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A Study to the Career Aspirations of Eighth Grade Students

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**A STUDY OF THE CAREER ASPIRATIONS OF EIGHTH GRADE
STUDENTS**

**A Research Paper
Presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the Department of Occupational and Technology Studies
at Old Dominion University**

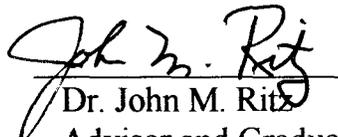
**In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for
The Master of Science in Secondary Science
Education Degree**

**By
Kelley O'Brien
August 2001**

Approval Page

This research paper was prepared by Kelley O'Brien under the direction of Dr. John Ritz in OTED 636, Problems in Education. It was submitted to the Graduate Program Director as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Education.

APPROVAL BY:



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7-28-01
Date

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Students from low socio-economic schools tend to have lower career and educational aspirations than students that attend magnet schools. This could be the result of low parental education, low self-esteem, lack of parental support, and living in single parent families (Marion, 1985, p. 328). Although a majority of United States students have high career aspirations, many do not follow through with them after high school. The concept of student career and educational aspirations are found in many school goals and reform agendas, but there have not been many research studies done on this subject. The goal of this research study is to determine if students that attend magnet/gifted schools have higher career aspirations than students of low socio-economic schools.

There are many variables that can effect a student's career aspiration. Some researchers feel that genetics accounts for 80% of an individuals potential, while others feel that the environment effects their potential (Marion, 1983, p. 32). The students that attend magnet schools are usually from middle and upper class families where the parents have had some form of higher education. On the other hand, students from low socio-economic schools are usually at or near poverty levels and the parents have had little or no education after high school. This study

will investigate whether or not adolescent aspirations are associated with parental influence and expectations.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problem of this study was to compare the career aspirations of eighth grade students at Kemps Landing Magnet School to that of Bayside Middle School students.

RESEARCH GOALS

The following questions guided this study:

1. Are students with parents that attended college more inclined to go to college after high school?
2. Did students that attended a low socio-economic school have lower career aspirations?
3. Did activities at the schools encourage the pursuit of careers requiring college education?
4. Did the level of education of the parent correspond with the student's career aspirations?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Young adolescents undergo rapid physical growth, moving from concrete to abstract thought. This is a time in their life when they are trying to form a self-concept and develop social skills (Kerka, 1994, p. 155). Eighth grade is a crucial time in an adolescent's life. This is a time when they are thinking about college and the type of career that they would like to pursue.

Out of 23,000 eighth graders, 50 to 60% planned to go to college and 64% have never talked to a counselor. The students in lower socio-economic schools were less likely to pursue a college education and have higher dropout rates. The higher dropout rates were associated with an increase in crime, low personal health levels, and reduced family incomes (Okechukiwu, et al., p. 158). Dropouts cost the United States over two billion dollars annually from unearned income and taxes. The variables associated with dropping out were demographic, family related, peer, school-related, individual, and economic factors. All of these factors were also associated with low career and educational aspirations (Plucker and Quaglia, 1998, p. 253). These students needed to be taught early on that they had the ability and resources to pursue higher education after high school.

Many researchers agree that there is a need for a study in this area. The last time there was a study done on eighth grade student aspirations was in 1998, by Plucker and Quaglia. However, Plucker and Quaglia failed to address parental education and parental marital status in their study. There is a need for this study

because middle school students need to be encouraged more to think about their futures and educational planning for college. If more students went to college, there would be less poverty and unemployment. By investigating the variables associated with low and high career aspirations, educators can begin to find solutions to this age-old problem.

LIMITATIONS

The findings and conclusions of this study were limited as follows:

1. The study was limited to eighth grade Physical Science students.
2. The study was limited to Kemps Landing Magnet School and Bayside Middle School.
3. The study was limited to the investigation of career aspirations.

ASSUMPTIONS

There were factors that were assumed to be true and correct. The assumptions were as follows:

1. The economic status had an effect on determining people's futures.
2. Parents model behavior and choice that students may follow.
3. All of the students knew the educational background of their parents.
4. Middle school students were in the stages of formulating attainable career aspirations.

5. Students were aware that differing careers required different levels of education.

PROCEDURES

This study involved selecting a sample of eighth grade Physical Science students from a magnet school and a low socio-economic school. The next step in the study involved the assessment of career aspirations. To assess career aspirations, a selected group of students from Kemps Landing Magnet School and Bayside Middle School were given a survey to be completed and returned to the researcher. All of the subjects were given the same survey on career and educational aspirations.

