

PARENTAL PARTICIPATION IN ADOLESCENTS' EDUCATIONAL AND CAREER EXPERIENCES AND PLANNING: A STUDY WITH PORTUGUESE PARENTS^a

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Abstract

The role of parents in adolescents' educational and career development is widely acknowledged. Parental influence in these processes includes parenting styles, parental support, warmth and closeness between parents and their children, attachment to parents, communication patterns in the family, and parents' expectations and aspirations for their children's achievement. In addition, recent literature suggests that youngster's school and career paths are co-constructed through parents' and adolescents' joint actions with common goals. This work explores parental involvement in adolescents' educational and career experiences and planning. A sample of 346 parents (165 mothers and 181 fathers; Mage= 43.8 years; SD= 5.51) of adolescents in eighth-grade completed a questionnaire (Pinto & Soares, 2000; adapted for research from Taveira et al., 2002) about parent-child communication, parental support, and parental expectations for their offspring's educational and professional future. Results present a description of mothers' and fathers' perceptions of the contents and goals of their conversations with their adolescent children, the joint activities they are involved in and the resources they provide to them, and parental goals for their children's educational and career achievement. Implications for educational and career guidance are discussed. Finally, the family environment is suggested as a powerful context of children's and adolescent's career planning and ethical reasoning about their own educational and career purposes.

Keywords: career development; career planning; adolescence; parents; ethical reasoning

1 INTRODUCTION

Career development and learning in childhood and adolescence are influenced by a complex set of individual and contextual variables. According to Vondracek, Lerner and Schulenberg [1], adolescents' career development is better understood from a dynamic interactional perspective that focuses on the developing individual in a changing context. From this developmental contextual perspective, the adolescent both influences and is influenced by his/her environment. In addition, it is important to study the ecological structures that describe the environment, in order to examine the impact of the context on youngsters' career development, in a comprehensive manner.

The family of origin is a salient microsystem [2] in adolescents' career development and learning. There is a widespread acknowledgement in career development and counselling literature of the influence of the family, and more specifically parents, on adolescents' career aspirations, planning, and decision-making [3, 4, 5]. Although the parents are not the only people who contribute to the process of adolescents' career learning and exploration, literature has selected parents as a focal point in the study of the family as a context of emotional and instrumental support for career progress in youngsters' lives [6, 7]. Additionally, and mainly because of this reported influence, parents are continually elected as important informants and collaborators in career guidance and counseling

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processes and in the career education of their children [8, 9, 10]. Thus, it is important to study parents' involvement in their children's educational and career development, in order to inform counseling and educational interventions aimed at the promotion of adolescents' exploration of the world of work and the self.

1.1 Parental Influence on Adolescents' Career Development

Whiston and Keller [5] conducted a review of the family structure variables (e.g., parental educational and occupational achievement) and process variables (e.g., support, expectations, communication patterns, attachment, parenting styles) that have a significant impact on adolescents' progress in career learning and development. Results of this review suggest that the operation of these variables is complex and many times indirect, and may not have equal importance for adolescents' career adjustment, as family process variables seem to influence adolescents' career aspirations and expectations to a greater extent than structural variables. Overall, a family environment characterized by warmth, support and higher expectations seems to be related to higher occupational aspirations and career orientation. Bryant, Zvonkovic, and Reynolds [6] furthered the review of the influence of the family on youngsters' career development, placing a focus on parenting as a relational context which impacts the development of occupational knowledge, beliefs, and values, the development of adolescents' exploratory processes in relation to their interests, and the development of academic and vocational aspirations, self-efficacy beliefs, and expectations. In addition, parenting behaviors, through communication, modeling, support, reinforcement, openness and accessibility, have been shown to be related to the development of career planning attitudes and exploration [e.g., 7]. Thus, literature has provided a description of the probabilistic ways by which parents exert an influence on adolescents' vocational identity, career exploration, aspirations and expectations, and decision-making.

One particular aspect of parental influence is the joint activities mothers and fathers and their adolescent offspring develop regarding career development and planning. Meaningful conversations about educational and occupational achievements and future plans, as well as information about the world of work and personal interests, values and expectations, are considered important joint activities in the family context. Research has suggested that adolescents recognize that they discuss what occupation they want to enter with both their mothers and fathers. Mothers, followed by fathers, are particularly viewed as helpful when talking about adolescents' career plans, and as having high expectations for them [11]. In addition, feeling connected to parents seems to be related to a willingness to adjust career planning to parental views, for female adolescents and young women [12]. Moreover, and regarding sports careers in adolescence and early adulthood, both young athletes and parents report a positive view about parents' involvement in their children's sports, with mothers showing more expressive behaviours and giving more positive support to adolescents' activities, and fathers presenting more instrumental role behaviours, giving more advice to their children and pushing them to train harder and give their best. In addition, results also seem to suggest that positive emotional support of parents increases the chances of reaching a higher career phase in athlete careers [13].

