

Centre for Economic Performance
London School of Economics

ESRC funded Seminar Series:
How to motivate (demotivated) 16-year olds?

16 May 2003

Teenage aspirations for education and work and long-term
outcomes. Evidence from two British Cohort Studies

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Over the last decade there have been rising demands from employers for qualifications and skills on the part of new recruits, and young people without them have increasing difficulty in getting work. One important determinant of individual attainments are achievement related beliefs, values, and goals (Wigfield & Eccles, 2001), and it has been argued that aspirations can act like a compass to help chart a life course and provide direction for spending time and energy. Teenage aspirations have shown to influence educational attainment, career choices, and future earnings (Elder, 1968, 1999; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; Schoon, 2001; Schoon & Parsons, 2002), and have variously been described as ‘planful competence’ (Clausen, 1993); ‘personal projects’ (Little 1983), ‘life plans’ (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999), or ‘personal goals’ (Nurmi et al., 2002). The aim of this paper is to investigate the factors and processes underlying the formation and realisation of teenage aspirations for education and work.

Two British Cohort Studies

The study draws on data collected for the National Child Development Study (NCDS) and the British Cohort Study (BSC70), two of Britain's richest research resources for the study of human development. NCDS takes as its subjects over 17,0000 persons living in Great Britain who were born between 3 and 9 March 1958. BCS70 began in 1970 when data were collected on over 17,000 babies born in the UK in the week 5th to 11th April 1970. In both studies a wide range of information was collected from parents, teachers, school medical officers, and, at later stages, from the young people themselves.

Measures of educational attainment, employment status, family formation, social

participation, physical and mental well-being are available from birth to young adulthood, providing a unique coverage of the life course.

Both data sets, capturing the development of over 30,000 individuals, are of immense value for investigating long-term influences of early experiences, and for tracing antecedent factors and processes that influence present circumstances and characteristics of the cohort members. Unlike cross-sectional studies, which compare developmental changes in different age groups each observed once at the same point in time, longitudinal studies follow individuals as they develop over time. By comparing two birth cohorts born 12 years apart it is furthermore possible to account for age, cohort as well as period effects shaping development across the life course.

The socio-historical context

Changes in social, economic, education and health policies between 1960 and 1980 resulted in the two cohorts growing up in very different environments. Between 1979 and 1986, and again between 1989 and 1993, the sharpest rise in unemployment since the 2nd World War took place. In particular the youth unemployment rates soared to unprecedented levels (Hart, 1988). Many have argued that children born in the 1970s have experienced a major shift in life expectations across the generations. This generation "X" has grown up at a time when the prospects of achieving employment directly after leaving school, and maintaining a continuing career, are increasingly in question, and the instability and insecurity characterising the world of work is echoed in the personal and social domains, where emotional commitment is becoming more diverse and more transitory (Bynner, Ferri and Shepherd, 1997). In the following I will

explore how these changes have influenced the development of individual motivations and attainments over time.

A developmental-contextual model of transition into adulthood

The basic proposition underlying this paper is that human development takes place in a social context. The notion of development-in-context has been introduced by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) in his ecological theory of human development. This theory has influenced researchers across disciplines, offering an integrative conceptual framework for the investigation of human development in a changing socio-historical context (Elder, 1985, 1998; Lerner, 1984, 1996; Sameroff, 1983). According to this ecological perspective human development has to be understood as the dynamic interaction between a changing individual in a changing context. Individuals are not passively exposed to experiential factors, but can become producers of their own development in that they affect the context that affects them. The developmental-conceptual framework allows for the study of individual and contextual variables as well as their dynamic interaction in a wider socio-historical context.

The developmental-conceptual framework conceptualises human development as taking place in a multiplicity of contexts including the home, the school or place of work and the neighbourhood. The model depicted in slide 5 differentiates between conditions at birth, individual characteristics, contextual or structural factors, and adult attainments (for more details see Schoon, 2000). Special emphasis is placed on the role of education and training in negotiating the transition from childhood to adulthood, making it central to the research. Within a developmental-contextual framework it is possible to distinguish distal factors (such as the socio-political context, cultural and

social value systems) that influence the developing individual indirectly, and proximal factors (such as the immediate day-to-day experiences in the family or school environment which are directly experienced by the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It thus allows us to systematically describe and analyse the socio-historical context in which development takes place, the interconnections and the reciprocal processes through which the context can affect the course of individual development, both directly and indirectly.