The subjects were asked about parental education, gender, race, parental marital status, number of family members, and aspirations after high school. The student's responses were compared to see which school had students with greater career ambition and the types of careers that they planned to select. After the data were collected and compiled from the survey, they were then analyzed and compared.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

A clear understanding of terms used in this research study is important for the reader. The terms used in this study are defined for the reader as follows:

<u>BMS</u>	Bayside Middle School.
<u>KLMS</u>	Kemps Landing Magnet School.
<u>Career aspirations</u>	The desire to pursue higher education after high school, such as a four-year college, two-year college or a vocational school, in order to increase career possibilities.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

Chapter I provides a focus on the problem of declining career aspirations in low socio-economic schools. The influence of parental education and expectations were discussed as variables effecting career and educational aspirations. The importance of encouraging and counseling middle school students to pursue higher education was discussed in this chapter. The goal of this research study was to determine if students that attended magnet/gifted schools had higher career aspirations than that of low socio-economic schools. In the following chapters, the reader will be informed of related literature, procedures and methods, actual findings, and be provided with conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Socio-economic status, parental education and expectations, and the type of school a child attends can affect whether or not that child expects to attend college after high school. Middle schools are designed to continue the learning that students began in elementary school and to prepare them for high school. This is a time in a middle school student's life that they learn to understand how their current educational and personal choices will affect their future life roles, such as choosing a career. Research studies have shown that parental education and socio-economic status have an effect on the career aspirations of those students. This chapter will inform the reader of the problems that affect the career aspirations of students who attend a magnet school to those who attend an at-risk urban school.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

Socio-economic status is by far the single most important factor accounting for the variance in student career aspirations. Students from disadvantaged families lack the support to continue their education after high school (Robinson and Weinberg, 1998, p. 149). Minority and low socio-economic students are more likely to be at the bottom of the educational hierarchy (Dauber, et al., 1996, p. 290). Students from these homes are given different messages concerning

education. Many are told that getting and keeping a job is the most important goal, not education. Going beyond the high school diploma is generally seen as a waste of time and money (McIntosh and Greenlaw, 1990, pp. 1-4). The aspiration to achieve one's goal is not readily accepted by lower class families. Long range goals are not a part of their reality. Parents from low socio-economic classes are usually employed in blue-collar positions that stress obedience and respect for authority. Such parents tend to discourage curiosity, communication, and creativity (Hickman, et al., 2000, p. 43).

Divorce

The low aspirations of these students can be attributed to cultural differences. Divorce is a key concept associated with socio-economic class. It is projected that forty percent of first marriages will end in divorce and as many as two thirds of African American marriages will end in divorce (Battle, 1997, pp. 29-38). By the turn of the century, African American households were more likely to be headed by women than were white households. Divorce has a direct influence on the high poverty rates of female-headed households. Divorce increases the odds that a child will end up in the lowest occupational level. Among African Americans, early marriage and pregnancy are problems. Early marriage limits educational attainment and socio-economic achievement. The lack of access to economical resources motivates tension, which is then transferred to the children and is manifested in lower academic achievement, lower test scores, and lower career aspirations (Battle, 1997, pp. 29-38).

Nationality

Along with divorce, nationality has an impact on socio-economic status and career aspirations. Recent studies have shown that economic and educational progress is uneven among immigrants and native people. Asian immigrants have progressed well, while Hispanic immigrants fare poorly. Immigrant Mexican children had lower math and reading scores than Asian and native white children (Hao and Bonstead-Brums, 1998, pp. 175-179). Asian American students score consistently higher on standardized tests, have higher grade point averages, and attend four-year colleges at a higher rate than blacks and whites. This can be attributed to their higher socio-economic status and cultural background (Goyette and Xie, 1999, pp. 22-33). Divorce, nationality, and socio-economic class are all factors that affect the career aspirations of middle school students.

PARENTAL EDUCATION AND EXPECTATIONS

Parenting styles, parental education, and expectations have been found to affect the career aspirations of children. Each of these factors influence a student's self esteem, assertiveness, responsibility, and academic achievement.

Parenting Styles

Parenting styles have been associated with academic success and high career aspirations. There are three different types of parenting styles that include authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. Harsh disciplinary actions, rigid boundaries, strictness, and the demand for obedience characterize the authoritarian

parenting style. This type of parent believes that a child's will must be broken. The permissive parenting style has few rules and the child has complete freedom to make life decisions without consulting with the parent. The authoritative parenting style exercises firm but fair discipline, displays love and warmth, and has a "democratic" attitude (Hickman et al., 2000, p. 41).