According to Young, Valach, and Marshall [14], family members and the adolescent co-construct adolescents' career development through meaningful joint intentional actions towards goals for educational and professional achievement. In this sense, relationships and career are reciprocal and co-constructed by parents and adolescents in an ongoing process. The relationship between adolescents and their parents is constructed, among other activities, through their participations in conversations about hypothetical and real educational and occupational situations, and by exploring occupational options, discovering personal interests, or balancing personal independence with responsibility. Research should further the manifestation of these relationships regarding co-constructed projects of adolescents' lives. One avenue for this study is a focus on parental perceptions of their role in communication with their offspring and the support they provide them, the contents of conversations regarding adolescents' career development, and parental expectations for their children's future achievement. The study presented as followed aims at contributing to the answer to such a need.

2 METHOD

2.1 Procedures

Data for this study was collected as part of the Study “Career and citizenship development: Personal and contextual conditions for ethical questioning of life-career projects” (PTDC/CPE-CED/098896/2008), a Portuguese national longitudinal investigation, which involved the assessment of adolescents, their parents, teachers, and career counselors. A standard data collection protocol was followed in all study locations. It consisted of a self-report data collection instrument, which included a description of the project, assurances of anonymity and require of consent for the participation in the study, and instructions on how to complete the survey. The questionnaire was received by eighth-grade students at their schools, after giving informed consent to the research team, and then sent home for parents to report their answers. Parents had one day to deliver their answers and hand over the data collection instrument to the research team, at their offspring’s schools.

2.2 Participants

The study sample included a total of 346 parents: 165 mothers (47.7%) and 181 fathers (52.3%), mean age $M = 43.8$ ($SD = 5.51$). Parents lived in three different municipalities in northern Portugal, and their children attended three different public state schools at these locations.

2.3 Instrument

Parents completed a questionnaire of parental influence on children’s and adolescents’ career development, named as “Parental Interview Grid” (Pinto & Soares, 2000; adapted for research from Taveira et al., 2002). This questionnaire includes items for socio-demographic data (e.g., name, sex, age, educational achievement, occupational achievement). It then follows with five items on parent-adolescent communication, parental support, and parental expectations for the offspring’s educational and professional future. Responses are given through a multiple answer format, in which parents are allowed to choose as many options as they perceive best fit their reality, regarding the educational and occupational future of their son or daughter.

2.4 Analysis

Responses to the questionnaire were examined in terms of their frequency (%), both for mothers and fathers, as well as for the global sample of parents.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Parents’ communication with adolescents

Table 1 contains mothers’ and fathers’ perceptions of who is more responsible for the conversations about the adolescent’s educational and occupational future. Mothers and fathers perceive themselves as being the active agent in conversations with their offspring, and present a perception that the adolescent rarely (12.7%) has the initiative to start the conversation.

Table 1

Parents’ and adolescents’ initiative in conversations

<i>Who has more initiative in the conversation?</i>	Mothers	Fathers	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Us, the parents	112 (67.9%)	127 (70.2%)	239 (69.1%)
My child	20 (12.1%)	24 (13.3%)	44 (12.7%)
Both	31 (98.8%)	29 (16.0%)	60 (17.3%)
Missing data	2 (1.2%)	1 (0.6%)	3 (0.9%)

In addition, parents seem to include a great variety of contents in their conversations with their children, varying from everyday-life subjects and school routines, to exploration of educational and occupational options for their future. Table 2 presents the frequency mothers and fathers named the different contents of their conversations with their adolescent son or daughter.