Developmental Focus

The developmental focus of this approach takes into account that young people's motivation changes across the school years (Wigfield, 1994). For example, children's understanding of crucial motivational constructs, such as their concept of ability, change as they mature (Nicholls, 1978, 1990). Many children begin school with a global sense of their competences and abilities and a general interest in learning (Harter, 1998).

Much has been written about how young children are optimistic about their abilities and thus are positively motivated for school learning (Eccles et al., 1998; Stipek & Mac Iver, 1989). Over the school years many children's aspirations, and academic motivation decreases due to changes both in themselves and in the environments they experience. For example, children's beliefs, values and goals relate more closely to their actual performance and attainments, as they grow older (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995), and levels of knowledge, planning, and steps taken for the realisation of future goals increase with age (Nurmi, 1989).

One of the major risk factors undermining positive motivational beliefs and goals is socio-economic adversity. It is well documented that social background is

associated with aspirations for education, occupational aspirations, and adult occupational attainment, and that the pattern of class inequality is much the same across most industrialised countries (Sewell & Shah, 1968; Shavit & Müller, 1998).

Fundamental to the idea of risk is the predictability of life chances from earlier circumstances. In a study investigating the influence of context, timing, and duration of risk experiences for the transition from childhood to adulthood, we demonstrated that being born into a relatively disadvantaged family increases the probability of accumulating risks associated with that disadvantage (Schoon et al., 2002; Schoon, Sacker & Bartley, in press). On the other hand, there is also see great stability in individual adaptation across different domains (i.e. academic, emotional or behavioural adjustment). For example, academic attainment at one time point is a strong predictor of academic attainment at a later time point. Continuities occur because current adjustment encompasses previous adjustment as well as earlier structural and functional change. The experience of early disadvantage weakens individual resources, and this detrimental effect is then carried forward into the future via decreased individual adjustment levels. Subsequent experiences of adversity add to the deterioration of the already reduced adjustment. If individual adjustment is already weakened at a very early age, it becomes more and more difficult for the young person to fully develop their potential. This negative chain effect undermines the positive adjustment of the young person, and increases the likelihood of negative outcomes in adulthood.

Generally the results imply that the experience of socio-economic disadvantage during childhood affects the likelihood of both material and psychosocial risks to well-being and that the differential aggregation of these risks influences both adult social status and adult health (see slide 9 and 10). The experience of cumulative adversity has

effects beyond those associated with current or early adversity. The early years are vital in shaping future developments, yet every stage of the life course is important. For example, in both cohorts there is an increased risk effect during the transition from late childhood to adolescence, at age 16, when important decisions about future careers are made. More generally our research has shown that persistent socio-economic disadvantage has stronger effects than intermittent adversity on individual outcomes, and that chronically stressful environments hinder the development of the personal resources needed for successful adaptation (Schoon et al., 2002).

The magnitude of the total effect of socio-economic risk at birth on adult social status is slightly stronger in the later born BCS70 cohort than in NCDS, suggesting increasing polarisation. This is a surprising finding, because the standard of living has generally improved for the later born cohort, with more families owning their own home, less over-crowding, and less sharing of household amenities. On the other hand, the later born cohort encountered more uncertainties and insecurity with increasing rates of unemployment, widening income inequality, and changes in family structure (increasing rates of divorce and a growing number of one-parent families) not witnessed a decade before. This could mean that those children in BCS70 who are suffering material deprivation are a more extreme group relative to their peers than similarly affected children in the NCDS, explaining the stronger direct association between socio-economic risk and psychosocial adjustment in the BCS70 cohort (Schoon et al., 2002).