Authoritarian and permissive parenting styles have been associated with poor academic success and low self-esteem of adolescents. Authoritarians have expectations that are too demanding, while permissive parents do not have high enough expectations for their children. It has been found that adolescents from authoritative parents have higher academic performance and aspirations than that of adolescents from authoritarian and permissive parents (Hickman et al., 2000, p. 42).

Parental education

Parental educational attainment has been found to be related to student achievement. There is a gap in the percentages of white and black children whose parents have at least a high school diploma. In 1999, there were a higher percentage of white children ages 6 to 18 with parents who attained a high school diploma and a bachelor's degree than that of black and Hispanic children (The Condition of Education 2000, 2000, pp. 1-2).

Many middle to upper class parents are typically employed in white collared positions. They tend to be more lenient, tolerant, and flexible than parents from blue collared positions. Parents with less education have fewer

resources to fund their children's college education. It has been found that both father's and mother's educational achievement was associated with parental encouragement of college plans. Also, it has been found that the higher the parents' education, the greater the ambition and success of their children (Hickman et al., 2000, pp. 42-43). Parents with higher education tend to affect their child's aspirations by motivating them to succeed. The more educated a parent is, the more influence they have on the formation of their child's cognitive ability and their career expectations (Ganzach, 2000, pp. 421-438).

Parental expectations

Parental involvement, support, and expectations have a tremendous influence on a child's educational success and aspirations. It has been found that parents that are involved and attend school activities have children with higher educational expectations than children whose parents rarely attend school activities (Trusty, 1998, pp. 261-269). Parents with some form of higher education have a tendency to have children that are more assertive, responsible, have higher self-control, and higher expectations to go to college (Robinson et al., 1998, pp. 153-154).

Parents who have not attended college seem to have lower expectations for their children than parents who have had some form of college education. Parents who have a high involvement at home tend to have children with higher expectations and cognitive ability. Parents from a high socio-economic class tend to intervene at all school levels if their child is having difficulties (Dauber et al.,

1996, pp. 290-292). Parental involvement is one of the most important factors affecting student achievement and career aspirations.

MAGNET SCHOOLS VERSUS COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOLS

With so many problems with our public education system, many feel that magnet schools are a solution. High failure and dropout rates, low scores on standardized tests, and a rise in crime and drug abuse have compelled the school systems to respond to these problems. Most high school students attend public comprehensive schools. Comprehensive schools include students from all backgrounds and abilities. Comprehensive schools typically lack specialized programs and academic counseling, resulting in poor academic performance (Gamoran, 1996, pp. 1-2).

Many feel that magnet schools are the solution to this ongoing problem. Magnet schools have had a major role in school desegregation. These schools use special programs to attract students from outside neighborhoods. Minority and disadvantaged students are more likely to attend public magnet schools, while the more advantaged students are more likely to attend private schools. These programs have a tendency to create a strong sense of community that many students need. These schools allow students that might be overlooked in a regular public classroom to assert themselves and show their talents. This in turn leads to higher academic achievement and the desire to pursue some form of higher education. Students in magnet schools tend to see course material as more

relevant to their daily lives (Gamoran, 1996, pp. 10-14). Magnet schools have been proven to increase scores on standardized test, student achievement, and educational aspirations.

SUMMARY

It appears from the research that socio-economic status, parental education and expectations, and magnet schools have had an influence on the career aspirations of middle school students. Research has shown that low socio-economic status, low parental education and low expectations have a tendency to lower a student's expectations to attend college after high school graduation. Magnet schools could be the solution to the problem of minorities and lower class students having lower aspirations.

This study has shown that although there has been research done on this problem, there have not been many solutions to change the situation of low career aspirations. Chapter III will identify the population, explain the design and use of the instrument, identify the methods of data collection, and describe the analysis of the data.

CHAPTER III

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This chapter dealt with the basic design of this research study. This study was a descriptive study with information on the population, instrument design, methods of data collection, statistical analysis, and a summary. This survey investigated a possible correlation between parental education and student career aspirations.

POPULATION

The sample consisted of 97 eighth grade physical science students who attended Kemps Landing Magnet School and 66 eighth grade physical science students from Bayside Middle School. The study was conducted during the spring semester of the 2000-2001 school year. This population represented a broad representation of race, sex, and socioeconomic status.

