



PSICOLOGÍA POSITIVA Y CICLO VITAL

ASPIRATIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND STUDENTS' BACKGROUNDS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to analyse the relationship between the perspectives of higher education (study aspirations) and variables of a social nature (nationality, level of family education), and also to study the relationship between fulfilment (educational and personal) and professional aspirations throughout adolescence. The sample comprised 487 subjects from different school years (7th, 9th and 11th years), from schools of Greater Lisbon and inland Portugal. School performance was assessed through school grades in essential subjects, and personal fulfilment through the *Children's Rights Scale* Tool; the pupils were also asked about the profession they would like to have and the education level they would like to attain. Analysis of the results enabled the observation of significant differences in the variables of both school and personal fulfilment, in terms of higher education perspectives (school and professional aspirations). The groups of pupils who had greater aspirations to move on to Higher Education returned more favourable results. These differences also included noticeable oscillations throughout the school years. The results were interpreted from a cognitive-social and developmental perspective, recognising the need for specific research and backing up the discussion through comparison with somewhat similar research projects.

Key-words: higher education; school aspirations; students' backgrounds.

INTRODUCTION

In reviewing the studies carried out on this topic, several show that family background, individual characters and academic results are heavily linked to the aspirations of adolescents regarding Higher Education, with big differences according to ethnic groups. In recent research by Marjoribanks (2003), following on from a previous study (Marjoribanks, 2002), the relationships between adolescents' academic aspirations and the academic skills of young adults are examined, taking into account variables such as family background, individual characteristics and academic results. The data were gathered in an Australian sample of 3 772 girls and 3 476 boys. Other studies have looked at the relations between aspirations (school and professional) and variables such as gender, socioeconomic level, the family, nationality, school performance, or academic self-awareness. Below we briefly outline these studies.



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Aspirations and gender

In a study by Mendez and Crawford (2002), a sample containing 132 girls and 95 boys from the 6th and 8th school years was used, aimed at analysing the professional aspirations of pre-adolescent pupils. The girls showed more flexibility in their professional aspirations than the boys. However, the boys aspired significantly more than the girls, to professions with greater social prestige. In a study in Portugal (Azevedo, 1991), focusing on school and professional expectations of youths who were attending the 9th school year and carried out over 3 consecutive years (1989, 1990 and 1991), one could see that in the sample of respondents in 1991 (N = 6 722 spread over 60 schools), which asked about school expectations, around one third of the pupils (35%) wanted to study for a short period (12th year or equivalent), and the vast majority (65%) wanted to study for many years (obtain a degree). In an analysis broken down by gender, girls returned more flattering results, both as regards the wish for a short study period (38.3% boys and 32% girls) and a long study period (61.7 boys and 68% girls).

Aspirations, socioeconomic level and family

In a follow-up study involving 17 000 individuals with a 12-year age difference (born in 1958 and 1970), Schoon and Parsons (2002) researched the adolescents' aspirations in a changing socio-historic context. In both groups it was found that the social class of the family was a good predictor both of school results and aspirations. The results confirmed the importance of the parents-children relationship, especially parental support in the occupational development of the children. Jodl and others (2001) carried out a study on the influence of the parental role in the early shaping of adolescents' aspirations. The results highlight the role of the parents in imparting values of fulfilment to their children, essentially the way adolescents look at their future profession.

In the study carried out in Portugal mentioned earlier (Azevedo, 1991), one can see that as regards school expectations, the "educational route" was the preferred path for pupils of a high and medium socioeconomic background, while the technological and professional route was chosen by pupils of a low socioeconomic background. As for professional expectations, high socioeconomic level pupils aspired to enter professions of greater social prestige, while low socioeconomic level pupils chose jobs more similar to their parents. These data were interpreted as confirming the reproducing trend of the education system (Azevedo, 1991). Another study (Silva, 1999) backs up the same findings regarding the differences in aspirations according to one's family.

Aspirations and nationality of parents

The research has not supplied data about the differences in youths' expectations, both concerning school and professions, according to the nationality of the pupils' parents. There is, however, a strong correlation between immigrant family households and belonging to a low socioeconomic level. The data presented earlier concerning the socioeconomic level, found in Azevedo's study (1991), can therefore be considered as reference points in this parameter. Other studies are also noteworthy, such as that by Marjoribanks (2003), who in an Australian sample of 3 772 girls and 3 476 boys found that the family background, individual characteristics and academic results are strongly linked to adolescents' aspirations, with differences according to ethnic groups. In the study by Jodl and others (2001) mentioned above, the parental values are able to predict the values of the youths.

Aspirations and school performance

As well as motivations of a more intrinsic nature, one kind of motivation has to do with *goals*. Without goals, and therefore without aspirations, the pupils' behaviour will have no direction and will sink into inconsistency. Action is triggered by defining a target to be reached (Nuttin, 1984; Stipek, 1996) and the crucial factor that will determine motivation is the importance and willingness to carry out an activity. Research into motivation has highlighted several kinds of goals which, depending on their specificity, activate certain thoughts and emotions, triggering different motivation patterns. Three



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kinds of goals can be categorised – academic goals – and within this category the learning goals and the fulfilment goals (Elliot and Church, 1997; Simmons, Dewitte and Lens, 2001) – social goals and relational goals (Elliot and Church, 1997; Stipek, 1996). The decision to establish goals and the method used is linked to the preparation of plans and school strategies and resources, and has implications on efficacy, motivation and learning (Simmons, Dewitte and Lens, 2001). Several studies have revealed that some weak pupils also have a low level of goals (Stipek, 1996; Simmons, Dewitte and Lens, 2001).

