



RESEARCH

The Significance of Significant Others: The Perspective of High-Achieving Students of Immigrant Background

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The aim of this paper is to examine the role significant others play in immigrant students achieving a successful school experience from their perspective. A critical mass of studies show that descendants of immigrants and poor white working-class students tend not to proceed to higher education because they either drop out of the education system at the end of their compulsory schooling do not attain the necessary grades to enrol in higher education. To capture the role significant others played in the students' educational experience, we adopted an analytical framework and concepts derived from cumulative empirical studies inspired by James S. Coleman and Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualisations of social capital. The study showed that despite the heterogeneity of the immigrant students in terms of class and ethnicity, they identified a nurturing adult who had earned their trust and respect where the most important actors in their successful educational experience. In addition, these students did not see their parents primarily as a source of academic support but as a source of emotional support, which was also seen by the students as critical in their school experience.

Keywords: Education; immigrants; transitions; secondary school; social capital

Syftet med denna studie är att undersöka vilken roll andra så kallade signifikanta andra har för studenter med invandrarbakgrund för att klara av skolan med bra betyg. Det finns en betydande mängd litteratur som lyfter fram föräldrars, syskons och andra vuxnas betydelse för dessa ungdomar skolframgångar, men hittills har det saknats forskning som belyser studentens eget perspektiv på dessa aktörers betydelse, och det gäller i synnerhet i studiet av framgångsrika invandrarstudenter. Det analytiska ramverket för denna studie kommer från empiriska studier som är inspirerade av Colemans och Bourdieus conceptualiseringar av socialt kapital (här definierat som kunskapsmässigt stöd, materiellt stöd och så kallat överbryggande stöd). Analytiskt sett fokuserar vi på den betydelse som signifikanta andra har för de intervjuade studenternas framgångsrika skolgång. Den empiri som analyserades i denna artikel samlades in i en longitudinell intervjustudie av unga studenters skolframgångar. Studien visar att andra aktörer spelar en nyckelroll för deras skolframgångar. Det kunskapsmässiga, materiella och överbryggande stödet ansågs vara viktigt, men framför allt lyfte studenterna fram betydelsen av lärare som stödde dem emotionellt och akademiskt, och av föräldrar som var närvarande och på olika sätt hjälpte dem att komma vidare med sina studier.

Nyckelord: Utbildning; migranter; övergångar; gymnasieutbildning; socialt kapital

Introduction

This study aims to examine the role significant others played to enable students of migrant background to embark on a successful educational career. In this paper, significant others are defined as ‘those persons who exercise major influence over the attitudes of individuals’ (Woelfel & Haller, 1971, p. 75). The term can denote parents, peers, siblings, relatives, and other adults the students themselves identify as significant in their successful educational career. Our main objective is to discern the role significant others (e.g. family, friends) play irrespective of their ethnicity or the parents’ educational capital (cultural capital). To our knowledge, few studies examine high achieving students of immigrant background vis-à-vis the role significant others play in their educational experience. A blind spot in Swedish and international research is the growing percentage of high achievers from migrant households from both low but also from families with high educational capital. These high achieving students of immigrant background challenge the idea that poverty, racism, discrimination, and low educational performance are linked. We hope that this study will contribute to the discussion of the significance of the significant others and their impact on educational careers of students with migrant background. In addition, it will nuance the result of the studies on the impact of significant other in the students’ educational achievement. Most studies that examine the role of the significant others focus on the perspective of significant others instead on the students own perspective. Theoretically we hope to contribute to the discussion of social capital in relation to educational achievement in general and particularly for students with migrant background.

Literature review

Research on the educational performance of migrants or children from low socio-economic background irrespective of ethnicity is vast and it is not possible to cover in its entirety. The literature review in this paper is divided into three parts or themes – social capital and educational success, migration and educational success, and parental support and educational success.