INSTRUMENT DESIGN

A survey was developed and used to obtain information about age, gender, parental education, type of school, parent's profession, school activities, and career aspirations. The population was separated into two groups: those who attend Kemps Landing Magnet School and those who attend Bayside Middle School. A copy of the survey is found in Appendix A.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

The survey was distributed to Bayside Middle School students by Suzanne Bruehl and to Kemps Landing Magnet School students by Lori Salisbury during homeroom on a selected day. The teachers were given instructions on distributing and collecting the surveys and were instructed to obtain responses from absent students upon return to school to ensure coverage of the total population. Information was gathered from 163 eighth grade physical science students. All information was kept confidential and no names were used.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

After the data were collected, the information based on age, grade, sex, parental education, type of school, parental profession, school activities, and career aspirations from the two schools were then compared using frequency and percentiles.

SUMMARY

The sample consisted of 97 students from Kemps Landing Magnet School and 66 students from Bayside Middle School. A survey was used to gather data on age, gender, parental education, and career aspirations. The data were used to calculate the frequencies and percentiles. Chapter IV will report the data collected

and reveal the findings. Tables and figures will assist the reader in the interpretation of the data collected.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to determine if students that attend a magnet school have higher career aspirations than students that attend a regular public middle school. The population consisted of 66 eighth grade students from Bayside Middle School and 97 eighth grade students from Kemps Landing Magnet School. The findings are based on the data collected from a six-question survey distributed by Lori Salisbury and Suzanne Bruehl during homebase.

The findings are used to answer the following research goals: 1) Are students with parents that attended college more inclined to go to college after high school? 2) Did students that attended a low socio-economic school have lower career aspirations? 3) Did activities at the schools encourage the pursuit of careers requiring college education? 4) Did the level of education of the parent correspond with the student's career aspirations?

The findings are divided into six sections: Highest level of education completed by the father, Highest level of education completed by the mother, Immediate plans after high school, Participation in career counseling/activities, Gender, and Nationality.

HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION COMPLETED BY THE FATHER

The percentage of fathers of students that attended Bayside Middle School had education levels that ranged from some high school to bachelor's degrees. The percentage of fathers with a high school diploma was 30% and with some college was 30%. The percentage with bachelor's degrees was 17%. The percentage of fathers of students that attended Kemps Landing Magnet School with some college was 15%, with a high school diploma was 16%, with a bachelor's degree was 34%, and with a graduate degree was 40% (See Table 1).

HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION COMPLETED BY THE MOTHER

The percentage of mothers of students that attended Bayside Middle School that had a high school diploma was 38%, with some college was 33%, and with a bachelor's degree was 15%. The percentage of mothers of students that attended Kemps Landing Magnet School that had some college was 20%, with a high school diploma was 23%, with a bachelor's degree was 31%, and with a graduate degree was 36% (See Table 2).

Table 1.**Highest level of education completed by the father**

	Bayside Middle School		Kemps Landing Magnet School		Overall
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	
Some high school	8	12%	2	2%	6%
High school diploma	20	30%	7	7%	16%
Some college	20	30%	14	15%	21%
Bachelor's degree	11	17%	33	34%	27%
Graduate degree	4	6%	39	40%	26%
Does not apply	3	5%	2	2%	3%

Table 2.**Highest level of education completed by the mother**

	Bayside Middle School		Kemps Landing Magnet School		Overall
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	
Some high school	4	6%	1	1%	3%
High school diploma	25	38%	12	12%	23%
Some college	22	33%	19	20%	25%
Bachelor's degree	10	15%	30	31%	25%
Graduate degree	4	6%	35	36%	24%
Does not apply	1	2%	--	--	

IMMEDIATE PLANS AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

The percentage of BMS students that plan to attend a two-year college was 12%, a four-year college was 52%, and military service was 15%. The percentage of KLMS students that plan to attend a four-year college was 69% and 19% were undecided (See Table 3).

PARTICIPATION IN CAREER COUNSELING/ACTIVITIES

The percentage of BMS students that have participated in career counseling was 42%. The percent of students that had not participated in these activities was 38% and 20% did not know. The percentage of KLMS students that have participated in career counseling was 36%. The percent of students that had not participated in these activities was 34% and 30% did not know. BMS had a mean of 1.04 and KLMS had a mean of 1.02, indicating uncertainty (See Table 4).

NATIONALITY

The nationality percentages of BMS were 29% Caucasian, 48% African American, and 11% Hispanic. The nationality percentages for KLMS were 79% Caucasian, 7% African American, and 10% Asian/Pacific Islander (See Table 5).

