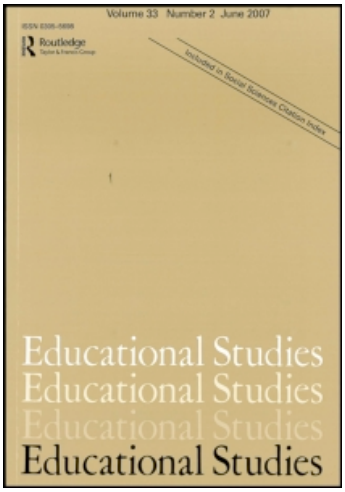

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The role of parent expectations on adolescent educational aspirations

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The role of parent expectations on adolescent educational aspirations

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Parental expectations have long been studied as a factor in increasing adolescent educational aspirations, often linking these expectations to parental level of education and involvement in academic endeavours. This study further explores this relationship in a statewide Midwestern sample of parents and their adolescent children. Regression analysis and independent samples *t*-tests were used to predict adolescent aspirations and compare groups. Results suggest that adolescent educational aspirations can to some degree be predicted by parental expectations. Parents reported high expectations for their children despite low levels of personal educational attainment. However, these high expectations were buffered by a reported unfamiliarity with college requirements and an expressed concern about college affordability and limited awareness of financial aid opportunities. Limitations and suggestions for future research and intervention are discussed.

Keywords: educational aspirations; adolescents; parent expectations

The influence of parent expectations on adolescent educational aspirations

The pursuit of a college degree has become a central tenet in the search for prosperity. While the traditional ideal that hard work and dedication can overcome the impact of environmental factors is still prevalent, increased evidence supports the heritability of socio-economic status between parents and their children (Bowles and Gintis 2002). Despite decades of programmes designed to reduce this trend, a 30% gap still remains between college attendance for children from rich families and poor families in the USA (Gladieux and Swail 1998). This stark inequality is one factor in extending a cycle of poverty on to future generations. In order to address this inequality, it is important that we understand more about the relationship between parental variables and their connection to educational aspirations and attainment in adolescents.

Parent expectations

The literature concerned with parental influence on educational aspirations and attainment is vast. In sum, parental expectations have been demonstrated to have a positive relationship with educational aspirations (Benner and Mistry 2007; Catsambis 2001). In addition, parental expectations may act as a moderating factor between students' academic abilities and their educational aspirations and attainment (Marjoribanks 2003), and may even buffer low teacher expectations (Benner and Mistry 2007). Parental expectations and educational behaviours seem to be affected by lower socio-economic status

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and to mediate the relationship between economic disadvantage and later college enrolment (Crosnoe, Mistry, and Elder 2002). Maternal optimism has also been demonstrated to have a direct effect on parenting behaviours, which predict higher levels of academic self-concept and less problem behaviour in school (Seaton and Taylor 2003).

The effect of parental expectations appears to have a cumulative effect over time. Catsambis (2001) found that parents' expectations for their children in eighth grade were a good predictor of the amount of high school credits they had completed as seniors. Gofen (2007) proposed "family capital" as a concept, which refers a certain subset of strengths present within a family that allows low-income, first-generation students to build educational aspirations. One of the key components of this model is the prevalence of expressions about the importance of education, as evidenced by parental involvement and priority given to educational endeavours (Gofen 2007). Trusty found a similar influence of parental expectations and involvement on educational aspirations, even above other variables such as socio-economic status and academic achievement (Trusty, Plata, and Salazar 2003).

Although the correlational relationship between parental expectations and adolescent aspirations is strong, the direction of causation is debatable. One assumption has been that increased parental expectations "cause" higher aspirations and achievement in students. However, some have discovered that it may in fact be the other way around, with student academic success influencing parental expectations (Goldenberg et al. 2001). Further, the expectations of parents may influence not only academic achievement and aspirations in their children, but also the future expectations of the parents themselves (Mistry et al. 2009).

Parent education and involvement

To further explore this relationship a number of factors have been researched. Among them parent level of education has been studied as both a function of socio-economic status and an independent factor (Davis-Kean 2005). Parent education has been tied to both parental expectations, parent involvement in school and academic achievement in children (Englund et al. 2004). Other studies cite parental self-efficacy and perceived mother support as predictors of a future education orientation in adolescents (Kerpelman, Eryigit, and Stephens 2008). The level of education that a parent has obtained seems to have a dramatic effect on both parent expectations and the educational aspirations and achievement of their children.