Focus on positive outcomes

We have seen that the foundations of psychosocial adjustment are laid down early in life through exposure to ‘risk factors’ identified with adverse socio-economic

circumstances. Yet, the outcomes of these early risks are by no means entirely predictable. A number of studies across many nations have demonstrated the capacity of human beings to overcome extreme adversity, and to show positive adaptation in the face of that adversity, a phenomenon also described as resilience (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000; Rutter, 1990; Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992). Resilience is not a personality characteristic, it rather denotes a dynamic process of positive adaptation despite the experience of significant adversity or trauma. It is a two-dimensional construct defined by the constellations of exposure to adversity and the manifestation of positive adjustment in the face of that adversity. Positive adaptation is usually identified in terms of manifested competence, or success at meeting stage appropriate developmental tasks (Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Adversity, also referred to as risk, can encompass genetic, biological, psychological, or socio-economic factors that are associated with increased risk of maladjustment. A major risk factor, however, influencing individual adjustment patterns across a variety of domains, is socio-economic adversity.

A central objective of resilience research is to identify vulnerability and protective factors that can modify the negative effects of adverse life circumstances. Previous research has revealed three broad sets of variables operating as protective factors that may impede or halt the impact of adverse experiences and enable the individual to fully develop his or her resources. These factors include a. attributes of the young people themselves, b. characteristics of their families, and c. aspects of the wider social context (Luthar, 1999; Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990; Rutter, 1990; Schoon & Parsons, 2002b; Schoon, Parsons & Sacker, in press; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992). The defining feature of a protective effect is that there is a modification of the individual

response to a risk situation, that there is a modification of the effects of adversity, which enable individuals to fully develop their capabilities. In more recent debates it has been argued that research on protective factors and processes should be carried out separately for major developmental outcomes, taking into account the notion of multifinality in developmental processes (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000).

In a study investigating the influence of socio-economic adversity on educational attainment at age 16 and subsequent levels of adult adaptation Schoon, Parsons & Sacker (in press) could show that protective factors identified in previous studies appear to generally promote educational attainment (see slide 15), but less so in when risk levels are high. Parental aspirations for the child to continue further education, however, appears to be a ‘protective-enhancing’ (Luthar et al., 2000) factor that stimulates young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve academically, to realise their academic potential, despite the experience of adversity (slide 16). The findings furthermore substantiate the argument that future research must identify specific rather than general factors that provide protection against specific risks in specific life contexts. Resilience research should not stop at identifying protective factors, it is also necessary to comprehend the underlying mechanisms and processes that enable young people to develop and maintain their capabilities despite the experience of adversity in different life contexts.

Protective processes

Let’s now focus on the factors and processes involved in shaping the formation of adolescent aspirations. Adolescence is a crucial phase or period in the life course when a young person becomes ready to assume adult responsibilities, and marks the transition

from dependent childhood to independent adulthood. Adolescent aspirations are associated with social background, and with previous academic attainment. Young people from working class families are not as likely as their more privileged peers to want continued education after the minimum school leaving age, or to aspire to a professional career (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Vondracek, Lerner & Schulenberg, 1986). Individuals from more privileged homes have more educational opportunities, greater access to financial resources when they are needed (i.e. to pay for books, computers, or higher education), role models, occupational knowledge, and informal/kinship networks (Marshall, Swift & Roberts, 1997; Schoon & Parsons, 2002a; Schulenberg, Vondracek, & Crouter, 1984). It has been argued that aspirations for further education among the less privileged are rather more ambitious than would be the same desires expressed by more privileged individuals, and also might involve more risks (Marshall, Swift & Roberts, 1997; Willis, 1979). Adolescent's educational and career plans reflect their own evaluation of whether they are suited for school or work, as well as their parent's aspirations for them (Hosser & Stage, 1992; Modell, 1994; Shanahan & Walberg, 1985). It has been argued that young people in developing their educational and occupational aspirations for the future orient themselves to social class reference groups, and are guided by their parent's aspirations for them (Schoon & Parsons, 2002a; Vondracek et al., 1986; Willis, 1979). Parents have, and youngsters adopt, different views about what is an acceptable job depending on their social class (Gottfredson, 1981). Parental encouragement for young people to continue with education increases by both social class and ability level (Sewell and Shah, 1968; Schoon, 2002). It has further been argued that because of the different opportunities and constraints facing children from privileged and less privileged family backgrounds the

young people themselves and their parents use different calculations of the possible costs and benefits of particular educational strategies (Ball, 1986; Marshal, Swift & Roberts, 1997).