Social capital and educational success

Classical educational sociological studies have shown that children from high socioeconomic backgrounds compared to those from low socioeconomic backgrounds are privileged in the educational system. The system generally functions to reproduce the privileged social position of the dominant bourgeois class (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Coleman 1988). Bourdieu (1984) identified two elements in relation to inequality in the field of education. These are social, cultural capital, and *habitus*. Studies founded in the concept of social or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Coleman, 1988) show that children from household or families with high social or cultural capital are the winners in the school system irrespective of country or ethnicity in highly stratified societies. Unlike low-performing children, this group brings with it the resources, or capital, required to decode school practice that enables them to achieve good grades (e.g. Abrahams, 2017; Carlhed Ydhag, 2017; Månsson, Carlhed Ydhag & Månsson, 2021; Osman, Carlhed Ydhag & Månsson, 2020; Williams & Bryan, 2013; Öhrn & Holm, 2014).

Educational system generally privileges students who come from homes that have high social and cultural capital (e.g. Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Carlhed Ydhag, Månsson & Osman, 2021; Dika & Singh, 2002; Lin, 2001; Månsson et al., 2021; Osman, 2012; Osman et al., 2020; Osman & Månsson, 2015; Prado, 2009; Tornatzky, Cutler & Lee, 2002). In general, middle-class parents are aware of the importance of supporting their children in school. They also have the skills to micromanage their homework and choose extracurricular activities to expand their children’s cultural repertoires (Carlhed Ydhag et al., 2021). In sum, many studies have shown that the major determinant of students’ educational performance is parents’ social and cultural capital, irrespective of ethnic or racial background.

Migration and educational success

There is some evidence that children with immigrant background, regardless of whether they were born abroad or have one foreign-born parent, have higher educational ambition and attainment levels than native-born children (Jonsson & Rudolphi, 2011). For instance, in Canada visible minorities generally have been shown to aspire to enrol in higher education (Krahn & Taylor, 2005; Boyd, 2000). In Sweden, it has been shown that Iranian and Bosnian perform better in the educational system than Somali children (Behtoui & Olsson, 2014). But, if one controls the parents’ educational background, age of arrival to Sweden or whether the child was born in Sweden or not, Somali children performed at the same level as other children with similar background, irrespective of their ethnicity (Behtoui & Olsson, 2014).

Similarly, international studies show that there are differences within and between groups. Abada and Tenkorang (2009) found that Asian and African-born youth in Canada were more likely to be enrolled in advanced placement programmes, while a higher proportion of Caribbean-born Black students were enrolled in vocational and occupational programmes. It has also been shown that educational aspiration levels (planned and realised transitions to higher education), when controlling for academic achievement and socioeconomic disadvantage, are higher among students with immigrant background in England and Sweden (Jonsson & Rudolphi, 2011).

Some studies (Carlhed Ydhag, 2017; Wyner, Bridgeland & Dilulio, 2007) show that not all high achievers from marginalised communities/groups graduate from high school, attend renowned universities, and enrol in prestigious programmes in higher education. Moreover, they also show that minority and students of migrant background are more likely to drop out in the first year of their university education than high achievers from middle and upper-middle class backgrounds. In a similar vein, Chau and colleagues (2010) note that in the United States high achievers from low-income households in urban areas are at greater risk of dropping out of the educational system because they have different social and material conditions compared to their rural peers.

The major challenges that immigrant students encounter in school arise from cultural differences, a lack of cognitive stimulation at home, a lack of reading culture, and thus poor language development (Bialystok, 2001; Carlhed Ydhag, 2017). Hence, students of immigrant background are not a homogeneous group. Some have the resources to enable them to succeed in their educational endeavour, while others do not (Nygård & Behtoui, 2020; Osman, 2012; Xu & Hampden-Thompson, 2012; van de Werfhorst & Hofstede, 2007). In addition, not all children of immigrant background and from households with poor cultural, social or economic capital drop out, some are embarking on a successful educational career (Osman et al., 2020).

