

The relationship between parental ambition and children's ambition for academic success

Dr. Latreche Halima

Department of Social Sciences, University of Oum El Bouaghi
Algeria

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore the relationship between parental ambition and children's ambition for academic success, by emphasizing that academic achievement is influenced by various factors. These include elements related to the student themselves and the level of ambition they set for their own success, as well as factors linked to the parents' cultural background and their positive or negative attitudes toward their children's education, which reflect their ambitions for their children's academic success. Therefore, the family's involvement serves as a key determinant of the student's academic performance, as children's ambition is greatly influenced by their parents' expectations.

Keywords: Ambition – Parental Ambition – Children's Ambition – Academic Success

Introduction and Problem Statement of the Study:

The prevailing culture in a society plays a significant role in the socialization process, shaping individuals' behaviors and habits. Naturally, the socialization of children from affluent backgrounds differs from that of children from underprivileged backgrounds. The school, through its curricula, programs, and the language used in classrooms, acts as a mirror reflecting the society's culture.

In this context, researcher Robert Gastel asserts that one of the most important findings of modern sociology is the evidence it provides that the true reasons behind success or failure in learning can only be understood by referring to the original culture prevailing in the students' environment.

Sociological approaches in general emphasize the role of both society and the school as an educational institution in either the success or failure of students. Numerous studies have analysed the impact of social, cultural, and familial factors, as well as the role of actors within the school system, on students' performance. Academic failure is now seen as a socio-educational phenomenon.

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The family's cultural level, particularly that of the parents, plays a major role in shaping the child's personality and future characteristics. The family is considered the primary cultural environment where an individual's culture is formed, and where their behavior and attitudes towards various life situations are developed. It is also seen as the unit responsible for transmitting positive culture and values to children, helping them achieve psychological and social adjustment across life domains. From this perspective, a high family cultural and educational level contributes to better adjustment and is considered a key factor in achieving academic success.

Parental ambition also plays a major role in the success or failure of their children, and this is the central point of discussion in this study. Parental ambition regarding their children's future is considered one of the most important aspects of parental upbringing, as it influences the formation of their children's personalities. According to Locke, parental ambition significantly affects the ambition level of children: parents with low ambition may lead their children to lower their aspirations out of fear of failure, or conversely, they may push their children to raise their ambition as a form of compensation for their own failures. Sometimes, parental ambition can cause anxiety in children and exert pressure when the parents' expectations exceed the children's abilities. This may even lead children to resort to cheating in exams to fulfill their parents' ambitions (Omar Khaled, 2018, pp. 22-24).

Accordingly, we pose the following research questions:

- What is the relationship between parental ambition and children's ambition for academic success?
- What role does parental ambition play in children's academic achievement?

Significance of the Study:

Ambition is one of the most important educational topics, playing a significant role in academic success specifically parental ambition. Several studies, including those by Winter Bottom and Rosen, have indicated that children's academic achievement increases with the cultural level of their parents, and is negatively affected by low parental education. Mothers with a high level of education tend to have greater ambition and encourage their children to improve their academic performance, closely monitoring their progress in order to fulfil their ambitions. These mothers often provide incentives and rewards to motivate their children to continue achieving good results.

This study also aims to draw the attention of educators and families in general to the importance of recognizing the relationship between parental ambition and children's ambition, and how this relationship affects their academic success or failure.

Objectives of the Study:

The current study aims to:

- Uncover the relationship between parental ambition and children's ambition for academic success.
- Identify the role of parental ambition in the academic success of children.

Concept of Ambition:

Linguistically: The Arabic root “ṭamaḥa” (طمح) means “to look up toward something elevated.” Anything high or elevated is described as “ṭāmih” (طامح).

Terminologically: Ambition is defined as the level an individual sets for themselves and desires to reach or feels capable of reaching. It is the pursuit of achieving one's goals in life or completing daily tasks.

Concept of Level of Ambition:

Abu Nahia defines it as the achievable goal that an individual sets in academic, educational, professional, family, or occupational fields—one that they aspire to and strive to achieve by overcoming obstacles and challenges within that domain. This goal aligns with the individual's psychological makeup and frame of reference and is shaped by their past experiences of success and failure (Abu Nahia, 2012, p. 13).