In a study investigating the underlying processes involved in the formation and realisation of teenage aspirations among men from different social backgrounds in the two British Birth cohorts, we found that educational and occupational aspirations have generally increased among the later born cohort – among the young people themselves as well as among their parents (Schoon, 2002; Schoon & Parsons, 2002)². While in NCDS only 10 per cent of young men from the most disadvantaged backgrounds wanted further education beyond minimum school leaving age, in BCS70 this has increased to 39 per cent of young men wanting further education (slide 20). This compares to 80% of young men from professional families in NCDS and 88% in BCS70 with high educational aspirations.

For men born in 1958 the predominant pattern was to leave school at the minimum age and to move directly into a job. Young men born in 1970, in contrast, are more likely to aspire for jobs that require degree level qualifications and to anticipate further education than adolescents born a decade earlier. Most young people born in 1958 who left school in 1974 could expect to obtain employment regardless of their educational attainment, whereas for young people born in 1970 poor educational attainment meant considerably more difficulties in gaining entry to employment (Bynner et al., 1997). Most young men who left school early during the 1970's did so to find a job that paid full wages. To forego this generally available opportunity to gain

² In slide 19 we can see the actual changes in occupational preferences: more young men and women strive for a professional career. There is also an increase in young people aiming for a career in clerical occupations or the service industry (especially among men). There is also a small increase in men and women aspiring to a career in the army. Manual jobs or farming saw a general decline in aspirants.

relatively secure employment with a living wage, and to continue further education instead was a relatively rare step to take, especially for young men from socially disadvantaged family backgrounds.

In both cohorts we also see a steep social gradient in parental hopes and expectations for their sons. Parental interest in education is often taken as a marker of cultural influences operating at the family level (Roberts, 1980; Vondraceck et al., 1986). Parents of the 1970 cohort members have higher hopes and expectations for their sons than parents of boys born in 1958. There are clearly social class differences in parental hopes and expectations for their sons, and parents in less prestigious occupations are less likely to expect further education for their sons than more privileged parents (Ginzberg et al., 1951; Gottfredson, 1981; Vondraceck et al., 1986; Schoon & Parsons, 2002). The social class differences are, however, reduced in the later born BCS70 cohort, and proportionately more socially disadvantaged parents want their sons to continue with further education than in the earlier born NCDS cohort (slide 21): in BCS70 58 per cent of parents in unskilled occupations hoped their sons would continue with further education, in comparison 39 per cent of unskilled parents in NCDS. This compares to 93% of professional parents in NCDS and 97% in BCS70 with high aspirations for their sons. Generally the findings indicate that social class influences parental aspirations, but that we should not underestimate working class parents' ambitions to see their children succeed (Roberts, 1980).

The data also suggests, that in the later born cohort the importance of parental aspirations in influencing their son's aspirations has increased for young men from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (slide 23 and 24), suggesting that young men from less privileged backgrounds rely more on their parents for advice and guidance than

young men from privileged backgrounds who might have other sources of support. It appears that in the later born cohort young men from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as their parents, might use different calculations of the possible costs and benefits of particular strategies (Ball, 1986; Marshall, Swift & Roberts, 1997). Being confronted with the choice to leave school or to stay on, less privileged young men and their parents seem to give more importance to concurrent academic attainment rather than previous one (slide 24). The findings seem to confirm that disadvantaged families tend to make choices by opting for security (Harker, 1990). Decisions about the future seem to be more strongly influenced by the need to prevent educational failure, which might more easily be mitigated by the more privileged young men and their parents. Planning for the future may therefore be based on careful negotiations between parents and their children, weighing the pros and cons of different strategies, and taking into consideration the available family resources to support a continued education. Young men in the later born cohort are generally under more pressure to continue with further education in order to get a job at all. If parents support the academic endeavours of their children they might just provide the crucial catalyst for their children to strive academically. These results point to the importance of parent-child interactions in socially disadvantaged families, and emphasis the importance of investigating potential protective factors in the contexts in which they operate.

