



Parental and school effects on students' occupational exploration: A longitudinal and multilevel analysis[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The study examines school and parental influences on adolescents' occupational exploration. Analyses of data from 859 6th, 8th, and 10th graders attending high- and lower-track high schools in the German federal state of Thuringia suggested more extensive exploration among students closer to the school-to-work transition. Besides cross-sectional effects of parenting and achievement orientation at school, acceptance and openness students experienced in class predicted increases of their exploratory behaviors. Multilevel analyses showed, however, that school effects operated on the level of subjective perceptions (individual level), but not on the level of intersubjective reality (classroom level). Implications for attempts to foster and facilitate exploration are discussed.

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The transition from school to work has been pointed out as a central developmental challenge of adolescence (Havighurst, 1972). Donald Super's (e.g., Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996) work has been a milestone in the field that has widely adopted a developmental perspective on the transition from school to work or postsecondary education. Super pointed to the exploration of own interests and abilities as well as of the opportunities that the world of work offers as the crucial developmental mechanism. Against this backdrop, influences of proximal contexts such as family and school can be assumed to importantly impact adolescents' occupational preparation by way of effects on exploratory activities (Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986). Meanwhile, particularly with respect to the role of parents quite some evidence has been accumulated that supports these assumptions (Whiston & Keller, 2004). However, the majority of previous empirical studies are based on cross-sectional data and are, thus, inconclusive concerning directions of influences and are vulnerable to the operation of third-variable effects. Moreover, contextual conditions have almost exclusively been captured in terms of individual perceptions. It might well be that the subjective perspective is more decisive in affecting adolescents' exploration than objective conditions. Still, in the lack of studies that allow to disentangle the individual and the contextual level, this remains an open question. Drawing on a longitudinal multilevel data base, the present study sets out to address these issues and to contribute to a better understanding of parent and school effects on adolescent occupational exploration.

1. Occupational Exploration in Adolescence

In Super's framework, adolescents' self-concept concerning the domain of work and occupations provides the basis for decisions and choices that eventually result in a more or less successful transition into work. Recent studies showed that extensive and intensive

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exploration (cf. Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006) of individual and contextual conditions continuously contributes to the development of the occupational self-concept (Vondracek & Skorikov, 1997). Individual characteristics to be explored include domain-specific abilities and interests. External conditions refer to, for example, demands and opportunities characteristic of different jobs and professions, the job market and its likely future development, necessary formal qualifications, and ways of access to a given profession. Exploration requires the search for information such as by talking with knowledgeable others, or checking out relevant internet sites as well as other sources of information. Likewise, (internally) pondering one's strengths and weaknesses or trying to imagine working in a certain job contributes to the formation of the self-concept.

People in proximal contexts could impact exploration processes in different ways. Exploration could be triggered or encouraged by, for instance, asking adolescents about their thoughts and plans. At the same time, information could be provided. A case in point is parents talking about their own work experiences. By the same token, issues such as career opportunities, or possible obstacles to the balance the demands of work and family are other aspects that adolescents might be suggested to consider in the course of occupational exploration. Finally, parents or teachers might initiate or facilitate contacts with people or institutions that could help adolescents to arrive at a better understanding of educational routes and their outcomes, of prerequisites of the entry into certain professions, or of the everyday life when involved in a given job.

Despite the temporally extensive nature of the exploration process which remains relevant even beyond first choices and commitments (cf. Blustein, 1997), support and the provision of information in proximal contexts could be more or less timely. In her control theory approach, Heckhausen (2002) stressed the importance of the distance to developmental deadlines concerning the ways in which individuals approach challenges and transitions. In the case of occupational exploration, the end of schooling can be considered as a crucial deadline for many young people. According to Heckhausen, active modes of addressing a developmental challenge are likely to increase when the transition comes closer (cf. Haase, Heckhausen, & Köller, 2008). The provision of information and support by parents and school should then be particularly influential when the end of school is in sight.

2. Parental Effects on Occupational Exploration

In adolescents' own retrospective reports, parents are pointed out as most influential in the course of occupational preparation (Kracke, 2001). Parents affect adolescents' occupational preparation in several ways. As pointed out by Schulenberg, Vondracek, and Crouter (1984) and Schnabel, Alfeld, Eccles, Köller and Baumert (2002), one process of parental influence is driven by SES. Financial and educational resources seem to particularly impact the occupational aspiration which adolescents develop in the approach to their transition from school to work.

A second process can be traced back to the quality of family relations and the ways in which parents and adolescents interact in the family (Schulenberg et al., 1984). Several studies suggest that child-oriented parenting such as evidenced in reciprocal relations, secure attachment, warmth, and tangible support is significantly associated with adolescents' occupational exploration (e.g., Blustein, Prezioso, & Schultheiss, 1995; Dietrich & Kracke, 2009; Vignoli, Croity-Belz, Chapeland, de Fillipis, & Garcia, 2005). Child-oriented parenting seems to foster self-directed, adaptive behavior in adolescents including active search for information and attempts at arriving at a realistic representation of the self including characteristics relevant to future occupational choices. While most studies examined cross-sectional associations of parenting and exploration (cf. Dietrich & Kracke, 2009), the scarce longitudinal evidence available so far supports the assumption of parental influence on exploration (Kracke, 1997; 2002; Neuschwander, 2008).

While male and female adolescents seem to benefit from parental support of their occupational exploration, some findings point to gender-specific variations. Paa and McWhirter (2000), for example, report on stronger parental support obtained by girls than by boys. This could explain findings of gender differences in the extent of occupational exploration with girls showing more exploratory activities than boys (Wallace-Broschious, Serafica & Osipow, 1994). It should be noted, however, that findings are mixed in this respect (e.g., Kalakoski & Nurmi, 1998).

3. School Effects on Occupational Exploration

Schools vary as to the extent to which direct instruction addresses aspects of occupational exploration and provides students with information about different jobs and work-life. In Germany, as in several other countries, units focusing on these issues are part of the official curricula (cf. Kracke, 2006). The placement of these units in the course of school education is oriented towards deadlines as referred to above. For instance, in the German school-system, achievement-based tracking typically distinguishes a higher secondary school track ("Gymnasium") that is college-bound and one or two lower tracks accommodating students that head for non-academic occupations mostly entered via an apprenticeship (Schudy, 2002). Low-track students leave school after grade 10, while high-track students attend school until 12th or 13th grade (depending on the federal state of Germany). Accordingly, domain-specific classes are typically given in 9th (low track) or 10th grade (high track). Units often include—besides information on various fields of work—visits to the local job agencies and a short internship with high-track students also being made familiar with different academic domains as represented at universities (Kracke, 2006; Schudy, 2002). In general, units in lower-track curricula are more intense and specific. Thus, there is a—potentially—strong push towards occupational exploration that is experienced by students at different ages.

Besides formal instruction, schools may provide students with more general experiences conducive to exploration. Just like in the family, aspects of in-class interactions such as feelings of security, encouragement to form one's own views and to express them, and other experiences that might facilitate self-direction (cf. Deci & Ryan, 1991) can be expected to foster exploratory behavior in general including the occupational domain (Schultheiss, 2003). While empirical studies in the career domain are scarce, educational research has shown that teacher behavior fostering a positive classroom-climate by being just and encouraging participation was associated

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