Parental support and educational success

Parental educational capital and parental support are identified as critical factors in educational performance of children, stronger than gender and ethnicity (e.g. Abrahams, 2017; Carlhed Ydhag, 2017). John (2005) examined whether social capital at the individual and school level improves students' grades in England, concluding that 'parental networks of some young people, particularly those from low socioeconomic status families, have negative rather than positive consequences' (p. 635). Similarly, studies from the United States show that these students' poor performance tends to manifest itself early on and is exacerbated by the lack of support and resources in their families, the schools they attend and the communities they are embedded in (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Gutman, Sameroff & Eccles, 2002). It is evident that strong parental support and engagement are linked to higher levels of achievement: 'Research consistently shows that parental involvement is a significant predictor of academic performance; students with more active parents do better in school' (Redford, Johnson & Honnold, 2009, p. 309). However, some research on parental involvement generally suggests that parental engagement is not about academic and pedagogical support but rather the emotional support and encouragement afforded to children (Crul & Schneider, 2009; Kinsley, 2014; Osman et al., 2020).

Not only parents or guardians are significant for young students' educational performance; family members such as siblings, cousins and grandparents might also be significant in this matter (Osman et al., 2020). Studies also show that teachers with whom students have a good relationship or who engage them in their schoolwork are also identified as significant others (Lund & Trondman, 2017; Osman et al., 2020; Williams, Greenleaf & Barnes, 2019). Furthermore, we also find studies (e.g. Månsson et al., 2021; Sammon, Toth & Sylva, 2018) that highlight that working with peers who share the same ambitions as themselves is significant for school results. What turns out to be a critical factor in relation to peers is that group members develops a form of social support that leads to an increase in both the willingness to cooperate and the feeling of participation (Månsson et al., 2021).

In this review, we have tried to capture the general picture of research on educational achievement of students with migrant background in educational sociology. In research on educational achievement or performance, the study of the significance of the significant other generally are done from the perspective of the significant others themselves. This holds true particularly for the study of immigrant students that are on their way to experience a successful educational career (Crul & Schneider, 2009). There is a paucity of research on the role of the significant others from the students' perspective, particularly so in the study of successful migrant students. We claim that it is not the significant others but the students themselves who best can give valuable insight into the role that the significant others play in shaping their educational

experience. We also hope that this paper will contribute to the discussion on the impact of social capital in relation to the educational achievement.

Analytical framework of the study

To capture the role that significant others play in the students' educational experience, we adopted an analytical framework and concepts derived from several empirical studies inspired by Coleman's (1988) and Bourdieu's (1984) conceptualisations of social capital.

Two conceptualisations on social capital

We are aware that Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1984) conceptualise social capital in different ways but there are also similarities. For instance, both Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1984) see social capital as a collective resource and a product that resides in the social structure in which individuals are embedded. However, Coleman (1988) perceives social capital as a public good and as an investment by agents to benefit the family and community, and as such he has an instrumental view of the concept. Bourdieu (1984) asserts that capital exists as both a cause and an effect, i.e., it acts in two ways concomitantly, producing and converting the different forms of capital that individuals use to entrench their positions. He also views it as a product of investment strategies of individuals and collectives aimed to maintain or reproduce social relationships. He uses the terms *social capital* to refer to the ability of individuals to access resources in their social network. The social capital individuals possess is contingent on the size of their network, the richness of the resources available, and whether they can be mobilised individually, collectively, consciously, or unconsciously (Bourdieu, 1984). Coleman (1988) perceives social capital as a resource that is intrinsic in the structure of social relationships. It is characterised by trust, social control, and reciprocity in terms of commitment and expectation.

The notion of trust and normative control (community control) in Coleman's (1988) understanding of the concept of social capital is supported by many empirical studies (Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Dika & Singh, 2002; Lin, 2001; Osman, 2012; Osman et al., 2020; Osman & Månsson, 2015; Prado, 2009; Stanton-Salazar, 2004; Tornatzky et al., 2002). The focus of these studies is set on shared expectations, trust, and normative control. The conceptualisation of social capital in these studies ignores the unequal distribution of social and economic resources and how this affects the competition for limited resources in different social fields (Bourdieu, 1984). At the core of Bourdieu's analysis of social capital, we find attention to how specific groups/classes and individuals can benefit from trust to facilitate their social mobility, while other groups and individuals are unable to do so.