It is also defined as the level of progress and success that an individual wishes to reach in any desired area, based on their awareness of their potential and capabilities and the benefit drawn from past experiences (Al-Mushaikh, 2009, p. 93).

The level of ambition reflects the goals individuals set for themselves in educational, professional, family, or economic fields and attempt to achieve. Ambition is influenced by one's personality and surrounding environment. It also varies within the same individual across different life stages. Escalona notes that individuals tend to seek relatively high levels of ambition (Omar Khaled, 2018, p. 17).

Atkinson's Definition and Related Perspectives on Level of Ambition:

Atkinson defines the level of ambition as the anticipated level of achievement that an individual attempts to reach in a familiar task, provided they have knowledge of their previous performance in that task.

According to Abu Nahia, the level of ambition is determined by the extent to which an individual overcomes obstacles encountered while striving to achieve a possible goal they have set for themselves in the academic, professional, occupational, or any other vital field. The level of ambition is considered one of the driving forces that motivate individuals to accomplish many of their goals and aspirations (Abu Ouda, 2014, p. 55).

It can be said that the level of ambition is linked to the learner, their capabilities, and the effort they exert. Success or failure depends on their competence and ability to adapt to specific personal and environmental circumstances.

Three Levels of Ambition (Samir Kamel, 1988):

1. Balanced and Realistic Ambition:

Here, the individual is aware of their capabilities and seeks to achieve goals that are in line with those abilities. High-achieving individuals are more capable of accurately assessing themselves compared to average students, who may either overestimate or underestimate their ambition level (Omar Khaled, 2018, p. 18).

2. Ambition Lower than Capabilities:

In this case, the individual possesses great potential, but their ambition falls short of matching those capabilities often a sign of low self-confidence.

3. Ambition Exceeding Capabilities:

This refers to individuals whose aspirations greatly surpass their actual abilities they want to achieve more than they are realistically capable of. Such imbalance is linked to personal experience: the more experience an individual has, the better they are at aligning their ambitions with their true potential.

In summary, ambition can be:

- Equal to one's abilities,
- Lower than one's abilities,
- Higher than one's abilities.

It is essential for parents to recognize their children's capacities to ensure their ambitions are aligned with their abilities.

Characteristics of Ambitious Individuals:

According to Al-Jali (2000), ambitious individuals typically possess the following traits:

- A strong tendency toward success.
- An optimistic outlook on life.
- A high sense of responsibility.
- Self-reliance in completing tasks.
- The ability to set clear goals and plans.

- A constant drive to improve and achieve more.
- A belief that effort determines success in any field.
- Perseverance in facing difficulties to reach their goals.
- A desire to attain prestigious positions in society.
- A love for competition and strong self-confidence (Al-Mushaikh, 2009, pp. 103–104).

It is also important to highlight that parents play a key role in fostering higher ambition in children who possess abilities but may not be fully aware of their own potential.

Manifestations of the Level of Ambition:

Ambition is one of the traits that distinguish human personality, and like any personal trait, it has several manifestations. Abdel Fattah (1984) identified seven manifestations of ambition:

- **Life Perspective:** Reflects a person's level of optimism and willingness to engage with life.
- **Tendency Toward Excellence:** Measures an individual's expectations for success in life.
- **Goal Setting and Planning:** Indicates that the person does not leave matters to chance but operates according to a clear and consciously understood plan and objectives.
- **Inclination to Struggle:** Refers to the individual's ability to use their resources, develop their skills, and gain experiences by placing themselves outside their comfort zone, which enhances their problem-solving capacity.
- **Responsibility and Self-Reliance:** Signifies genuine self-worth, enabling the individual to assume social roles and responsibilities.
- **Perseverance:** Builds on previous traits; proper self-assessment helps individuals endure failure and turn it into a strong motivator for success.
- **Satisfaction with Current Situation:** As long as the individual has self-awareness, acknowledges their abilities, and utilizes them effectively, this leads to a realistic assessment of their circumstances and efforts—without attributing outcomes to luck (Al-Shajrawi, 2015, p. 264).