Parental involvement is another often used concept in explaining parental influence on adolescent educational variables. It has been quantified in a number of ways from parent help with homework, to parent participation in school activities, to reading to children and child–parent play (Davis-Kean 2005). Family cohesion, parental monitoring and general feelings of parental support have a positive effect on school attachment among African-American and Hispanic youth (Annunziata et al. 2006; LeCroy and Krysik 2008). Parental involvement may be divided between in-home involvement (help with homework, reading to children, etc.), which may be more associated with students who are struggling and at-school involvement, which may be more prominent in students who are excelling (Shumow and Miller 2001). The broad definition of parental involvement has led to some difficulty in drawing valid conclusions from the literature. In addition, many parental involvement studies have been done on younger children, which have different developmental needs than adolescents.

Conceptualisation of parental variables in relationship to adolescent education may vary between different cultural groups. Some studies have found strong relationships between parent and adolescent education among populations of colour (Bohon, Johnson, and Gorman 2006; Davis-Kean 2005), yet another study suggests that the associated corollary rise of adolescent educational aspirations and expectations with increased parental education may not apply to Hispanic/Latino populations (LeCroy and Krysik 2008). Despite educational inequities, parents of several ethnic backgrounds have high expectations of their children, which do not differ after adjusting for parent education level and child's academic performance (Spera, Wentzel, and Matto 2009). In additional, parental involvement may take different forms in other cultural groups (Lee and Bowen 2006).

Research questions

It is clear that to some degree parents play a key role in the shaping of educational aspirations in their children. The purpose of this study is to further explore that relationship in a statewide Midwestern sample of US youth. First, this study was concerned with whether adolescent educational aspirations could be predicted from parents' expectations of their child's future educational attainment. It was hypothesised that this relationship does exist. Second, parents with high educational expectations for their children were compared to those with lower expectations on a number of factors (parent education level, family college prevalence, awareness of financial aid and college entrance requirements and perception of student grades). Third, adolescents whose parents have high expectations were compared with adolescents whose parents had low expectations on several variables including academic self-perception, grade point average (GPA) and perceived parental support.

Methods

Participants

A total of 171 parents and their adolescent children participated in this study. The adolescents were participants in Kansas Kids @ GEAR UP (KKGU), a federally funded, programme designed to help limited-income students obtain access to post-secondary education. The families came from across the state of Kansas, ranging from rural to urban areas, with zip code population densities ranging from two persons per square mile to over 4500. Slightly more of the parent/adolescent pairs came from rural areas ($N = 93$) than did from urban areas ($N = 78$).

The adolescent participants in the sample ranged in age from 11 to 19 with a median age of 13. The participants attended both middle school ($N = 99$) and high school ($N = 72$) at the time of the study. The sample was split according to race and gender with 40% identifying as Black/African-American ($N = 69$), 37% as White/Caucasian ($N = 63$) and 16% as Hispanic/Latino ($N = 27$). Table 1 shows the demographic breakdowns of the adolescent sample.

The parent participants in the sample were largely female ($N = 146$, 85%). Information on parent age was not obtained. In addition, some of the youth were designated as part of the foster care system ($N = 36$). Thus, at some point during research, the adolescent and parent may not have lived together, yet, in order to participate in the study, the parents were still actively involved in their child's life.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the adolescent sample.

Characteristics	*N*	%
Male	93	54
Female	78	46
Middle school	99	58
High school	72	42
Black/African-American	69	40
White/Caucasian	63	37
Hispanic/Latino	27	16
Other race/ethnicity[a]	12	7
Rural[b]	93	54
Urban[c]	78	46

Notes: [a]"Other" included American-Indian, Pacific-Islander and other races.
[b]Rural = Zip code population densities < 1000.
[c]Urban = Zip code population densities > 1000.

Measures

Kansas Kids @ GEAR UP administered two surveys to its participants, which comprise the primary measures for this study. The KKGU parent survey was a 45-item inventory of the parents' thoughts and perceptions about college attendance. Several items from the parent survey were used to create the variables for this analysis. First, several items asked about the parents' level of awareness in regard to college entrance requirements (four items) and financial aid (seven items). Scores on these items were summed to create a scale with higher scores indicating a greater reported knowledge of these key variables. Table 2 displays the items comprising these scales. Second, the parents were asked about their expectation for their kids, their perception of affordability in attending a four-year college or university and their child's grades. Finally, the parents were asked about their personal level of education and whether anyone in their family had previously gone to college.