Different notions of support

In this paper, we use the analytical concepts of ideational, material and bridging support to analyse the empirical data. These concepts are drawn from studies that are inspired by Coleman's and Bourdieu's concepts of social capital (e.g. Lin, 2001; Osman, 2012; Osman et al., 2020; Osman & Månsson, 2015; Prado, 2009; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). *Ideational support* refers to the ability of parents and significant others to inculcate pro-academic norms in the students by providing them with advice and information about educational opportunities, and helping them with their schoolwork, choice of programme, school, career and so on (Coleman, 1988; Osman, 2012; Osman et al. 2020; Prado, 2009). *Material support* refers to how these underprivileged students or their parents compensate for their lack of material resources to successfully 'get ahead' in a competitive institutional school practice (Bourdieu, 1984; Osman, Carlhed Ydhag & Månsson, 2020; Osman, 2012; Prado, 2009).

Bridging support is the connection between ideational and material support. Both Bourdieu (1984) and Coleman (1988) stress the significance of others in the students' network (the resources embedded and available to the individual student) are vital in the competition for limited institutional resources. Hence, bridging support refers, for instance, to parental abilities to link their child to individuals who can provide *ideational* and *material* support. It can involve parents linking their child to a third person with institutional expertise in the educational system. It links two or more parties and serves as a conduit for material and ideational support (Osman, 2012; Osman et al., 2020; Osman & Månsson, 2015; Prado, 2009).

Method

The data analysed in this paper was collected in 2018 as part of a longitudinal interview study in a research project funded by The Swedish Research Council – *Following footprints of resilient youth: successful educational trajectories and transition into higher education*.

Study context and participants

The data was collected in several stages. The first stage of the data collection process involved contacting secondary schools in the Stockholm region with three-year national programmes for university entrance. This process involved presenting the research project to the head teacher to get their permission to conduct the study in their schools. The secondary schools we approached generally agreed to participate in the project. We then asked the head teachers to provide us with a list of high-achieving students in their second year of upper secondary school. (We defined 'high achievers' as students with A's or B's in English, Swedish or Swedish as a second language or mathematics at the end of the first year.) When we received the list, we sent a letter to the students and their parents describing the research project and asked if they could participate in the study. Fifty-two students agreed to participate. They were called to a meeting at their respective school. The students who came to the meeting were asked to fill out a short questionnaire about their parents' educational background and professions, the grades they attained in their first year at upper secondary level, their nationality, and which people in their lives they perceived were significant for their schooling experience. In this meeting, we also asked them to draw a map of their social network.

Network mapping has its roots in formal mathematical sociometry and graph theory (Moreno, 1934), and in early ethnographic studies by anthropologists who examined the structures of kinship and interpersonal relations (Tovatt, 2013). The aim was to identify and map the students' social networks, how they are interlinked, and the flow and exchange of resources, information, ideas etc. In this mapping, we adopted the 'concentric circles' approach, where the participants are asked to place contacts within different rings on a sheet of paper, and the closest contact they have with a particular person is placed in the centre circle (Pahl & Spencer, 2004).

Selecting informants – round 2

The participants were informed that the project has been assessed (and approved) by the Regional Ethics Review Board in Stockholm (Dnr. 2017/348-319). We did not need parents' consent since the students were above 15 years old and thus considered able to decide by themselves if they understood the consequences of participation in the project (SFS 2003:460).

The first round of selecting informants for the research project did not recruit enough students, so we adopted different strategies to recruit more students. We expanded our search for students to adjacent regions beyond Stockholm. We identified schools, recruited students through our networks, and sent text messages to the students on the lists we received from the schools we contacted, inviting them to visit our webpage to read more about the project. We also asked those we interviewed to inform their friends and classmates about the study and help us recruit additional interviewees – the snowball strategy. We managed to recruit 52 students (19 male and 33 female, between 17 and 19 years old). The sample of informants is not statistically representative. The students we recruited to the research project included students with and without immigrant background. A considerable number of the students who participated in the study had immigrant background and came from families with low educational capital and with limited school experience in both their home country and Sweden.

