

“What do I want to be when I grow up?”: Role of parent and teacher support in enhancing students’ academic confidence and educational expectations

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This study was funded by the William T. Grant Foundation.

Presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, 2001, Seattle, Washington.

Family and school are two of the most significant contexts in which adolescents grow and develop. The influence of these two contexts, positive or negative, in shaping the lives of adolescents as they grow into young adulthood cannot be overstated. The type and extent of support they receive from the adults in these contexts, namely, teachers and parents, will determine to a large extent their confidence in their academic abilities while at school, their future educational and career expectations and aspirations, and their faith in schools as an institution in helping them attain their educational and career goals. In this study, we examine the type of support high school adolescents' need from parents and teachers to make them feel academically efficacious about achieving their educational aspirations. In addition, we also examine whether students who have support from both parents and teachers are at an advantage in terms of these educational outcomes as compared to students who receive support from only one source or students who receive support from neither source.

The beneficial effect of social support from parents and teachers on adolescents' healthy development is well established. Not surprisingly, the supportiveness students perceive from their teachers impact students' academic self-views and school-related feelings and behaviors. Adolescents who perceive their teachers as supportive have a more positive attitude toward school (Fraser & Fisher, 1982; Hawkins & Brendt, 1985), feel less alienated and lonely in school (Kumar, Gheen, & Kaplan, in press; Mouton, Hawkins, Mcpherson, & Copley, 1996), and are better able to cope with school related stress (Levitt & Levitt, 1994). Supportive relationships with teachers are also associated with enhanced classroom motivation (Rigby, Deci, Patrick, & Ryan, 1992; Goodenow, 1993, Wentzel & Asher, 1995), greater feelings of academic efficacy (Roeser, Midgley, & Urda, 1996), and higher self-esteem (Harter, 1996; Felner, Primevera, & Cause, 1981).

Research has also established the importance of family support, and parental support in particular, in predicting adolescents' educational and psychological outcomes. Emotional support from parents is related to higher levels of academic confidence (Went-Gross, Siperstein, Untch, & Widaman, 1997) and self-esteem (DuBois, Felner, Sherman, & Bull, 1994), greater school engagement, fewer problem behaviors (Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 1998), higher educational aspirations (Marjoribanks, 1997), and lower stress (Clark, 1991).

While it is important to examine individual sources of support, we believe, it is even more important to examine the network of support available to adolescents because this approach takes a more holistic view of what students experience. In their study of the support network available for adolescents at risk for negative school related outcomes, Richman and his colleagues (1998) found that at-risk students had fewer sources of support than did students who were not at risk for such negative outcomes like problem behavior, poor school attendance, low grades, lack of satisfaction with school, and low academic confidence. Therefore, the number of sources of support may be important when considering what impacts adolescents' academic self-concepts and feelings about their futures. In this study, we examine whether students who receive social support from both parents and teachers will have better school related outcomes than students who receive support from only one source will, and whether students who receive support from either parents or teachers are likely to be better off than are students who do not receive support from either of these sources.

In addition to the number of sources, the type of support each source provides may also be critical. For example, support from parents of an emotional type may be more important than support from teachers of an emotional type. Or support from teachers of an instrumental or informational nature may be more crucial to students than getting this same support from parents. Accordingly, we were interested in how these various types of support from each source

combine together to help, or possibly hinder, the adolescent. With that in mind, we now turn to an examination of the various types of social support that have been forwarded in research and theory.

### Type of Support

In much of this research, the social support construct lacks clarity and is typically treated as unidimensional in nature (Hupcey, 1998). As many researchers and theorists have point out, social support is a multidimensional concept, which should be defined and measured as such (Cohen, 1992; Saranon, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983; Richman, Rosenfeld, & Bowen, 1998; Vaux, 1988). For example, parents and teachers may provide adolescents with emotional support, by being sympathetic and understanding. This kind of support is defined by warm interpersonal relationships. Adolescents may also receive informational support, when teachers and parents provide them with relevant and necessary information to help them make important decisions; or they may be the recipients of material support where they receive some tangible assistance like money or physical help (Birch, 1998; Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 1998). In this study we examine whether adolescents' perceptions of the availability of two different kinds of supports, emotional and informational, combine differently to affect school related outcomes. Therefore, by including different types of social support we wanted to examine not only the sources of support but the specific kinds of support that related to beneficial outcomes.

