Educational and career aspirations

School perseverance is highly influenced by students' educational and career aspirations. Students who have well-defined educational and career goals find the motivation they need to stick with their studies. Setting such goals is often related to students' self-perception of their cognitive abilities (ease of learning, satisfaction with grades, considering oneself as smart as anyone else, etc.), to the effort they put into their studies, to their prior school record (successes or failures), and to the education level of their parents. Students who do not set specific educational and career goals are more likely to change programs or abandon their studies. This is why it is important to help students gain better self-awareness and set educational and career goals for themselves.

What the research says

In general, research has indicated that a number of factors influence how young people set educational and career aspirations. These include family history, socioeconomic background, place of residence, school grades, self-perception of cognitive abilities, family debt, and peer influence. Each of these factors could be the target of specific interventions. However, it is also possible to take a broader approach to acting on youth aspirations. It should be pointed out that everyone in a young person's life—from their friends to any significant adult they encounter (whether or not they are family members)—can contribute to nourishing their educational and career aspirations.

A few facts about the aspirations of Canadian youth for higher learning

- Girls do better at school than boys and have higher educational goals.
- Parental encouragement has more influence on young people's plans than their socioeconomic status.
- Young people going to school in small communities (rural as opposed to urban areas) have lower aspirations.
- Grades have a significant effect on students' educational plans and on the efforts they put into their studies.

However, the decision to stay in school is greatly influenced by students' self-perception of their academic ability. The feeling of competency is a basic psychological need that allows a person to rise to challenges. Because people tend to undertake activities at which they feel they can succeed, and to avoid those at which they expect to fail, their choices in life often depend on their own perception of their abilities.[1]

Whether or not a student has repeated a year, their academic results, and the program they are in are all indicators that help evaluate their predisposition for educational success. These indicators are decisive, in that they have direct effects on the youth's educational and career aspirations.

Numerous studies show that these factors are among the most significant determinants of high educational aims and enrolment in post-secondary studies. A study conducted by the ÉCOBES group[2] showed that the most important obstacle to educational aspirations was difficulty doing schoolwork (56%), while boredom and lack of interest was in second place (22%). A Canada-wide study[3] of 29,687 youth born in 1984, based on data from the Youth in Transition Survey[4] and the Programme for International Student Assessment[5] drew similar conclusions about the influence of grades and experiences at school on the development of aspirations.

RELATIONSHIPS

For more information
L'influence des aspirations scolaires sur l'accès aux études postsecondaires
http://www.cirst.uqam.ca/Portals/0/docs/projet_transitions/Capsule_Note5.pdf

[1] A. Bandura (1986), *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

[2] Groupe ÉCOBES (2010), *Comprendre les aspirations, les habiletés cognitives et l'engagement scolaire des jeunes des Laurentides.* Downloaded at: http://www.prel.qc.ca/files_a-propos/05_Comprendre_les_aspirations.pdf

[3] D. Looker and V. Thiessen (2004), *Aspirations of Canadian youth for higher education*, Learning Policy Directorate, Strategic Policy and Planning, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. Downloaded at: http://www.pisa.gc.ca/eng/pdf/SP-600-05-04E.pdf

[4] Youth in Transition Survey: http://www.pisa.gc.ca/eng/yits.shtml

[5] Programme for International Student Assessment: http://www.pisa.gc.ca/eng/home.shtml

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Taking effective action

Certain observations thus pave the way for courses of intervention that improve school performance by emphasizing the role of parental encouragement, extracurricular activities, students' sense of belonging at school, their sense of self-efficacy, and their living environment.

For instance, it has been observed that parents play an important role in developing their children's educational aspirations, regardless of their socioeconomic situation. This is likely due to the clear messages they send to their children about the importance of education as well as to the encouragement they provide during their children's school years.

One may assume that other types of encouragement could have a similar effect. In other words, children who do not receive encouragement at home may be urged by other significant people in their lives to continue their education. The fact that young people whose peers are more focused on their studies tend to have higher educational goals lends support to this argument. The same goes for youth who are surrounded by models of success.

Avenues for effective action related to educational and career aspirations

Put in place activities that guide parents in encouraging their children to develop and pursue educational and career aspirations:
- to act as role models at home (finishing tasks, valuing education, setting goals, persevering, finding solutions to problems, etc.),
- to help youth identify their aspirations (goals, possible choices, exploration, discussions, etc.),
- to promote success and motivation at school (help with and interest in school work and extracurricular activities),
- to foster mastery of reading in particular (literacy activities from early childhood, fun reading activities, etc.).

Put in place youth mentoring and guidance activities (tutoring, mentoring, pairing, sponsoring, buddying, etc.):
- to provide positive role models for youth,
- to give youth a chance to talk about their problems and find acceptable solutions,
- to provide a source of encouragement to youth both inside and outside the family,
- to promote career exploration, especially for students at risk of dropping out,
- to explore options for the future and their respective requirements (degrees, careers, prerequisites, registration, programs, etc.).

Put in place activities for vulnerable youth
- to provide guidance for youth who lack motivation at school (individualized follow up, brainstorming workshops, etc.);
- to promote the development of meaningful and positive relationships with adults at school, in the community, and with peers;
- to get youth interested in improving their skills, especially with their scholastic abilities and their sense of belonging at school (contests, artistic presentations, sports, creative activities, various extracurricular activities, recognition events, social activities, hands-on projects, etc.).