The KKGU also administered a student survey to all adolescent participants of the programme. Four items from this survey were used to create a scale of educational aspirations with higher scores indicating increased aspiration for post-secondary education. Cronbach's α for this scale was .83. Other items were used to assess academic self-perception (What type of student do you consider yourself to be?) and perceived parental support. Table 2 displays these items from the student survey and their corresponding variables. In addition to the survey data, GPAs were tabulated from student transcripts and zip code information was obtained via the KKGU database. Transcripts for some of the participants were not received by the programme, and these were determined to be missing at random. Multiple imputation using NORM was chosen to estimate the missing data (Rubin 1996).

Procedure

This analysis uses archival data from the KKGP programme. Parents were administered surveys at KKGU activities or upon signing up their student for the programme. These surveys were completed on paper and then later entered into the online survey

Table 2. Variables and corresponding survey items from the KKGU parent survey.

Variable	Item(s)
Parent variables	
Expectations	• What is the highest level of education you expect your child to receive?
Familiarity with college entrance requirements (α = .70)	• Do you know about the college entrance requirements for: Two-year, Four-year?
Familiarity with financial aid (α = .87)	• Have you heard of: Federal Pell grant/student loan/work study/ athletic scholarship/institutional scholarships?
Perception of child's grades	• What type of grades does your child usually receive?
Perception of college affordability	• Do you think your child will be able to afford to attend a 4-year, public college or university after high school using financial aid and your family's resources?
Adolescent variables	
Educational aspirations (α = .83)	• What is the highest level of education you expect to obtain? • How important to your future is getting an education beyond high school? • I believe I can graduate from high school and complete college. • Do you think you will continue your education after high school (that is go to college, attend trade school, etc.)?
Academic self-perception	• What type of student do you consider yourself to be? Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor
Parental support	• Do your parent(s) usually help you with your homework? • Do your parent(s) give you information about your options for continuing your education after high school?

Note: α = Cronbach's α statistic.

system by KKGU staff. Upon qualifying for the programme, the students were given the KKGU student survey either on paper or online. The online results were submitted to a secure server on the Wichita State University Campus. Data were then compiled and inputted into SPSS Windows 16 for analysis. In addition, data were gathered from the KKGU database. The data for this study were collected between 2006 and 2008.

Design

In order to evaluate the influence of parental expectations, a linear regression analysis was used to predict adolescent educational aspirations from the parents' expectations. To follow up this analysis, comparisons between parents who expected their child to receive a four-year degree and those who did not were made on a variety of parental factors including familiarity with college entrance requirements and financial aid, level of parent education, perception of students' grades and perception of college

affordability. Finally, adolescents whose parents expected them to obtain a four-year degree were compared with those whose parents did not on three variables: (1) academic self-perception; (2) perceived parental support; and (3) GPA. Independent samples *t*-tests using Bonferoni corrections and descriptive statistics were used for making these comparisons.

Results

Predicting adolescent aspirations

The first portion of this analysis was concerned with whether parental expectations of their child's educational attainment were predictive of educational aspirations in the child themselves. Overall, parental expectations and adolescent aspirations were similar with nearly 60% of each expecting to obtain a four-year degree or greater as displayed in Figure 1. To further explore this relationship, a linear regression analysis revealed that educational aspirations in adolescents were indeed predicted by their parents' expectations ($F(1, 170) = 33.22$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = .164$, adjusted $r^2 = .159$). Thus, in this sample, 16% of the variance in adolescent educational aspirations may be predicted from parental expectations.

Parent comparisons

Next, it was considered whether differences could be determined between high expectation parents and low expectation parents. Six parental variables were considered and means compared using *t*-tests with Bonferoni corrections (0.5/9 = .005). Figure 2 displays the differences between high expectation and low expectation parents on the six variables. High expectation and low expectation parents differed significantly on perception of their child's grades ($t(93.34) = 5.70$, $p < .005$, $d = -0.94$, $r = -0.43$). Interestingly, parent perception of grades and the estimation of GPAs differed. While