Family Factors and Their Impact on Children's Ambition:

• **Family Stability:** Individuals from economically and socially stable families are more capable of setting and achieving high levels of ambition. Ralph Turner sees ambition as a result of cultural education facilitated by a stable family environment. Factors that affect family stability include divorce, separation, the father's absence, and the mother's employment.

In Krauss's study, it was confirmed that the death, disability, or absence of a family breadwinner makes it difficult for children to maintain their previous levels of ambition especially in families with limited economic resources.

• **Family Size:** Children from large families are less likely to have high levels of ambition compared to those from small families. Majorie Banks found that small families are associated with higher academic and professional achievement, which is attributed to more focused and effective parental encouragement—something harder to maintain in large families.

• **Parents' Educational and Professional Levels:** Parental education is a major determinant of children's ambition, regardless of the family's social status. Ambition tends to rise in accordance with the educational level of both the father and the mother. Richard Heberg and David Westby confirmed a positive relationship between parental education/profession and children's academic aspirations. In their study, 24% of the sample expressed high educational ambition among children whose parents held university degrees. Moreover, discrepancies between spouses' educational levels may also influence children's ambition.

• **Birth Order:** According to Robert Sezer, firstborn children tend to rely more on others, making them more susceptible to parental influence, which can shape their capacity to pursue high ambition.

- **Siblings' Gender:** Having siblings of the opposite gender (male and female) fosters the learning of different perspectives. Boys with sisters tend to be more ambitious than those without sisters, and the same applies to girls with brothers.

- **Family's Socioeconomic Status:** The family's economic and social level significantly influences the patterns and levels of ambition (Al-Zahrani, 2018, p. 418).

The Subjective Factors Influencing Children's Level of Ambition:

Among them are:

Reward and Punishment:

Reward is the consequence that follows performance and responses, leading to a feeling of satisfaction and comfort. It is reflected in the learner's effort to obtain or maintain this stimulus.

Experiences of Success and Failure:

Success typically leads to an increase in the level of ambition, while failure tends to decrease it. Moreover, the likelihood of increased ambition rises with the magnitude of success, while the chances of its decline increase with the magnitude of failure (Al-Zahrani, 2018, p. 478).

Self-Concept:

Self-concept is a motivating force for behavior. It drives ambition to rise and gives the individual a sense of identity and existence. This is the case when self-perception is positive. However, if the self-perception is negative, the level of ambition inevitably decreases. Often, a person's idea of themselves is incomplete or inaccurate due to a human tendency to be blind to their own flaws. We see ourselves not necessarily as we truly are, but rather through a subjective lens. Nevertheless, self-concept has a profound influence on directing behavior and shaping the level of ambition.

Intelligence:

According to Al-Aswad, the higher the level of intelligence, the higher the level of ambition, and vice versa. However, it was also found that an intelligent person may tend to lower their level of ambition as a result of failure, because they often set unrealistic goals for themselves (Hamed & Al-Tarhouni, 2020, p. 76).

Thus, we can say that the expectation of success is associated with a high level of ambition, while the expectation of failure negatively affects ambition.

If the level of ambition exceeds an individual's ability to face a difficult task, they will not be able to achieve the goal they have set based on that ambition. Conversely, **if the level of ambition is lower than the learner's ability**, the task becomes too easy and does not foster a spirit of challenge.

- A learner may set high goals in order to feel successful, even while being aware that they cannot achieve them.

- A learner may also set low ambition levels to protect themselves from failure.

Thus, we conclude that **the family, teachers, and adults play a role in shaping the ambition levels of children**. The teacher, in particular, should help learners set **realistic and achievable goals** that match their abilities.

The teacher should also understand the learner's perceptions and expectations of themselves—that is, **the self-image they construct regarding their intellectual, physical, emotional, social, or moral abilities**. This concept was discussed by **Carl Rogers**, who emphasized that **misunderstanding one's self can hinder progress**, while correcting that understanding leads to healing and **true self-awareness**. Therefore, **children should recognize their potential and set ambitions accordingly**, and **parents must support them in this process**.