### Future Educational Outcomes: Emotional and Informational Support from Parents

All parents, regardless of their demographic background, want their children to do well in school (Steinberg, 1996). However, for various reasons, not all parents are able to provide the same level of support to their children to accomplish this goal. Parents who are not proficient in English, and are unfamiliar with the schooling system, for example, find it hard to provide

support when their children face problems in school. Oftentimes adolescents who experience such discontinuity between home and school do not approach their parents and family members for help with school related problems because they are aware of their parents' difficulty in communicating with school personnel (Delgado-Gaitan, 1988; Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1994). Consequently, these students may not receive the emotional support from their parents that would encourage confidence in school.

Parents vary both in how they approach family-school interactions and in the skills they bring to such interactions. Many working class and minority parents lack a sense of efficacy when dealing with teachers (Lareau, 1996). They sense a separation between home and school and turn over the task of educating their children to teachers, maintaining minimal involvement with school and their children's schoolwork. Thus, parents' feelings of inefficacy can inhibit them from providing needed emotional support to their children. Higginbotham and Weber (1992) found that middle class parents, whether African American or European American, provide more financial and emotional support for their adolescents than working class parents. Along a similar vein, middle class girls receive more encouragement and emotional support to reach their academic goals than girls raised in a working class environment (Hill, 1997).

Parents, regardless of the level of emotional support they provide, are sometimes not well equipped to provide informational support. They differ in their level of expertise to help their children make informed decisions about their future (Lareau, 1987). Poor minority parents, who may have high educational and professional aspirations for their children, are hindered in their ability to help their adolescents achieve their goals because they do not possess knowledge of the resources available in school (Cooper et al., 1994). Often parents with little formal education or who do not speak English experience difficulty in understanding and intervening in their adolescents course placements (Useem, 1991). For example, in her ethnographic work, Delgado-

Gaitan (1988) discovered that parents of Latino adolescents were not sufficiently familiar with the workings of the school system to help these adolescents select courses in high school that would improve their chances of attending colleges and universities.

For some parents, particularly those who have themselves experienced academic failure, schools are likely to evoke painful memories and deep-rooted feelings of inefficacy. Many of these parents are skeptical that schools can better the lives of their children (Cooper, Jackson, Azmitia, & Lopez, 1998). This may translate into inability on the part of parents to provide adequate emotional and instrumental support to their children. Adolescents socialized within such family contexts are likely to incorporate their parents' skeptical beliefs about education into their own belief system. This may have negative consequences as adolescents attempt to establish their own identity and develop a sense of their future (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Grotevant, 1998). As they are socialized within this family context, adolescents are also more likely to incorporate their parents' skeptical beliefs about education into their own belief system. Lack of school related support, both emotional and informational, from their parents increases the likelihood that students may become more pessimistic about the role of education for advancing their socioeconomic status and less likely to value educational attainment and academic achievement.

#### Future Educational Outcomes: Informational Support from Teachers

Teachers and school counselors are also important sources of information and support as adolescents negotiate their way through high school and beyond. While the positive effects of warm interpersonal relationships with teachers has been the focus of a great deal of research (e.g., Noddings, 1988), few have focused on the effect informational support from teachers has in shaping adolescents' feelings about their present school experiences and future educational and occupational expectations.

Expectations of and beliefs about their students often influence the informational support that teachers provide. As Jussim and his colleagues suggest, teacher expectations have the power of creating social realities (Jussim, Eccles, & Mandon, 1996). Teachers rely on stereotypes in developing expectations for students from stigmatized group. Based on their prejudices and the low expectations they have of these students, teacher may discourage them from taking courses that can improve their future educational opportunities (Cooper, 1994; Patthey-Chavez, 1993). Consequently, teachers who hold lower expectations of poor, minority students not only deny these students emotional support, but by giving inappropriate advice, also deny students informational support. As Phelan found in her ethnographic study of high school students in schools where two-thirds of the students were minority and came from homes where neither parent had a college education, teachers provided no mentoring to help them with course selection. Students were not made aware of the availability of college scholarships they could apply for or the opportunities open to them at local universities and businesses (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998). These students received little informational support from their high school teachers and counselors.

Thus schools, and teachers in particular, can act as gatekeepers, preventing some students from advancing while encouraging other students to do so. With little or no informational support from teachers or parents, these adolescents are likely to have little understanding of how schoolwork relates to their future lives, or how they can reach their future educational and career goals. A school where students are not helped to make this connection between their present life and their future are likely to have depressed educational aspirations and expectations, as well as feel skeptical about the usefulness of schooling.

## Hypotheses

We believe that students' perceptions of the level and type of support they receive from parents and teachers together play a role in their level of academic confidence, their future educational expectations, their level of knowledge about the future, and whether or not they are skeptical about the value of education in their lives.

