Circumscription and compromise: An accelerated longitudinal analysis of primary and secondary school pupils’ career aspirations

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A decade of economic and social policy in Australia and the Anglosphere more broadly has been directed at enabling access to tertiary education for students from historically underrepresented social backgrounds. The drivers behind these policy settings have included the need to staff increasingly knowledge-based economies and a concordant desire for greater social mobility from the working to the middle classes. In Australia, however, students from the top socioeconomic status (SES) quartile account for 38% of university enrolments whereas those from the bottom SES quartile make up just 15% of students undertaking degree-level education. These figures have largely remained stable for a decade. In order to begin to address this social inequity, educators and policymakers need a greater understanding of how career and education aspirations develop over the course of schooling. This study applied the latent class mixture modelling (LCMM) technique to three years of accelerated longitudinal data gathered from some 6,500 primary and secondary school pupils in New South Wales, Australia. LCMM identified a number of latent developmental trajectories in the social prestige of career aspirations across nine years of schooling; trajectories which differed according to student SES, prior achievement, gender, and educational goals. Pupils with relatively low career aspiration trajectories tended to come from lower SES backgrounds and had increasingly lower prior achievement from late primary school when compared to high aspiring pupils. Furthermore, the low aspiring pupils increasingly circumscribed their education goals away from university degrees to vocational qualifications and the completion of secondary school only. In contrast, high aspiring students tended to come from a variety of SES backgrounds but had higher prior achievement profiles. Throughout their schooling high aspiring students also had consistent aspirations to attain degree-level qualifications. As the observed differences increased as pupils aged, the analysis suggests the existence of a developmental process by which pupils are socialised into having certain career goals which accord with their perceptions of the social order, and thereby supports aspects of Gottfredson’s theory of career circumscription and compromise. An important implication of this study is that to improve access rates to tertiary education there is a need to systematically address the impact of social inequity on school achievement from early childhood through to adolescence.