Table 2

Contents of parent-adolescent conversations

<i>What do you talk to her/him about?</i>	Mothers	Fathers	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
School achievement	163 (98.8%)	178 (98.3%)	341 (98.6%)
School life, in general	155 (93.9%)	165 (91.2)	320 (92.5%)
Homework	147 (89.1%)	156 (86.2%)	303 (87.6%)
Relations with peers	152 (92.1%)	155 (85.6%)	307 (88.7%)
Time spent studying	126 (76.4%)	130 (71.8%)	256 (74.0%)
Time management in different activities	117 (70.9%)	125 (69.1%)	242 (69.9%)
College/University	87 (52.7)	76 (42%)	163 (47.1%)
Options after 9 th grade	73 (44.2%)	72 (39.8%)	145 (41.9%)
Secondary schools	62 (37.6%)	64 (35.4%)	126 (36.4%)
Jobs	105 (63.6%)	109 (60.2%)	214 (61.8%)
Occupational alternatives	93 (56.4%)	95 (52.5%)	188 (54.3%)
Changes in the world of work	78 (47.3%)	75 (41.4%)	153 (44.2%)
Daily life	132 (80.0%)	134 (74.0%)	266 (76.9%)
Adolescence	139 (84.2%)	147 (81.2%)	286 (82.7%)
Personality features	128 (77.6%)	144 (79.6%)	272 (78.6%)
Academic competencies	99 (60.0%)	88 (48.6%)	187 (54.0%)
Health	134 (81.2%)	156 (86.2%)	290 (83.8%)
Values	141 (85.5%)	152 (84.0%)	293 (84.7%)
I don't talk with my son/daughter about these subjects	1 (0.6%)	2 (1.1%)	3 (0.9%)

School achievement in terms of grades and project and tests results, as well as school life in general, which includes school activities, schedules, and problems at school, are among the most frequently chose subjects in parent-adolescent conversations. This seems to be true for mothers, as well as for fathers. In addition, in all content categories, except for “personality features”, mothers present a slightly higher frequency in their conversations with their children, when compared to fathers. The least debated topics in conversations are, according to Table 2, related to adolescents’ educational and occupational future (i.e., college/university, options after 9th grade, secondary schools, and changes in the world of work).

Finally, parents’ goals for conversations with their adolescent sons and daughters are mainly related with career learning and exploration and with the quality of the relation between the parent and the child (Table 3). Parents talk with their children to promote their development (81.5%) and the development of their knowledge about themselves and the world of work (85.3%). Mothers’ and fathers’ results are very similar.

Table 3

Parents’ goals for conversations with their adolescent offspring

<i>Why do you talk with him/her about these subjects?</i>	Mothers	Fathers	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
To help my son/daughter develop his/her knowledge	144 (87.3)	151 (83.4%)	295 (85.3%)
To better understand and know my son/daughter	107 (64.8%)	117 (64.6%)	224 (64.7%)
To promote my son/daughter’s development	137 (83.0%)	145 (80.1%)	282 (81.5%)
To help him/her develop new perspectives about the occupational world	121 (73.3%)	126 (69.6%)	247 (71.4%)

3.2 Parental support for adolescents' career development

When asked about the activities that parents do with their son or daughter which are related to their educational and career development, parents report a variety of negative and positive options (Table 4).

Table 4

Parental support for adolescents' educational and occupational future

<i>What do you do with your son or daughter regarding his/her educational and occupational future?</i>	Mothers	Fathers	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Not much, because I don't have enough time	25 (15.2%)	26 (14.4%)	54 (14.7%)
Not much, because I don't know what I should do	14 (8.5%)	11 (6.1%)	25 (7.2%)
Not much, because I don't want to influence him/her	10 (6.1%)	10 (5.5%)	20 (5.8%)
Not much, because it's too early to do something	10 (6.1%)	22 (12.2%)	32 (9.2%)
Help him/her study	100 (60.6%)	100 (55.2%)	200 (57.8%)
Extra-curricular activities	83 (50.3%)	83 (45.9%)	166 (48.0%)
Research school and college programs or other information on the internet	40 (24.2%)	36 (19.9%)	76 (22.0%)
Talk with family members about school and college programs and degrees, professions, or jobs	50 (30.3%)	62 (34.3%)	112 (32.4%)
Enrolment in school trips and other similar activities	81 (49.1%)	90 (49.7%)	171 (49.4%)
Talk about changes in secondary schools and programs throughout time	59 (35.8%)	59 (32.6%)	118 (34.1%)
Talk about professions	95 (57.6%)	93 (51.4%)	188 (54.3%)
Informal conversations about different professions	98 (59.4%)	108 (59.7%)	206 (59.5%)
Visit institutions	19 (11.5%)	17 (9.4%)	36 (10.4%)
Talk about the job market	107 (64.8%)	105 (58.0%)	212 (61.3%)
Participate or arrange cultural activities to extend his/her "horizons"	77 (46.7%)	71 (39.2%)	148 (42.8%)

According to Table 4, parents are active in providing experiences that somehow help their children prepare for their educational and occupational future, even though they are still in eighth-grade and are not expected to make a decision about their educational future until ninth-grade. Few parents report that they don't provide support in this field. There seems to be a tendency for higher frequencies in mothers' responses, when compared to fathers' answers about this support. Talks about the job market and professions seem to be the most frequently developed activities by mothers and fathers.