More specifically, we hypothesize that:

1. Emotional support from parents is more important than informational support in enabling students to feel more academically confident in school.
2. Informational support is more important than emotional support in enabling students to feel more knowledgeable about their future.
3. Both informational and emotional supports are important in decreasing students' skepticism about the value of getting an education for their future and enhancing students' educational expectations..
4. Students who receive informational support from both parents and teachers will feel less skeptical about the value of getting an education for their future and have higher educational expectations than students who receive informational support from only one of the sources.
5. Students who receive informational support from either parents or teachers will feel less skeptical about the value of getting an education for their future and have higher educational expectationsthan students who do not receive such support from either source.



## Methods

### Participants

Participants were 453 students from three school districts involved in a longitudinal study of school transitions. The participants included in this study were those students who had data at eighth grade in middle school, as well as ninth grade in high school. The sample used in the analyses was 40% European American and 60% African American. Students from other ethnic groups were excluded because they constituted a very small percentage of the total sample (7%). There were approximately equal proportions of males (52%) and females (48%) in the sample. The communities from which participants were drawn were primarily low to middle class, with 38% of the students in the sample receiving free or reduced-fee lunch.

### Measures

These data were collected in the spring of the fourth and fifth year of the larger longitudinal study on school transitions. Students completed surveys about a variety of school related constructs outside their regular classroom, during one class period lasting approximately 40 minutes in both eighth (middle school) and ninth grades (high school). A subset of the scales from the broader survey was used in this study. Other than students' educational expectations, items included on scales used in this study, were rated using a 5-point Likert scale (*1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree*). (Note: The point scale for educational expectations is described below.)

Social support. We used three different scales collected during the ninth grade survey to form a composite picture of the social support students received from parents and teachers. The parental emotional support scale consisted of six items assessing students' perceptions that their parents would not be able to provide them with help when it came to problems in school ( $\alpha =$

.86). This scale was rated such that students who scored high on the scale perceived the least amount of emotional support from parents while students who scored low on the scale perceived greater support. A sample item from this scale was “If something about school made me upset, my parents wouldn’t know how to help me out.” The parent and teacher informational support scales consisted of two items each and assessed how much information about preparing for the future students perceived receiving from adults in their lives. Students scoring high on the scale perceived more informational support, while students scoring low on the scale perceived less informational support. The parent informational support scale ( $\alpha = .77$ ) included the item “My family gives me good advice about what high school classes will help me reach my educational and career goals after I graduate.” The teacher informational support scale ( $\alpha = .82$ ) included the item “My teachers or counselors at school help me understand what I need to do now in order to achieve my future educational or career goals.

Outcome measures. We included four different outcome measures in our analyses: academic efficacy, knowledge about the future, skeptical beliefs, and future educational expectations. Since middle and high school students attend a variety of classes in school that might impact them differentially, survey items specific to students’ academic confidence centered around math and math class. The same five-item scale was used in both eighth grade ( $\alpha = .86$ ) and ninth grade ( $\alpha = .87$ ). A sample item from the academic confidence scale was “I can do even the hardest work in my math class if I try.” The five-item knowledge about the future scale, collected during the ninth grade, assessed students’ perceptions that they knew what to do to successfully prepare for their future ( $\alpha = .81$ ). A sample item from this scale was “I know which high school classes will be useful for my future success after I graduate.” The skeptical beliefs scale was also collected in both the eighth ( $\alpha = .78$ ) and ninth grade ( $\alpha = .79$ ). It included five-items assessing students’ devaluing of school as helpful to their

future success. A sample item from the skeptical beliefs scale was “Even if I do well in my school, it won’t help me get a good career when I grow up.” Also collected in ninth grade was a single item indicator of educational aspirations. This was rated on a 6-point scale (*1 = Not finish high school, 6 = get a Ph.D., a medical degree, a law degree*).

Demographic information. In addition, demographic information (gender and ethnicity) and students’ GPA in the eighth grade were gathered from school records.

### Results

In this study, we examined the role played by students’ perceived instrumental and emotional support from parents and teachers on their present academic beliefs and behaviors and their future educational expectations. To this end, we conducted an R-type cluster analysis using, as the clustering variables, students’ beliefs about their parents’ capability to help them with school related problems, perceptions of their parents as a source of information about the future, and perceptions of their teachers as sources of this information. We then used the clusters as independent variables to investigate students’ present and future academic beliefs and behaviors.