Aspirations for the future are an important source of achievement and are a vital predictor of adult occupational attainment for both socially advantaged and disadvantaged men (Elder, 1968; 1999; Ginzberg et al., 1951; Schoon & Parsons, 2002a; Schoon, 2002). In comparison to their less ambitious peers young men with the desire to continue full-time education after minimum school leaving age and to pursue a

professional career are more likely to enter a professional or managerial job in mid adulthood. Young men from less privileged backgrounds, however, do not achieve to the same levels as their more privileged peers. Controlling for academic ability and aspirations we find that young men from less privileged backgrounds with high competences (above average academic ability and high aspirations) do better than less privileged men without these qualities. Yet, even this highly competent men are still at least in part handicapped by the experience of social disadvantage, and do not achieve to the same extent as their more privileged peers (slide 27).

The findings furthermore indicate that the changed socio-historical context has influenced the processes by which young men reach their occupational destinations in mid adulthood. For the later born cohort the stakes were raised, as more young people continued with further education and obtained degree level qualifications.

While the direct influence of teenage aspirations on occupational attainment is of comparable size for socially advantaged and disadvantaged men, academic attainment plays a more important role in predicting adult occupational attainment for men from socially disadvantaged background than for more privileged men, especially in the later born BCS70 cohort (slides 23 and 24). While the importance of academic attainment for occupational success has generally increased for the later born cohort, young men from disadvantaged backgrounds have to bring that little extra to do well in their careers, and still do not succeed to the same extent as young people from more privileged backgrounds. These findings illustrate that particular personal attributes can serve as protective factors, but they are substantially shaped by life circumstances.

Positive adaptation, or resilience, does not reside within the person, but in the active interactions between the young person and aspects of the environment s/he experiences.

Implications for Interventions

The findings advocate a shift of focus away from maladjustment to areas of strength (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Schoon & Bynner, 2003). The focus on risk and maladjustment has a negative stigmatising effect, because it assumes behaviours and outcomes to be strongly conditioned by antecedent experiences of risk. Focusing on negative outcomes can have the effect to stigmatise individuals rather than to value them for their capabilities and positive powers such as energy, adaptability and idealism. From a policy perspective this would imply a shift of emphasis from crisis intervention to primary prevention before serious maladjustment has manifested itself. It would also involve a shift from preventing youth problems to the promotion of youth development and youth engagement in their communities and societies (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem & Ferber, 2001; Schoon & Bynner, 2003).

We should not underestimate the hopes and aspirations of socio-economically disadvantaged young people or those of their parents for their children's welfare and future development. From a resilience perspective efforts should try to harness notable strengths of 'vulnerable populations' to derive a significant momentum for positive change (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). This also implies an increased research effort to identify and to define positive strengths that are important at different developmental stages and in different contexts.

Yet, we should not stop at the identification of protective factors, there should also be a systematic investigation of the processes and mechanisms underlying positive adaptation in different and changing contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 1990; Schoon & Bynner, 2003). Interventions should not

attempt to improve isolated skills or competences with little consideration of the wider context, they rather should aim to understand the functional utility of the competencies targeted. A high degree of differentiation and specialisation in services can be counterproductive for at-risk children who are exposed to co-occurring, multiple or accumulating risks. Intervention or prevention programs should be integrated into the cultural context, the educational programme, and personal behavioural repertoire of the developing individual (Pianta & Walsh, 1998). They should be based on a holistic approach, implying community based interventions and integrated service delivery involving families and communities in addition to the young people themselves (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Schoon & Bynner, 2003).

Furthermore, interventions should have a clear developmental focus. Early interventions are of obvious preventive value. The earlier intervention occurs through pre-school provision, and then through home school links, the more opportunity there is to build a positive set of home-school relationships around developmental processes and remove obstacles to the acquisition of capabilities (Bynner, 2001; Schoon & Bynner, 2003). On the other hand, it is never too late to intervene. Development is ongoing. Children at different developmental stages have different needs, and there is no way to adequately 'inoculate' children so that they will be immune to later challenges and developmental tasks (Pittman et al., 2002). Children and young people have different 'sensitive periods', during which they are particularly responsive to different types of interventions, especially when confronting major transitions like leaving school (slide 9 and 10). Without appropriate interventions young people exposed to multiple risk factors are highly vulnerable to long-term problems. Targeting therefore needs to occur

at every age, at every stage and in every place with the targets determined by the research evidence.