The students we recruited were born or their parents came from Sweden, Finland, Hong Kong, India, Iraq, Kurdistan, Norway, the Philippines, Russia, Syria, Somalia, Thailand, South Korea, the UK and the USA. The students' migration histories and processes are different; some were refugees, while others came from Nordic countries, the UK, the USA, and Asian countries. Some students were born in Sweden, but their parents had migrated. We divided their parents' or guardians' birth countries into two categories: Swedes and Immigrants. Thirty-five students had parents born outside of Sweden, and seventeen had native-born parents. Thirty students had parents with tertiary education, while the parents of the remaining twenty-two did not. We furthermore divided the parents into the categories of high and low educational capital. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The focus in these interviews was to identify the support and the resources the students mobilised to embark on a successful educational career. The interviews took 45–90 minutes.

For the present paper, we isolated the data on students with immigrant background and focused on who they identified as significant in their school success and what the significant others did or what role they played to help them embark on a successful school experience. This selection included 14 male and 21 female students, of which 19 had parents with low educational capital and 16 with higher educational capital. The data was analysed using our analytical concepts of ideational, material, and bridging support.

Data analysis strategy

The research project adopted an abductive data analysis. This approach entails interpreting the empirical data in relation to theory and the theory in relation to the empirical data (Alvesson & Sköldböck, 2017). In analysing the data according to this tradition, the objective is to identify anomalous or surprising patterns. In the analysis, we were interested in delineating what resources these students had mobilised to enable them to embark on a successful educational career. In this paper, we are specifically focusing on the resources mobilised by students with immigrant background.

In the first stage of the analysis, we first read the transcripts to get a picture of what types of resources the students mobilised to embark on a successful school career and who in their networks they perceived were significant in helping them experience success in their schooling. In the second stage of the analysis, we used NVivo software in open coding and when coding in detail all responses on what types of support they mobilised, and what and whom they attributed their school success to. We identified three types of support: i) families (preferably the mother, but also the father, siblings and other family members), ii) teachers, and iii) peers. We have also published another article, a study of successful school performance of students from low social cultural background based on this analysis (Osman et al., 2020).

Results

The students identified their parents and extended family as the most significant in their educational success. There were a few students who identified teachers and non-parental significant others, such as trainers and peers. The significant others inspired these children to work hard in school and engage in their schoolwork. The push to work hard in school is contingent on a strong emotional bond and the reciprocal trust between the significant other and the student, leading them to engage in schoolwork.

'Pushing me about school': The engaged and supportive family

Irrespective of their socioeconomic background and ethnicity or immigrant background, these students identified their mother as the person who played the most significant role in their schooling. Nearly all the students stated that their mothers were engaged in their school life, pushed and encouraged them to focus on school, regardless of whether or not they were able to help them with their schoolwork. However, all students pointed out that the academic help they got from their parents was at the level of primary schooling, not at the secondary level.

It is Mum, since I was a little, who has taught me to spell and how to study; she was a teacher, so she knows techniques that can help you learn things. How to study. How to think about solving a problem and how one can get higher grades.

When I was little my parents were also there, they knew what lessons I had, they were always pushing me about school. This is something I am very grateful for today. My parents could help with some of my lessons when I was in primary school, now they cannot help.

Some students identified relatives as the significant others who helped and encouraged them to work hard in school. The se relatives were willing to provide them with ideational and material support such as free housing, and encouraged them to get good grades in order to get into a good university. The implicit message here is that being a graduate of Stockholm University can open doors for a bright future.

My aunt and her husband, I did not say that to anyone, you should also get, eh, good grades as Vasu [a relative]. But they just said that if you get good grades in, eh, now in high school then you will be able to apply and get into Stockholm University and you will be able to stay here at home and study. You will not need to live in student housing and pay for yourself. Therefore, if you study hard and get a good education that can give a good job and a good salary then it's something good for you. I think like this, yes but, if I do just concentrate on my studies now, I can have a good time in the future.

Many of the students reported that their parents constantly reminded them that they left their countries to provide them with better education and thus a better future in Sweden. To cite one of the students: 'We left our homeland so that you can have a good education and a better life'. The parents used this 'sacrifice card' to motivate their children to do their best. Some students had a family member (sister, brother or a relative) that could provide them with material and ideational support, but this was often contingent on working hard and getting good grades.

For others, neither the parents nor any other person in their family could help them with school or academic work. They had no one in their family or family network who could help them with different aspects of the school experience.