#### Cluster Analysis

Our first step in doing this was to conduct a hierarchical cluster analysis using Ward's method and squared Euclidean distance. As the groupings that result from cluster analyses are often unstable, we first randomly divided the sample in half, then conducted separate analyses for both of these sub-samples as well as a similar analysis using the entire sample. Examination of the agglomeration tables and the dendograms indicated that all three samples were best represented by four clusters. In order to get a purer clustering of individuals into relatively homogeneous groups we re-compared the cluster assignments from the sub-samples to the same pattern cluster in the full sample, retaining only those individual cases that were similarly

assigned in both analyses. This process reduced our sample size from 453 to 333 students, indicating that the agreement between the sub-sample and full-sample cluster analyses in their assignment of students was approximately 74%.

The final clusters we used in later analyses included:

- 1). A group that perceived a low level of emotional support from parents and low levels of informational support from both parents and teachers (Cluster 1: 13%).
- 2). A group that perceived a higher than average level of emotional support and average levels of informational support from parents and high level of informational support from teachers (Cluster 2: 28%).
- 3). A group that perceived a slightly below average level of emotional support and low informational support from parents and high levels of informational support from teachers (Cluster 3: 26%).
- 4). A group that perceived a higher than average level of emotional support from parents and high levels of informational support from parents and teachers (Cluster 4: 32%).

Means and standard deviations for the clustering variables both in the full sample and within each cluster are presented in Table 1. Table 2 includes the correlation between the clustering variables and the outcome variables.

### ANCOVAs

After clustering students, we conducted ANCOVAs using these clusters as between subject factors along with ethnicity and gender. Two ANCOVA analyses were conducted so that we could examine the association of cluster membership to students' academic confidence and to their skeptical beliefs about the value of education. For these two outcomes, we covaried out eighth grade levels from each ninth grade outcome, so that we were looking at the change in the outcome over the transition into high school. We also included these clusters as a between

subject factor in two additional ANCOVAs examining students' knowledge about preparing for the future and their educational expectations, covarying out eighth grade GPA. All ANCOVA analyses included follow-up pairwise comparisons of the cluster means.

In Table 3, we present the means and standard deviations for all the dependent variables for the entire sample and for each of the four groups.

#### *Academic efficacy*

Results indicated a significant difference in the four clusters in how efficacious students felt academically in math ( $F_{(df=3,264)}=5.73, p < .001$ ). Follow-up comparisons revealed that the change in confidence from eighth to ninth grade was significantly greater for students who reported that both parents and teachers were good sources of information (cluster 4:  $\underline{M} = 4.59$ ) than for students in the other three groups (all  $ps < .05$ ). These findings suggest that perceiving one has more than one source of support has a beneficial effect on adolescents' academic confidence.

#### *Knowledge of future*

The ANCOVA analysis, covarying out eighth grade GPA from knowledge about what is needed in order to prepare for the future, indicated that the four clusters once again differed significantly in reported mean levels ( $F_{(df=3,291)}=21.94, p < .001$ ). Students who reported high levels of information from both parents and teachers (cluster 4:  $\underline{M} = 4.36$ ) reported significantly more knowledge about what they needed to do in order to succeed than did any of the other three clusters (all  $ps < .001$ ). Students who perceived low levels of all three types of support from parents (cluster 1:  $\underline{M} = 3.13$ ), reported significantly less knowledge than students in the other three groups (all  $ps < .001$ ). These results point to the importance of informational support if students need to have a good understanding of what they need to do in school in order to succeed in later life.

### *Skepticism*

The clusters also differed significantly on the change in students' skepticism regarding the value of education for future success ( $F_{(df=3,272)}=9.04, p < .001$ ). Students who perceived low emotional support from parents (cluster 1:  $\underline{M} = 2.58$ ) displayed the sharpest increase in skepticism about the value of school across the transition to high school. Furthermore, this increase in skepticism differed significantly from that of each remaining cluster grouping (all  $ps < .01$ ). Students who reported high levels of parent and teacher information (cluster 4:  $\underline{M} = 1.64$ ), were also significantly less skeptical than students who reported above average parental emotional support and perceived teachers as a good source of information but only average levels of information from parents (cluster 3:  $\underline{M} = 2.13$ ). These results indicate that when students are kept informed about ways in which they can mold their high school experiences to further their educational and career goals, they are likely to be less skeptical about the benefits of their educational experiences for their future life.

### *Educational Expectations*

ANCOVA results indicated that there were significant differences among the groups in their educational expectations ( $F_{(df=3,291)}=3.58, p < .05$ ) after controlling for eighth grade GPA. Pairwise comparisons among the groups indicated that students who reporting receiving low levels of parental emotional support (Cluster 1:  $\underline{M} = 3.77$ ) had significantly lower educational expectations than did students in the remaining three groups.