Aspirations and rights in school

The literature about rights does not include studies about the possible relationship with educational aspirations. Some of the studies are now described. More than fifty years after approval, on the tenth of December 1948, of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there are still constant infringements of human rights, above all in war situations, but also with regard to minority social groups (Jordan & Goodey, 1996; Schlene, 1992; Sparks, 1994).

In a previous study (Veiga, 1999; 2002), it was found that psychosocial rights with the lowest existence in school were situated, in a scale from 1 to 5, between the average parameter (3) and the very frequent parameter (4); the rights that appeared most frequently were situated between the parameter very frequent (4) and extremely frequent (5). The differential analyses of the results found that, with regard to school years, 9th-year pupils, when compared to 7th/8th-year pupils, perceived the existence of fewer rights in school and at home (protection, relation, affection, instruction), although the importance attributed to these dimensions was greater. In this study the rights were also differentiated according to the number of fails. The data enabled one to conclude that support from teachers is one of the best ways to increase the amount of psychosocial rights of the young at school and at home. This support is linked to all dimensions of psychosocial rights, above all to affection and self-determination. The affection shown by the teacher to the pupil in the process of building his identity, in the sense attributed by Erikson (1980), and consideration for his self-determination, in the sense attributed by Maslow (1970), stand out as important means of enhancement (Jordan & Goodey, 1996; 2004). In addition to these studies, the scientific research does not include specific work on the perceptions of the young concerning the existence and evolution of their rights, in school and in general (Jordan & Goodey, 1996; Schlene, 1992; Sparks, 1994; Symonides, 1998; UNESCO, 1998).

The *aim of the study* presented herein includes the following aspects: to analyse the relationship between school aspirations and other variables (gender, level of family education, nationality); and to study the relationship between fulfilment (school and personal) and professional aspirations throughout adolescence.

METHODOLOGY

As regards the methodology used, the subjects of the sample, the assessment tools and the procedure implemented are outlined.

Subject

The *sample* was made up of 487 subjects from different school years (7th, 9th and 11th years), from schools in Greater Lisbon and Inland Portugal, including subjects of both sexes. The subjects are split into groups of different nationalities and other groups of belonging, as shown in the tables of results below.

Instruments

School fulfilment was assessed through the school grades achieved in essential subjects. Personal fulfilment was assessed using the *Children's Rights Scale*, adapted to Portugal (Veiga, 1999; 2002). The pupils were also asked about the profession they would like to have ("What profession would you like



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to have?”), what year of educational study they would like to reach (“For how many years do you want to continue studying?”), as well as their own and their parents' nationality.

Procedure

After authorisation from the governing bodies of the schools contacted, the questionnaires were handed out in a classroom environment with the researcher or someone accredited would be present. The pupils were told that their collaboration was voluntary and they were guaranteed anonymity.

Study questions

Based on the goals of the study, the following questions were raised: What is the relationship between school aspirations and the gender, family education level and nationality variables? Is there any main effect and interaction among the professional aspirations and school year variables, in school and personal fulfilment? These were the questions that guided the search for answers in the research, using a methodology whose results are shown below. School fulfilment was understood to mean the grades obtained in the essential subjects (mathematics, Portuguese, History and Science) and personal fulfilment the results of the *Children's Rights Scale* Tool, in its total dimension.

RESULTS

The analyses listed below intend to find answers to the study question “What is the relationship between the desired years of study by the pupils and the variables: gender, family education level and nationality?” The data linked to the gender (Table 1) show the significant relationship that this variable maintained with the desired years of study (Chi-squared=6.99; $gl=2$; $p<0.05$). In the total sample, not even half of the students intend to enrol in higher education to obtain a degree (38.8%), around half intend to study up to the 12th school year, and some intended to study only up to the 9th year (6.9%); a larger proportion of the female subjects want a degree (44.1%) and in this group the proportion that were happy with the 9th year fell sharply (5.7%); as for the male sex, these sectors were less extreme (32.8% and 8.2%).