Emotional Balance:

This is linked to **self-confidence, optimism, and feelings of joy and happiness**. Emotions strengthen an individual's motivation and have social value. There is a relationship between the level of ambition and emotional stability. An emotionally stable person has **clear goals**, unlike a confused and unstable one.

Experiences of Success and Failure:

These influence a person's goals, ambitions, and expectations. When an individual achieves success and performs well academically, their level of ambition and expectation for future success rises.

Abilities, Interests, and Aptitudes:

Success requires certain **aptitudes and capabilities**, and the learner should be aware of their own **potential, aptitudes, and inclinations** when planning their level of ambition.

Theoretical Explanations of Ambition and its Level:

Scalona's Theory introduced a concept known as the **self-value of the goal**, where the **desire for and achievement of a goal** is determined by the individual's choice.

A well-adjusted person is one who takes into account the **possibility of success or failure** when setting a specific level of ambition. These expectations are important so that the learner does not experience **shock or disappointment**. This theory is based on three principles:

1. Every individual has a tendency to seek a relatively high level of ambition.
2. Individuals tend to raise their level of ambition to a certain extent.
3. There are significant individual differences in the **tendency to seek success versus avoid failure**.

Some people fear failure even before starting the task. These **negative expectations** may actually lead to real failure.

Kurt Lewin's Theory identified several factors that influence ambition, including:

- **Maturity Factor:** The more mature the learner is, the more likely they are to achieve their ambitions. Maturity refers to the full development of abilities and their proper use.

- **Intellectual Ability:** Mental abilities, aptitudes, and interests enable the learner to succeed in the ambition they choose.

- **Future Outlook:** An individual's view of the future is reflected in their choice of profession and field of study.

- **Peer Comparison:** Comparing oneself to peers may lead to feelings of satisfaction and achievement or the opposite depending on the outcome of the comparison.

- **Nature of Peer Relationships:** If the relationship with peers is negatively competitive, it may hinder ambition. On the other hand, positive relationships can support its development.

- **Prevailing Environment:** The social climate in which a person lives may influence their tendency to become virtuous or corrupt. These social conditions are essential to consider, as they help shape an individual's ambition level.

Adler's Theory emphasized that the individual is born weak and feels helpless, striving for survival. However, a healthy environment is essential to acquire traits such as self-reliance, preventing feelings of inferiority that could lead to compensatory aggression. Concepts such as the **creative self, the struggle for superiority, lifestyle, and goals** are fundamental in Adler's theory. Therefore, the **goals that an individual pursues determine their level of ambition**, as all humans seek to excel (Khalid, 2018, p. 33).

Social Environment Factors:

The **social environment plays a major role in shaping ambition levels** because it provides the individual with their values and cultural concepts, forming their reference framework. However, this influence varies from person to person based on their individual capacities and the content of the values they receive. These values can either foster the development of a realistic level of ambition or lead to unrealistic expectations.

For instance, the **family plays a vital role** in developing ambition levels. Individuals from socially stable families are generally more capable of setting high, realistic ambitions and achieving them, compared to those from unstable families.

This was confirmed by **Hurlick's studies (1967)**, which found that the individual's **stability within their family** significantly influences their level of ambition. The more stable the family environment, the higher the ambition level. Moreover, **early parental involvement** in their children's lives contributes to higher ambition. Parents can encourage their children to aim high and help them formulate plans to reach those goals. However, **some parents may go too far**, using pressure, coercion, or undue incentives to push their children toward goals, which may have negative effects (Al-Sadiq, 2016, p. 17).

Family Practices and Their Relation to Academic Success:

In a survey conducted in China, some primary school dropouts were asked what circumstances might have prevented them from leaving school. Nearly **one in three** responded that **if their parents had provided more support**, they would not have dropped out. Additionally, about **47% of the dropouts left school based on a decision made by their parents** (Fiske, 1998, p. 36).

This indicates that **parental attitudes toward their children and the school** significantly affect the student's success. Similarly, a **lack of family care**, absence of **follow-up**, and **inappropriate educational practices** by parents can negatively impact children. In contrast, parents who show **love, emotional support**, and care about their children's academic performance positively influence their children, encouraging them to have **high educational ambitions**.