3.3 Parental expectations for adolescents' career development

When asked about the expectations they have for their adolescent sons or daughters, mothers and fathers identify specific and global alternatives for their careers (Table 5). Most mothers and fathers present somewhat undifferentiated expectations, as they expect their children to be successful, happy, or pursue their dreams. Once again, mothers' responses are not discrepant from fathers' responses. It also should be noted that mothers and fathers have more frequently higher expectations than lower expectations for the adolescents. According to Table 5, 28.3% and 32.4% of the participants report expectations for higher education, while only 9.2% of parents expect their children to finish 9th-grade. In addition, vocational education, which is globally viewed as less prestigious by the Portuguese society, is rarely considered (2.9%) by the parents in this study.

Table 5*Parental expectations for adolescents' educational and professional future*

<i>What would you like your son/daughter to achieve?</i>	Mothers	Fathers	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
A higher education degree in any given subject	44 (26.7)	54 (29.8%)	98 (28.3%)
A higher education degree in a specific subject	56 (33.9%)	56 (30.9%)	112 (32.4%)
Finish 12 th -grade	39 (23.6%)	39 (21.5%)	78 (22.5%)
Finish a vocational education program	6 (3.6%)	4 (2.2%)	10 (2.9%)
Finish 9 th -grade	15 (9.1%)	17 (9.4%)	32 (9.2%)
Have a specific profession	15 (9.1%)	17 (9.4%)	32 (9.2%)
To work in a specific domain	23 (13.9%)	22 (12.2%)	45 (13.0%)
To work in a profession with employability options	67 (40.6%)	70 (38.7%)	137 (39.6%)
To have a profession in which he/she feels fulfilled and is successful	128 (77.6%)	139 (76.8%)	267 (77.2%)
To have a highly prestigious profession in our society	23 (13.9%)	25 (13.8%)	48 (13.9%)
Whatever he/she wants	65 (39.4%)	73 (40.3%)	138 (39.9%)
To be happy	112 (67.9%)	128 (70.7%)	240 (69.4%)
To follow his/her dream	110 (66.7%)	113 (62.4%)	223 (54.5%)

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The main objectives of this study were to examine Portuguese mothers' and fathers' conversations with their adolescent sons and daughters concerning their educational and occupational future, the support they provide to their offspring's career learning and development, and the expectations they have for their children. The results support the idea that Portuguese parents are actively involved and want to be engaged in their children's educational and career experiences, exploration and planning. Parents reported the contents of their conversations with sons and daughters, their goals and intentions for these conversations, and the active support they provide for youngsters' exploration and learning about themselves as workers and about the world of work. In addition, this sample of Portuguese parents also reported positive, high and rather undifferentiated expectations for their children's educational and career paths. Mothers and fathers results are quite consistent across all the variables assessed.

Conversations between parents and their offspring are viewed as joint actions by which both agents co-construct adolescents' career development. According to this study's results, parents seem to have a clear focus on the future of their children, and therefore contribute for their independence and knowledge, social adjustment and orientation for common values, positive attitudes towards the future, and planning. In this sense, parents can and should be seen as potential agents for career guidance and counselling interventions. Parents may be guided to optimize their intentions in conversations, interpret information in conversations with adolescents, and reinforce positive attitudes and conceptions about work and themselves as workers. In so doing, parents collaborate in career education and may positively work with teachers and other educators regarding the career education and development of youngsters.

Parents can be helped to assist their children's career development, both in the context of intervention programs for parents and in the context of individual counselling. For example, excessively high or unrealistic expectations for their children, or a negative outlook of valid career alternatives, such as vocational training, may be selected in this context as aims for this intervention. In this process, the positive relational influences can be explored and the language and dialogue between parents and adolescents optimized. Parents can specifically contribute for their children's and adolescents' everyday learning about work and workers while encouraging the analysis of personal strengths, interests, and aspirations, as well as the examination of lifestyles in society and potential opportunities related to the conditions of these lifestyles. Other avenues for this role include the discussion of common benefits of personal achievement for the family and for society in general, while also acknowledging the importance and dignity of all works and workers. In this sense, the promotion of

children's and adolescents' career development may also contribute for the development of a positive and responsible citizenship, as well as for the ethical reasoning of one's career plans.

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