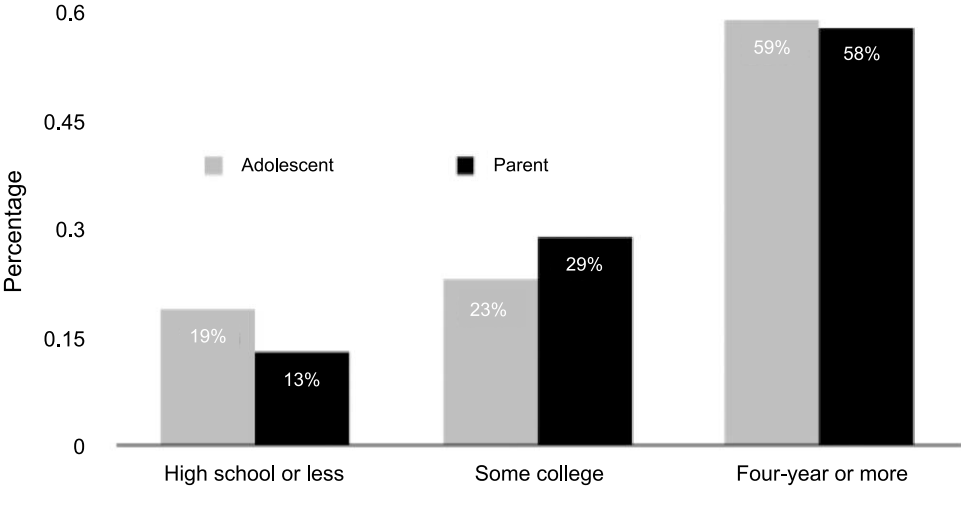

Figure 1. Responses from students and their parents on one item measuring educational aspirations and expectations.

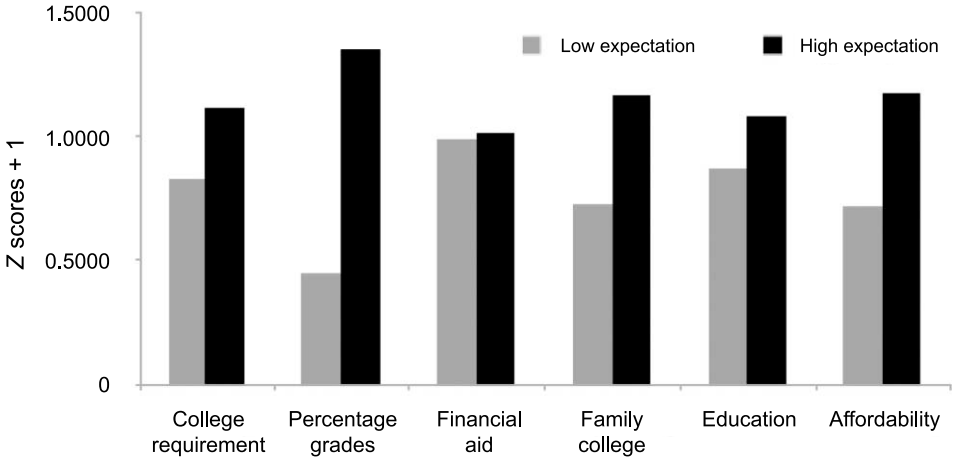

Figure 2. Differences between parents with high expectations ($N = 99$) and parents with low expectations ($N = 72$) on the variables from the analysis.

75% of the parents reported that their children received A's and B's, only 30% of the estimated GPAs were above a 3.0.

In addition, the two groups of parents differed significantly in perception of college affordability ($t(169) = 2.98$, $p < .005$, $d = -.46$, $r = -.23$). Parents with higher educational expectations were more likely to believe that their child could afford to attend college. Figure 3 compares the responses on perceived affordability between parents and students. In addition, when asked what factor would prohibit students from attending college both parents and adolescents identified cost as the primary reason for failing to advance to post-secondary education.

The differences between the two groups of parents on the remaining four variables were non-significant. However, a further exploration of these variables is helpful. First, it should be noted that while 61% of the parents overall reported an expectation that their child would receive a four-year degree or more ($N = 105$), only 14% of the

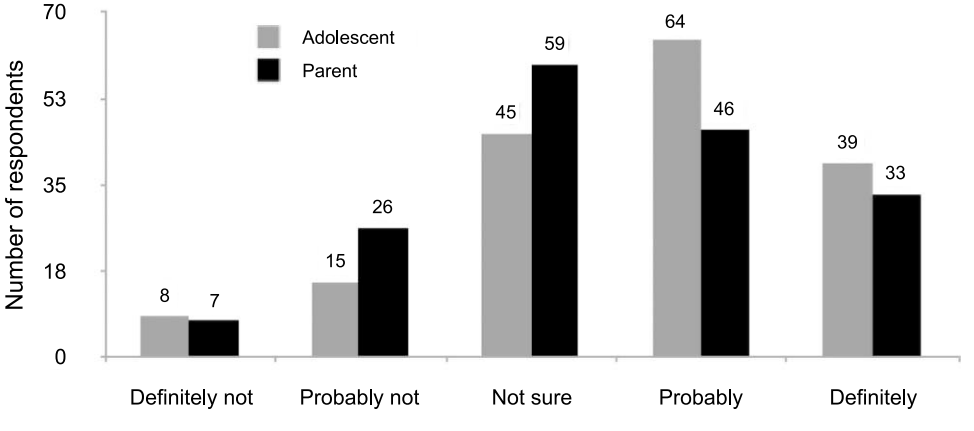

Figure 3. Responses on item measuring perception of college affordability between parents and their children.