### Discussion

This study reaffirms that students need both emotional and informational support from parents and teachers. Further, findings from this study highlight adolescents' need for a combination of different kinds of support from parents and teachers to feel confident about their future and to make school work for them. While many prior studies have used an ethnographic

approach to investigate samples of high-risk adolescents, often from a single ethnic group, the quantitative data presented in this study indicates that these findings are generalizable to a broader population, one not necessarily at risk.

Our findings indicate that students who reported receiving low parental emotional support and lower than average information from both parents and teachers (Cluster 1), fared the least well on the outcomes we examined. Conversely, when students reported average or above average levels of parents and/or teachers as good sources of information, outcomes improved. While students who received who reported above average levels of all three types of support (cluster 3) showed the most adaptive pattern of outcomes on the factors we examined, students who reported some type of teacher informational support fared better than students without teacher informational support. Not surprisingly, the group with all three types of support reported the most academic confidence, knowledge about the future, and highest educational expectations. In addition, they were the least skeptical regarding the value of education for their future.

In addition, this study sends an important message: teachers apparently can make a difference in the lives of students who do not get informational support at home. Students in clusters 2 and 4 did not differ significantly from each other in any of the outcome measures; so while receiving all three kinds of support is optimal, teachers can provide compensation to students whose parents are not providing emotional or informational support at home. Teachers can do this by providing information to their students regarding options and opportunities available to them. Thus, the outlook for adolescents who receive information from either parents or teachers is far brighter than for students who receive no support at all. In a society where the numbers of minority and immigrant students is increasing rapidly, this is good news. Parents of many of these students may not be familiar or knowledgeable about the functioning of the educational system. Providing information about future educational opportunities and guiding

students through high school to help avail those opportunities, is crucial. This study suggests that if teachers and counselors can deliver this kind of support to their students, transition to high school and beyond will be smoother and less rocky.



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Table 1  
Means and standard deviations of the clustering variables for the full sample and within each cluster

Clustering Variables	Full Sample	Cluster 1 (Low parental emotional support and low parent and teacher informational support)	Cluster 2 (High parent emotional support, low parent informational support, and high teacher informational support)	Cluster 3 (Low parent emotional support, low parent informational support, and teacher informational support)	Cluster 4 (High parent emotional support and high parent and teacher informational support)
	N = 333	N = 44	N = 94	N = 88	N = 107
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
	(SD)	(SD)	(SD)	(SD)	(SD)
Parents' capability to help with problems in school	2.03 (.99)	3.23 (.85)	1.61 (.51)	2.81 (.81)	1.27 (.41)
Parents as sources of information about the future	3.85 (1.06)	2.25 (.85)	3.81 (.86)	3.49 (.63)	4.84 (.31)
Teachers as sources of information about the future	3.50 (1.22)	1.97 (.67)	2.47 (.77)	4.04 (.62)	4.60 (.47)

Table 2  
Correlation among variables (Grade 9)  
N =333

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Parents capability to help	.					
2. Parents: Sources of information	.56	.				
3. Teachers: Sources of information	.25	.47	.			
4. Academic Confidence	.30	.31	.27	.		
5. Skeptical beliefs about education	-.42	-.33	-.26	-.26	.	
6. Knowledge about future preparation	.32	.57	.41	.27	-.37	.
7. Educational Expectation	.24	.25	.15	.33	-.32	.34

Table 3  
Means and standard deviations of variables measuring present academic beliefs and behaviors and future expectations (Grade 9)

Clustering Variables	Full Sample	Cluster 1 (Low parental emotional support and low parent and teacher informational support)	Cluster 2 (High parent emotional support, low parent informational support, and high teacher informational support)	Cluster 3 (Low parent emotional support, low parent informational support, and teacher informational support)	Cluster 4 (High parent emotional support and high parent and teacher informational support)
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Academic efficacy (math)	4.11 (.92)	3.69 (1.09)	3.98 (.91)	3.90 (.94)	4.59 (.59)
Skeptical beliefs about education	1.97 (.86)	2.58 (.91)	1.91 (.73)	2.13 (.89)	1.64 (.75)
Knowledge about preparing for the future	3.82 (.83)	3.13 (.80)	3.63 (.81)	3.72 (.70)	4.36 (.64)
Future educational expectations	4.35 (1.27)	3.77 (1.54)	4.39 (1.26)	4.25 (1.22)	4.64 (1.12)