Table 1. Years of Study desired by gender

Years of Study desired / Gender			Gender		Total
			female	male	
School year	9 th	Frequency	15	19	34
		%	5.7%	8.2%	6.9%
	12 th	Frequency	132	137	269
		%	50.2%	59.1%	54.3%
	Secondary school	Frequency	116	76	192
		%	44.1%	32.8%	38.8%
	Total	Frequency	263	232	495
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%



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Table 2. Years of Study desired broken down by family education

Years of Study desired / Education			Family education		Total
			low	high	
School year	9 th	Frequency	27	4	31
		%	11.7%	2.4%	7.8%
	12 th	Frequency	137	69	206
		%	59.3%	41.1%	51.6%
	Secondary school	Frequency	67	95	162
		%	29.0%	56.5%	40.6%
	Total	Frequency	231	168	399
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-squared =35.28; GL = 2; p<0.001

Table 3. Years of Study desired broken down by nationality

Years of Study desired / Nationality			Nationality		Total
			Portuguese	Other	
School year	9 th	Frequency	24	7	31
		%	6.6%	5.7%	6.4%
	12 th	Frequency	185	80	265
		%	50.8%	65.0%	54.4%
	Secondary school	Frequency	155	36	191
		%	42.6%	29.3%	39.2%
Total	Frequency	364	123	487	
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	



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The distribution of the pupils broken down by family education (FE) is shown in table 2. In students with high FE, most wanted to get a degree (56.5%), a reasonable proportion wanted to study until the 12th year (41.1%), while only a few opted for the 9th year (2.4); the difference between these extreme groups is less in the low FE pupils (29.0% and 11.7%), with a definite majority wanting the 12th year (49.3%).

Very similar to that observed in the FE was the distribution of pupils broken down by nationality (Table 3): in the group of Portuguese pupils a reasonable proportion wanted a degree (42.6%), half wanted to study only until the 12th year (50.0%), and few were satisfied with just the 9th year (4.3%); as for immigrants, most wanted just the 12th year (61.1%), far fewer wanted a degree (39.3%), and some wanted to study only until the 9th school year (5.7%).

The analyses below focus on the study question "Is there a main effect and interaction among the professional aspirations and years of study variables in fulfilment, both personal (rights at school) and educational (performance in essential subjects)"?

Graph 1 shows data about the rights and professional aspirations variables. It shows, albeit on the threshold of statistical significance ($p < 0.05$), a lower existence of rights in school perceived by pupils with high professional aspirations (who want a profession that requires a degree) than those who have low professional aspirations (who want a job that requires study up to the 12th year or less), for both 9th-year and 11th-year pupils. This discrepancy is not significant in the contrast of 7th-year pupils.

Graph 1. Rights (eexiTot) and professional aspirations (profisnn);
Graph 2. School performance (rendtot) and professional aspirations.

Graph 2 shows data about the variables of school performance and professional aspirations. School performance is significantly better in pupils with high professional aspirations than pupils with low professional aspirations, but only in the 7th school year (in the 9th year and 11th year the differences were not significant).



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DISCUSSION

The results obtained are largely what one would expect, based on the literature reviewed. The importance of the stereotypes linked to gender was confirmed, as well as the family backgrounds and nationality (immigrant or not), in determining the youths' aspirations concerning higher education. There was a difference in the value attributed to studying for many years to gain access to higher education, with female pupils attaching more value to this path than male pupils, as do high and medium FE pupils compared to low level FE pupils, and Portuguese pupils compared to pupils from immigrant families, thus confirming the results from earlier studies about gender (Azevedo, 1991; Mendez and Crawford, 2002; Silva, 1999), family education (Azevedo, 1991; Schoon and Parsons, 2002; Jodl et al., 2001; Silva, 1999) and nationality (Jodl et al., 2001; Marjoribanks, 2003). Although access to school has become democratised, this is still a reproduction mechanism of socio-professional inequalities. School attendance varies depending on groups of belonging such as gender, family education and parents' nationality (Silva, 1999).

One finding was that the existence of rights in school is significantly less in pupils with high professional aspirations (wanting to enter higher education) than those with low professional aspirations, both in the 9th year and the 11th year, although this difference was not significant in 7th-year pupils. This may be linked to the fact that school is valued more highly by pupils who aspire to higher education and this greater value attributed to it implies giving greater importance to the rights of pupils in school; therefore there is progressively greater demands linked to the perception of less existence of such rights. The study of the variations in school performance found that it was considerably better in pupils with high professional aspirations than pupils with low professional aspirations, but only in the 7th school year (in the 9th and 11th year the differences, although existing, were not significant). It is pointed out that in the analyses carried out there were certain cells with a low number of subjects, and this could lead to possible statistical bias which requires further study.

The exploratory nature of this research suggests the undertaking of further investigation, with more heterogeneous samples, especially as regards nationality. It is important that future studies take into account nationality in larger and more representative subgroups of pupils, including the different kinds of immigrants (African, Eastern European and others) and different degrees of immigrant are brought into the equation — immigrant pupils, immigrant father, immigrant mother, either exclusively (low immigrant factor) or simultaneously (high immigrant factor). As for the implications of the results found, it is pointed out that it is important to help pupils build aims, raise their aspirations, define priorities, monitor personal targets and fulfilment plans. This task can be an important educational initiative implemented by teachers and also by parents (Simmons, Dewitte and Lens, 20; Stipek, 1996; Veiga, 2001). Finally, and to sum up, the results found are largely in line with previous studies, corroborating the influence of stereotypes and socio-family constraints in the trajectories, aspirations and expectations of youths as regards access to higher education.

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Fecha de recepción: 25 de febrero 2010

Fecha de admisión: 19 de marzo 2010