

Ask: NUS Economists

# How students' aspirations exacerbate social inequality

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For The Straits Times

**Q** How do differences in students' aspirations affect social inequality in school?

**A** While the latest results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) show that Singapore outperforms most Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, including the territory of Hong Kong, in both mathematics and reading, they also show that Hong Kong clearly outperforms Singapore in terms of social equity.

Indeed, the report shows that while socio-economic status (SES) explains only 5 per cent of the variation in science performance in Hong Kong, it explains 17 per cent of the variation in Singapore.

So, parents' social status matters much more here than in Hong Kong for academic success. This is a significant finding and one supported by recent economic literature, which explores a new potential mechanism to explain social inequalities at school, namely: students' aspirations.

In new research, we show that an aspiration failure reinforces social inequalities at school.

Using data on 14-year-old students in France in their last year of secondary school, we first find evidence that aspirations affect test scores as well as the probability to follow an academic track in high school, meaning that aspirations do matter. This is one way in which social inequalities in aspirations can affect social inequalities in school achievements between secondary school and higher education.

Specifically, we show that social inequalities in aspirations exist even among equally achieving classmates and then disentangle several factors leading to these inequalities.

First, students from different social backgrounds do not have the same existing options on top of their mind. Low-SES students are, for instance, 7 per cent more likely to mention vocational high school as part of the existing options than their equally achieving high-SES classmates, and 12 per cent less likely to mention tracks of five years of higher education or more.

These differences in awareness of existing tracks are a source of inefficiency of aspirations, as both low- and high-SES students cannot make efficient decisions if they do not have in mind all existing options.

Second, even when they mention the same existing options, low-SES students are still 4 per cent less likely to state that academic high school is attainable than their equally achieving high-SES classmates.

As a matter of fact, they may have good reasons to aspire lower than high-SES students. Indeed, even with an equal academic capacity and school environment, students from different social backgrounds may have different budget constraints, for instance, that could make some options unattainable to them. This is true even with high school being free in France, for example, because they would have a lower probability to have access to tuition at night.

In fact, we find that low-SES students progress less well when test scores are measured than their high-SES classmates of the same initial academic level. Low-SES students are, thus, right to feel less capable. But do they assess their objective disadvantage correctly? We provide evidence that they

do not. To do so, we examine students' self-perception of both current academic capacity and future academic progress and find evidence that low-SES students underestimate them both.

On the one hand, students exhibit excessively fatalistic views to the extent to which future academic success is determined by social background. For example, the real probability of passing the end-of-high-school exam for a reasonably good low-SES student (above the median) is 13 points lower than that for a similar high-SES student in France, but students perceive this gap to be more than two times bigger than it is. Students are thus too fatalistic with respect to the impact of social background.

On the other hand, low-SES students – in particular the high-achievers – underestimate their scholastic ability. To see this, we measure students' scholastic self-esteem by using the "Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents" conceived by Susan Harter in 1988, including questions such as whether students feel that they are just as smart as others, or whether they feel that they do well at class work. We find that this index of scholastic self-esteem is 39 per cent smaller for low-SES students, compared with their equally achieving high-SES classmates.

More specifically, this measure explains 25 per cent of the deficit in high-achieving low-SES students mentioning a master's degree among their attainable tracks. These findings highlight the role of social stereotypes in shaping students' perceptions and cognition, with important consequences for educational aspirations and later outcomes.

More importantly, we show that social differences in academic aspirations cannot be explained by differences in professional aspirations. Overall, academic aspirations are not consistent with professional aspirations, suggesting that teenagers view their educational aspirations and professional aspirations quite separately.

This is especially so for low-SES students. For instance, in France, they are as likely to prefer a job that requires a master's degree as their equally-achieving high-SES classmates, while they are 26 per cent less likely to prefer to pursue a master's degree.

Low-SES students have a clear disadvantage from the beginning and their lower aspirations drag them down even further, even when these are not justified. This inefficiency calls for government intervention to help disadvantaged students aspire to their true potential to increase upward mobility.

• The writer is an assistant professor in economics at the National University of Singapore. Her research focuses on the economics of education. This is a monthly series by the NUS Department of Economics. Each month, a panel will address a topical issue. If you have a burning question on economics, write to [stopinion@sph.com.sg](mailto:stopinion@sph.com.sg) with "Ask NUS" in the subject field.

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