I have managed it on my own. Therefore, I have not had anyone who has helped me with homework. I have always done that myself. Eh precisely because my parents do not have any higher education, they are smart in other ways as well. Then they have not been able to speak the Swedish language as well as I do.

Nobody is going to fix this for me.

Similarly, another student said:

I have never asked, and I mean it, have never asked anyone for help with my schoolwork.

Most of the immigrant students interviewed for this study were not embedded in a home environment characterised by intellectual discussion, cognitive stimuli, or material support. Concerning challenges in their environment:

I know others who have not succeeded in school. When I look at them and see their situation, it is a warning for myself. I also know people I went to school with who sell drugs outside the metro and it is a constant warning to me not to end up in the same place.

The family's engagement and the role they played for these students was to push them to do their best in school. From the students' perspective, the role most of their parents played was to ensure that their children work hard and succeed in school, instilling in them the idea not to 'waste' the sacrifices they had made for them, and make a better life for themselves. The parents utilised the sacrifice card to motivate these students to work hard, in particular the mothers. This was evident in how most of these students stressed that they wanted their mother to be proud of them by successfully pursuing an educational career. In addition, most parents were not embedded in a social network to link their children to get the resources that could help them academically.

Hardly any of the students we interviewed mentioned that their parents had helped or linked them to others who could help them with their schoolwork and the like. It was evident that these students did not have material support, such as paying private home tutors, to spur them in their educational success. Moreover, the parents could seldom provide a conducive learning environment; for example, one student told us that she had to wait until all her brothers and sisters had gone to sleep in order to study. She shared a room with her little sisters. Hence, most parents played no active role in their children's academic work, and our interviewees were aware of this fact and had to fend for themselves to get the support necessary to succeed. They lived in segregated areas and perceived school as the only means for social mobility and to escape from the neighbourhood they grew up.

There is some literature that shows a 'neighbourhood effect' on children's educational achievement (Nieuwenhuis, Hooimeijer, van Dorsselaer & Vollebergh, 2013). However, the mechanisms of the neighbourhood effect on school performance are somewhat unclear. Many studies have shown a link between the economic and cultural resources of the parents and educational outcomes. We know that high-status neighbourhoods have better schools, and that most of the students in these schools embark on a successful educational and work life career, compared to children who grow up in poor neighbourhoods. But this is not to say that the children in poor neighbourhoods are doomed to fail. For example, the students in this study are on their way to embark on a successful educational career. One of the interesting things that caught our attention is that families are aware of the success of other children in the neighbourhood, or of the children of relatives. This is talked about and used directly or indirectly to inspire their children to work hard in school. For instance, one student pointed out that 'when I hear somebody's child has succeeded, then I become inspired'.

'My parents are there for me': The emotional supporting role of the parent

It was apparent that the students had strong bonds and relationships with their parents, irrespective of their background or ethnicity. They used phrases such as 'I want my mother to be proud of me', 'My parents are there for me' and 'encourage me to do my best' – a nurturing relationship with their parents. They were also

aware that their parents trusted them to do the right thing, i.e., to be independent and take responsibility for their schoolwork and decisions.

When I panic about schoolwork, I usually go to my mother. She calms me down so that I do not do something impulsive such as dropping out of school.

What was central and critical was the trust and respect they had for their parents, particularly their mothers; only one mentioned their father. The students perceived this trust and respect to be mutual. A nurturing relationship at home seems to be essential for parents to affect their children positively or to create a pro-academic disposition in their children. It is, however, not only the parents that the students we talked to identified as significant others, but some also identified a sibling or cousins as playing an important role in their success. For instance, this is apparent in the following:

If I need help, I ask my brother. He completed his high school and is now studying political science.

They [my sisters] always gave me something when I performed well. Because I am mature, in my schoolwork. My mother, she is very proud of me, she has always been there and always said I will do well in school.

There is substantial research inspired by Coleman's (1988, 1990) perspective of social capital, defined as a supportive bond between family and children, that shows a clear-cut relationship between family relations and educational performance (Jæger & Holm, 2007; Rosenbaum & Rochford, 2008), which also has been shown in the present case.

