to the maintenance of aspirational level.

Table 3

		Changing of options					
		Uncertainty	Decrease of aspirations	Increase of aspirations	Constant aspirations	Decrease of uncertainty	Increase of uncertainty
Last school graduated by the father	Unschool	1.8	-0.1	-0.2	0.1	-1.3	0.1
	8th grade	2.4	-1.1	2.3	-2.7	-1	1.4
	12th grade	1.9	-2.2	-1.4	-1.3	3.1	0.5
	Highschool diploma	-1.8	0.4	-0.1	0.6	0	0.4
	Professional school	0.4	0.5	0.4	-1.2	1	-0.9
	Technical school	-1.3	2.8	-0.5	-0.2	-1.1	0.3
	University	-1.5	-0.1	0.9	3.6	-3	-0.9
	Postgrad	-0.8	1.1	-2.1	2.6	-0.6	-1

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, the first two hypotheses of the study were confirmed, while the third hypothesis, concerning the relationship between parental educational attainment and students' educational aspirations, was refuted. Even if we would have expected, according to existing studies, that there would be a positive relationship between parental educational attainment and aspirational growth, this does not necessarily exist. One possible explanation is that parents with higher educational attainment had higher educational aspirations for their children from the outset whereas parents with lower educational attainment adjust these aspirations according to other factors not investigated in this study, such as increasing socio-economic status, reassessment of the child's academic ability, etc. Although this article is a basic one, its purpose is to pave the way towards understanding how educational aspirations form and interact with other factors to achieve educational attainment and supports future efforts to investigate all factors involved in the formation of aspirations.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by a study conducted each year by the Center for Resources and Educational Assistance of Bihor County, Romania. The author has a doctoral student position at the University of Oradea, Romania.

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