The **family is the most influential social system** in a child's early development. The child inherits genetic traits from the family and grows up within the social environment it provides. The family's **socioeconomic level** determines the child's behavior patterns, values, and social norms, and its **social standing** influences the child's academic and social success. The family also shapes the child's **personality**, particularly during the first **five years of life**, and provides values, emotional expression methods, and plays a major role in **language acquisition**.

The child's **self-concept** begins to form within the family (from around age two) and later develops further through **peer interactions** and especially through teachers—**primary school teachers** in particular—via **social interaction**. According to **Charles Cooley**, the child's sense of self is like a mirror reflecting how others perceive and judge them, shaping their **social identity**. From there, the family introduces the child to various other **socialization institutions** (Ahmad Al-Sayyid, 2004, pp. 73–75).

Parental Ambition:

The **educational level of parents** affects their children's **career maturity and academic achievement**, and can influence the type of career a child aspires to. Parents might instill in the child from an early age the desire to become an engineer or doctor, which in turn leads the child to gravitate toward subjects related to that profession. This is confirmed by **Super**, who stated that there is a **link between career maturity and school achievement**: the child works hard and enjoys subjects that align with their future ambitions.

Parents who are aware of their children's **capabilities and inclinations** can foster **positive attitudes** in their children toward educational paths that match their abilities and suitable professions. However, parents must also recognize the importance of **balancing their ambitions with their children's abilities**. If their ambitions exceed what their children can realistically achieve, it can negatively affect the children's performance. Therefore, it is essential to **consider the child's own preferences** when choosing a particular academic field.

Dovan emphasized that students whose **ambitions surpassed their parents' expectations** and who had **high academic performance** typically had parents with **good moral character and respectful behavior**. These parents **rarely resorted to physical punishment**, had **good relationships** with their children, and **engaged with them during their free time**.

Dovan's study also highlighted the importance of **emotional harmony between parents and children**, **guidance over punishment**, and the **value of love and understanding**. Discipline based on affection enhances the child's **self-confidence** and **sense of responsibility**, which positively reflects on their academic achievement.

In short:

- **Democratic parenting** → **high academic achievement**
- **Authoritarian parenting** → **low academic achievement**(Uthman et al., 2013, pp. 93–97)

Parents often form a mental image of their child's future, particularly regarding the type of education or specialization they want for them. This planning may stem from **past failures experienced by one or both parents**, who may try to **compensate for their own disappointments** by fulfilling their unmet needs through their children.

However, **parental pressure on children to achieve ambitions that reflect the parents' own aspirations** can lead to the **child's distress and academic decline** instead of improved performance. The child may attempt to meet these expectations, but **may lack the abilities or readiness** to do so. This can also cause the child to **lose a sense of self-worth, identity, and individuality** under the pressure.

In contrast, **positive parental attitudes toward learning** foster in the learner a **desire for success**. This aligns with **McClelland's concept of the "Need for Achievement"**, which enhances enthusiasm and motivation. This **need for achievement is influenced by the parents' expectations** and their guidance that encourages **self-reliance and independence** in performing tasks suited to the child's abilities (Al-Sayyid, 2004, p. 84).

As a result, the child learns to define a **Level of Aspiration** aligned with their abilities and strives to achieve it using effective goal-oriented strategies. This helps avoid frustration and strengthens motivation. Thus, **the family's support and involvement become a key factor in the student's academic performance** and a **primary driver of success**.

Conclusion:

The family plays a **major role in their children's academic success or failure**, through encouragement, emotional support, and a stable environment. There is a **strong correlation between parental ambition, family involvement, and children's academic ambition**—which may sometimes have a **negative impact**. If parents pressure their children to reach levels beyond their true capabilities, this may lead to **failure instead of success**. Conversely, realistic and supportive ambition can foster positive outcomes.

Therefore, the **relationship between parental ambition and children's ambition** is complex and influenced by **multiple factors** including the **parents' personality, family dynamics, and personal traits of the children**.

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