'You can do it': A nurturing and academic teacher role

For some students, their elementary or junior high school teacher played an important role in their educational success. Academically and emotionally supportive teachers were the ones that they identified had spurred them to embark on a successful educational career. One student identified his teacher as a role model who enabled him to do his best.

When I feel bad, she [teacher] is there and listens. She does not say much, but she shows that she cares. She is there for you not only academically but also emotionally.

The teachers in my school are good resources. I have a good relationship with them.

I used to talk with my teacher about how I could improve my home study technique so I could reach an A [grade], and, if I did not understand or missed something during class, I asked if I could do it again.

My teacher, she teaches economy. She has many things going for her. She runs two companies and is a teacher, two kids. She does everything 100%. She inspires me.

Another student mentioned several teachers as significant others and said that he used to talk to them about his grades and asked for clarifications whenever there was anything he missed during class. Other students said that some of their teachers welcomed them to share their social burdens and private thoughts, or were simply there for them also for matters other than schoolwork:

Well, I am quite a sensitive type, and the teacher saw it. Sometimes, I would bawl my eyes out and she would come to sit beside me and talk with me. She did not say much but she showed that she cared – it was nice to feel that one had the support of a teacher.

Another girl highlighted the virtue of being a good listener. She referred to one teacher, who she could depend on to listen to her, as a significant part of her relationship with teachers at the school.

They are important too. I feel I can talk to them. At least at [this school]. I feel that if there is something I am thinking about, I can go and talk to them and they would listen.

Although academic support was important for their high grades, the students highlighted their teachers as a resource for academic success, and saw them as a resource for their entire successful school experience. Teachers were the ones who inspired the students to work, who they could talk to about any issues they

were confronting, who listened to them and whom they felt they could trust. As noted earlier, these children knew that their parents could not help them with schoolwork or link them to others who could provide ideational support in relation to their school career.

'We push each other': Peers as emotional and academic partners

Our interviewees also stressed that peers played a significant role for their successful educational careers, particularly socialising with peers with similar educational ambitions:

A person who is important to me is a friend I had in primary school, you could say we were rivals in the class, we were the smartest. We competed a lot when it came to grades, who got the highest grades. I would call her and sometimes we study together with my friend, after school, when we have exams, and we are friends in and outside of school.

It is my mother and my friends. Without my friends ... if they get an E I would work hard to get a C, because I like to be better. It has always been like that, but I don't have to have an A or a B, it is because my friends have grades like that. ... We have no competition, but we push each other, so I would never be pleased with a C, just because my friends got a C. My friends are very important, and we all help each other a lot, to achieve such good grades together.

Another student mentions her friends as good study partners, but seems to rely on her sister's academic skills as a last resort for help:

I study with my friends, and we ask each other what we know and don't know. But if I need help, I ask my sister, particularly in maths. She is studying at Uppsala University to be an engineer.

Peers also function as persons they can confide in, and ask for help when it comes to schoolwork, choice of university, and study programmes – they function as study counsellors and psychologist. Cherng and colleagues (2013, p. 79) note that 'existing research, however, has not fully examined friends' resources or their impact on adolescents' outcomes'. It is also evident in this study that these students exhibit homophily, indicating the old adage that 'birds of a feather flock together', or that people with the same values, ambitions and tend to gravitate to one another.

Discussion

Analytically, this paper departs from concepts derived from studies on educational performance inspired by Bourdieu (1984) and Coleman (1988) understanding of the concept of social capital. The results suggest that the specifics of the relationship between these students and their parents were fundamental to their academic success, irrespective of their background. In this study, the students did not identify the material resources available to them (such as household income) and the capacity of their parents to provide material and academic support as significant factors. However, relationships of mutual trust and respect seemed to be the most significant for their school experience and seem to compensate for their lack of material resources. In other words, material resources may privilege certain categories of student (such as middle-class students) providing them with resources to successfully navigate school practice(s), such as extra tuition or guidance. Put differently, the parents or others in the social network that middle-class students are embedded in have themselves had a successful educational career in the Swedish educational system compared to the parents of students with migrant background. Our study, however, shows that lack of material resources can be ameliorated if the students are embedded in nurturing home environments and relationships. Furthermore, these students with migrant background identified their teachers – not their parents – as the ones who provided them ideational support in relation to their school.