parents ($N = 23$) reported having received that level of education themselves. The largest number of parents ($N = 80$, 47%) reported having received some college education, but less than a four-year degree. Further, nearly 80% of the parents ($N = 133$) reported that someone in their family had attended college, although no designation was made between levels of college completion.

Finally, reported familiarity with college entrance requirements and financial aid were not significantly different between the parent groups. Only 44% of parents ($N = 75$) overall reported that they knew "enough about college requirements to help my student choose the necessary high school classes". In addition, parents were asked about their familiarity with different types of financial aid. Parents were most familiar with Pell grants ($N = 120$), student loans ($N = 115$) and athletic scholarships ($N = 111$), and least familiar with work study ($N = 65$) and institutional scholarships ($N = 66$). Figure 4 displays these results.

Adolescent comparisons

Next, the study considered how adolescents whose parents had high educational expectations differed from students whose parents had lower expectations. Three variables were explored using *t*-tests with Bonferoni corrections (0.5/9 = .005). Figure 5 shows that students whose parents expected them to enter college had higher GPA's, academic self-perception and perception of parental support. However, only differences in GPA were statistically significant ($t(169) = 3.68$, $p < .005$, $d = -.59$, $r = -.28$).

Despite having a non-significant difference overall, academic self-perception was moderately correlated with parental expectations ($r = .20$) as well as perceived parental support ($r = .16$). However, some differences do exist in student and parent reports of receiving information about college. Over 90% of parents ($N = 155$) reported talking to their kids about college, but only 61% of students ($N = 104$) reported having received college information from their parents.

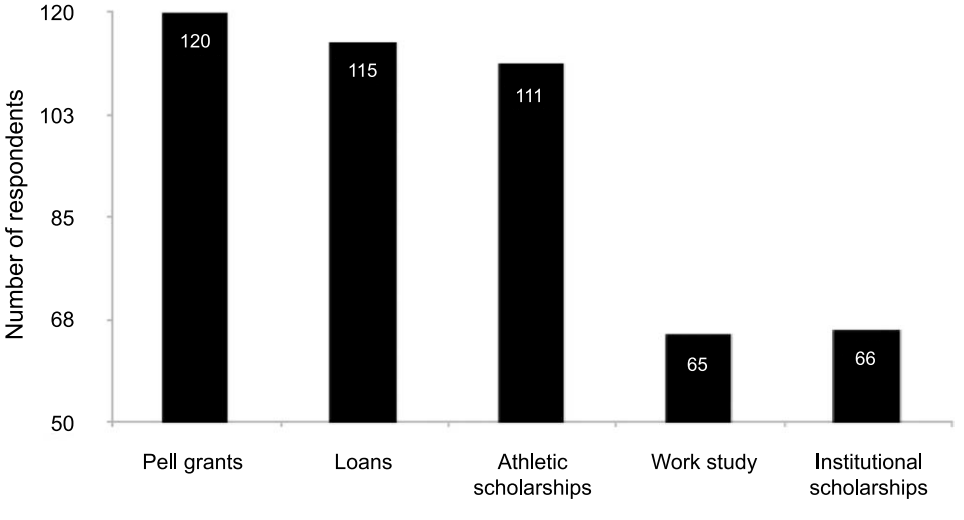

Figure 4. Parent familiarity with various financial aid opportunities.