Table 3.**Immediate plans after high school**

	Bayside Middle School		Kemps Landing Magnet School	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Vocational/trade/technical/ Business school	4	6%	1	1%
Two-year college	8	12%	--	--
Four-year college	34	52%	67	69%
Military service	10	15%	5	5%
Employment	1	1%	4	4%
Other	4	6%	2	2%
Have not decided	5	8%	18	19%

Table 4.**Participation in career counseling/activities**

	Bayside Middle School			Kemps Landing Magnet School		
	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	Frequency	Percentage	Mean
Yes	28	42%	1.04	35	36%	1.02
No	25	38%		33	34%	
Do not know	13	20%		29	30%	

Table 5.**Nationality**

	Bayside Middle School		Kemps Landing Magnet School	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Caucasian	19	29%	76	79%
African American	32	48%	7	7%
Hispanic	7	11%	1	1%
Asian/Pacific Islander	5	8%	10	10%
Native American/Alaskan Native	3	4%	3	3%

SUMMARY

This section of the paper revealed the results of a survey of the career aspirations of Kemps Landing Magnet School students and Bayside Middle School students. The frequency and percentage were calculated for the highest level of education completed by the father and mother, immediate plans after high school, participation in career counseling, and nationality. Detailed data of all of these sections can be found in Appendix B. The summary, conclusions, and recommendations of this study are found in Chapter V.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The problem of this study was to compare the career aspirations of eighth grade students at Kemps Landing Magnet School to that of Bayside Middle School students. This chapter summarizes the study, draws conclusions based on the findings, and makes recommendations for further study.

SUMMARY

This study was conducted to determine whether or not students from magnet schools have higher career aspirations than students from a regular public middle school. The population consisted of 66 students from Bayside Middle School and 97 students from Kemps Landing Magnet School. The data collected was used to determine whether or not students with parents that attended college were more inclined to attend college after high school and if activities provided by the school encouraged the pursuit of careers requiring college education. There is a need for a study in this area because students from low socio-economic schools tend to have lower career aspirations.

The instrument used was a six question survey that asked for parental education, career aspirations, and if they have attended career counseling. The data collected were then used to calculate the frequency and percentile of

responses. Based on the findings, the researcher was able to draw conclusions and make recommendations.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study revealed that students from magnet schools had higher career aspirations than students from a regular public middle school. The following conclusions are derived from the study:

1. Are students with parents that attend college more inclined to go to college after high school?

The parents of KLMS students had higher levels of education than that of BMS parents; therefore the students at KLMS had higher career aspirations than that of BMS students.

2. Did students that attended a low socio-economic school have lower career aspirations?

The students from BMS come from a low socio-economic background. These students had lower career aspirations than students from a high socio-economic background, such as KLMS.

3. Did activities at the schools encourage the pursuit of careers requiring college education?

BMS and KLMS students were similar in their responses to the question about participation in career counseling/activities. A third of the

population had participated in career counseling and a third had not. A third of the population did not know if they had participated in these activities.

4. Did the level of education of the parent correspond with the student's career aspirations?

The level of education of the parent did correspond with the student's career aspirations. Most of the parents of KLMS students had either a bachelor's degree or a graduate degree. 69% of KLMS students planned on attending a four-year college after high school. The parents of BMS students had either a high school diploma or some college education. This influenced the student's responses in that 52% wanted to go to four-year colleges, while 33% chose technical training.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study revealed that students from low socio-economic schools had lower career aspirations than students from a magnet school. It was found that parents with lower levels of education influenced their children's decisions concerning higher education after high school. Further study in this area is needed so that the schools can boost student achievement. The following are recommendations for further study:

1. Every public school should provide mandatory career counseling for each student, starting in eighth grade. Students from low socio-economic students should be provided with information about various scholarships and student loans.
2. The public schools should provide at risk students with mentors from various professions to encourage them to pursue higher education.
3. Further study of factors that may effect student's career aspirations such as social environment and economic status need to be undertaken.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A Student Career Aspirations Survey

APPENDIX A

Student Career Aspirations Survey

SURVEY

Research Study: A study of the career aspirations of eighth grade students

SCHOOL: _____

TEACHER: _____

DIRECTIONS: Please check your appropriate response for the following questions:

1. What was the highest level of education completed by your father?

_____ High school diploma

_____ Some college

_____ Bachelor's degree

_____ Graduate degree

_____ Some high school

_____ Does not apply

2. What was the highest level of education completed by your mother?

_____ High school diploma

_____ Some college

_____ Bachelor's degree

_____ Graduate degree

_____ Some high school

_____ Does not apply

3. After high school, what are your immediate plans

_____ Vocational school/trade/technical/business school

_____ Two-year college

- Four-year college
- Military service
- Employment
- Other (please list)
- Undecided

4. Have you received any counseling and/or participated in any activities at school that encourage you to attend college after high school?

- Yes
- No
- Do not know

5. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

6. What is your nationality?

- Caucasian
- African American
- Hispanic
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Native American/Alaskan Native