However, even if parents, teachers, and other significant others have the possibility to provide ideational, material, and bridging support, this does not mean that these students can embark on a successful school career. In our study, success seems to be contingent on the nature of the relationship between the students and their parents, and the value the parents attach to education. If the relationship is not built on trust and mutual respect, their support would not spur the student to engage in schoolwork and embark on a successful educational career. According to this study, teachers, parents, and other significant others who supported the students unconditionally also pushed them to do their best and made it possible to embark on a successful educational career. To put it simply, when teachers and parents hold emotional capital the children trust them, and they can be motivated to engage in their schoolwork.

Several studies show that trust is important for immigrant children who benefit when useful information and ideational support is offered. According to Abada and Tenkorang (2009, p. 190), establishing trustful relationships is 'especially crucial for the children of immigrants, who also have to deal with their racial status, that is, their ascribed physical characteristics or skin colour, which may hinder their upward mobility'. This aspect did not come up in relation to the experiences of the students in our study, but it was clear that there was little contact between the students with immigrant background and native Swedes in our study. The students with immigrant background socialised with each other in and outside of school and helped one another with their academic work.

We would like to argue that this relationship – particularly the strong relationships of trust between these youngsters and their significant others – helps them stay focused and not fall into anti-social behaviour. However, students who experience pressure to perform or attain grades beyond their capacity might be influenced oppositely, making them engage in anti-social behaviour. There is much literature on the psychological effects of perfectionism and performance pressure, which can lead to depression, angst, substance abuse, self-doubt, and suicide at worst (Levine, 2006). However, the students in this study were embedded in an environment and networks that provided them with bridging and ideational support for their educational careers. In addition place can be a motivating but also a hindering factor, but this is contingent on the nature of the relationship between the students and the parents.

Our findings support studies claiming that the extended family can play a critical role in the educational success of certain children. Family and the extended family, can help them with tutoring information about how to deal with different school challenges they encounter in their educational experience (Carlhed Ydhag et al, 2021; Corcoran & Nichols-Casebolt, 2004; Månsson et al., 2021; Osman, 2012; Osman et al., 2020; Osman & Månsson, 2015; Prado, 2009). However, our study also shows that descendants of immigrants who lack family networks with strong academic resources are forced to negotiate their way in the school system and practice with little or no support from their parents. Furthermore their parents also had limited possibility to connect them to individuals who can provide ideational and material support. Teachers and pastoral school actors such as study counsellors and other non-parental significant others (e.g., mentors and trainers) can play an effective role for these students if the students feel validated and respected.

Finally, one aspect we did not expect was the significance of place in relation to educational performance. Most of the students we interviewed came from segregated areas. These areas have high rates of school dropouts, criminality, and dependency on social welfare, and people in these areas predominantly work in precarious work sector and condition. One can argue that place also plays a role (Osman & Månsson, 2015); it could spur students to work hard in their educational endeavour, hoping to make their parents – particularly their mothers – proud. Some studies similarly note that a nurturing parental style creates a strong emotional bond (Osman et al., 2020; Englund, Egeland & Collins, 2008) and provides the parents with emotional capital to promote an academic disposition. Some of our informants particularly felt that education is their ticket out of the environment they grew up in and to provide their future children with better conditions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) than the segregated life they live.

Conclusion

The students in our study could identify a nurturing adult who had earned their trust and respect, and who inculcated a belief in them that they could do better. These students did not see their parents as a key source of *academic* support but mainly as a source of *emotional* support. This offers a somewhat different perspective than studies that focus on the parental perspective, which generally stress the significance of academic support from parents or other significant others. We have also found that the nature of the parental relationship – particularly the nurturing relationship that gives the student a sense of wellbeing and security – is independent of educational achievement, and that the nurturing relationship trumps material conditions. When this support is not available at home, this role can be taken over by individuals in the family network or by other non-parental significant others such as teachers, trainers, or other pastoral school staff.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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