A last but not least concern regards the macrocontext in which development takes place. Even the best interventions and policies will have little impact if there are no viable economic opportunities. Perhaps the greatest challenges to the future of adolescence are lack of opportunity and economic deprivation. In the 1960's the majority of young people left school after completing their compulsory education, and went straight into full-time jobs. With the collapse of the youth labour market and in response to increasing levels of youth unemployment, youth training schemes (YTS) were introduced in the UK from the mid 1970's onwards, aiming encourage higher rates of educational participation among the less privileged (Ashton, Maguire & Spilsbury, 1990; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). In comparison to the NCDS cohort, where training led to full-time employment, the experience of training in the later born cohort is associated with the repeated experience of unemployment (slide 34, Schoon et al., 2001). These findings indicate that the YTS has not fulfilled the high hopes that were placed into it, that it has rather increased than decreased existing inequalities in youth transitions. The structural changes in the economy seemed to be too pervasive for YTS to succeed.

Ultimately, the continued deterioration of the labour market will have disastrous consequences for the young people who are left out. When they begin to believe that their training or schooling is not leading to a career, when they attribute their failure to find work, or to enter a career, not to a lack of effort on their side but to circumstances beyond their control, then they will become alienated from society and lose their motivation to succeed (Hamilton, 1987). Broadening access to further education is important – but securing vocational education and training of high and

consistent quality continues to be a pressing need (Unwin, 2002; Evans, 2003). Young people should be able to see the connection between education and their future in the world of work. Popular beliefs among young people in equal opportunities and being awarded for demonstrating abilities and competences ‘could evaporate very quickly if in the new generation of adults it becomes apparent that the qualifications chase eventually becomes a zero-sum game for all but the most advantaged, those who can stay in the race longest’ (Evans, 2003, p.3). To think of occupational development, especially that of disadvantaged young people, in terms of individual choice can be misleading. The process of finding employment is constrained by labour market conditions, requiring an accommodation to economic reality. Life chances and opportunities of young people are associated with the overall socio-historical context that they experience. We have seen that aspirations among adolescents have generally increased, but even highly motivated and highly able young people from disadvantaged family backgrounds are still in part held back in realising their potential, and do not achieve to the same level as their more privileged peers. Most programs aiming to reduce the increasing marginalisation and alienation of disadvantaged young people tried to enhance skills, rather than target the demoralising socio-economic constraints on their future prospects. Opportunities, however, should be open to every young person and not be monopolised by the privileged few.

Acknowledgements

This work was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (Grant No. R000238051).

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Dear

Thank you very much for sending me your summary of the seminar. Your review of my paper is ok – there are only two sentences I want to change:

The holistic approach adopted aims to investigate the active interaction between a developing individual and a changing socio-economic context to explain differences in educational outcomes and adult attainment.

Protective factors associated with resilience are:

- Attributes of the children themselves
- Characteristics of their families
- Aspects of the wider social context

I would also like to comment on the summary of discussion and points raised:

2nd paragraph: I think I said that later cohorts continue to have high aspirations, but that there will be an increasing polarisation, an increasing number of young people who are left out, who are disillusioned about their prospects, and who become alienated from society, unless appropriate measures are taken, offering opportunities for marginalized young people to develop meaningful and valued roles for adulthood.

And on the final conclusion:

I never have said that ‘the socially disadvantaged start out with aspirations which have to be progressively lowered as academic achievement does not match aspirations, that they are much more likely to have aspirations that are progressively shown to be unrealistic than the advantaged.’ – the formation of aspirations among the socially disadvantaged rather involves more risks, and appears to be based on careful negotiations with parents, weighing the pros and cons of different strategies, and taking into consideration the available family resources to support a continued education. Educational failure can be more easily mitigated by the more privileged young people and their parents, and disadvantaged families tend to make choices by opting for security.

Please find attached a manuscript of the paper I presented, which might give you some more input.