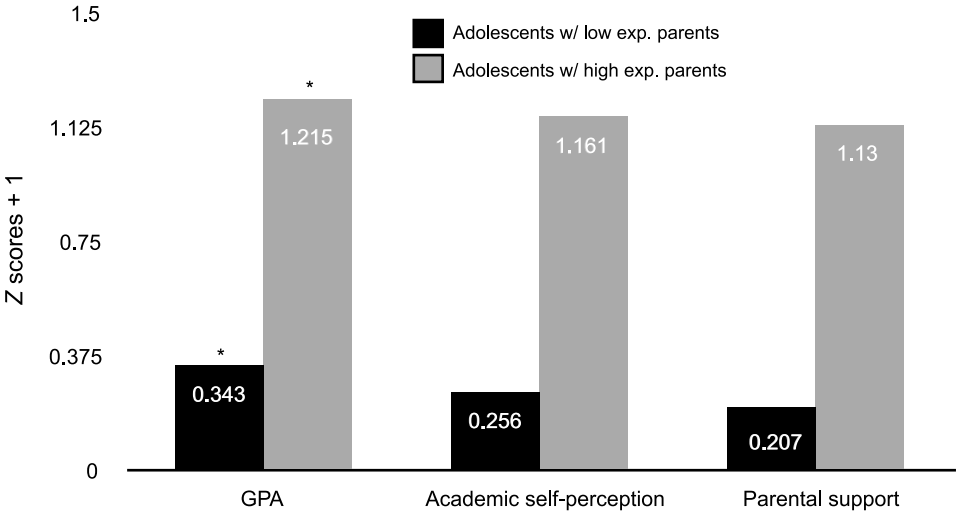

Figure 5. Differences between adolescents with low expectation and high expectation parents.

Discussion

The parents in this study clearly had high expectations for their children, despite lower levels of personal educational attainment. As hypothesised, these expectations did predict a significant portion of the variance in adolescent educational aspirations, consistent with previous research linking the two constructs (Benner and Mistry 2007; Catsambis 2001). Correlational data of this kind do not presume causation, as parental expectations may be influenced by earlier adolescent aspirations and educational achievement as well. As noted, parental expectations do not account for all of the variation in educational aspirations of the youth. Other macro- and micro-level forces are at work, which supports the literature on the topic. For example, one study linked how a student felt about their neighbourhood to educational variables (Stewart, Stewart, and Simons 2007). This focus on a larger context can help explain more of this construct. Others focus on more proximal factors, like teacher expectations, school environment or peer group (Benner and Mistry 2007; Marjoribanks 2003).

However, high parental expectations appear to be buffered by a reported lack of familiarity with college entrance information and financial aid. Parents with higher expectations of their children reported a greater perceived affordability of college. It appears that the fear of being able to pay for college is salient in both parents and students. In fact, in the KKGU surveys, the number one reason given for "not attending" college was that the costs were too high, making attendance unaffordable. Most parents reported a lack of familiarity with different types of financial aid. It seems that many parents felt unequipped to help their child pick the appropriate high school courses or to pursue certain financial aid opportunities.

Contrary to previous research (Englund et al. 2004), parental education level was no different between the parents with high expectations and the parents with low expectations. However, given that the sample was exclusively limited-income families, a restriction of range may have occurred. The perception of their students' grades was significantly different, and adolescents whose parents had high expectations did indeed have higher estimated GPAs. This may further the suggestion that

parental expectations are highly influenced by the academic performance of their children.

Limitations and future research

Several key limitations are present in this study. The sample of parents and youth in this sample may not represent all low-income families. The data in this study are based on questionnaires and thus may be subject to self-report bias. This cross-sectional design is solely correlational and cannot imply causation to any extent. Further, the percentage of missing data on GPAs suggests that the estimation of GPA used in the analysis must be interpreted with caution.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to explore how parental expectations and adolescent achievement work in conjunction over time to affect the educational aspirations of a young person. In addition, research on the messages that parents receive from schools may help explain parental perception of adolescent abilities, and thus influence parental expectations. Future interventions should consider parental expectations and adolescent aspirations as two sides of the same coin and design targeted interventions to increase each. Finally, since parent expectations account for less than a quarter of the variance in adolescent aspirations, research and intervention should explore the influences of organisational and macro-level systems including the school, neighbourhood and regional settings (Stewart, Stewart, and Simons 2007).

Conclusion

These findings add to the research on the connection between parental influences and adolescent educational aspirations, confirming that a relationship exists between parental expectations and adolescent aspirations. While this relationship is well-documented, these findings suggest that low-income parents may feel ill-equipped to prepare their children for college, despite a strong desire to do so. In order to continue the pursuit of equal access to post-secondary education and the opportunities therein, it appears that more will need to be done to equip both parents and their children, matching expectations with a collective efficacy in making choices about attending and completing college.

Notes on contributors

Chris Michael Kirk is a doctoral graduate student in the community psychology programme at Wichita State University. His research interests include adolescent empowerment and future aspirations both within the USA and around the world.

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