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Do school grades influence parental support?

The Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (MPIDR) has researched parents' support behavior in relation to school grades. The study shows that low-income families support their children equally regardless of grades, while parents from higher income groups tend to give more support to children with lower grades. It also raises the question of whether these patterns contribute to low social mobility, as parents of high-achieving children from lower social classes do not have the same resources and strategies at their disposal as parents of low-achieving children from higher social classes.

Rostock, Germany. Whether a child brings home good or poor grades may influence the extent to which parents support their children. Much of the research to date has assumed that parents with a higher socio-economic status (SES) are more likely to support the child with poorer grades than the child with good grades. In low SES families, on the other hand, it has been assumed that only children with the best chances of academic success are supported. A recent [study](#) by the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (MPIDR), however, does not find support for this theory, at least in families with lower incomes.

Philipp Dierker, a PhD student at the MPIDR and the University of Helsinki, along with his co-author Martin Diewald (Bielefeld University), used data from the German [TwinLife](#) study to investigate how parents' behavior towards their children changes as a function of academic performance. "Unlike previous research, we did not focus on children's cognitive abilities, but instead we looked at how parents support their children depending on how well they perform academically by evaluating parents' reactions to their children's school grades," explains Dierker.

Twin pairs serve as a data set

Data from the first three surveys of the TwinLife study were used in the research. The results of the cohorts born in 2003 and 2004 were analyzed for both identical and fraternal same-sex twins. At the time of the first survey, the children were on average 11 years old. By the third interview, they were on average 13 years old. "It is particularly valuable that the children were asked directly about the kind of support they received from their parents. In this way, we could rule out the possibility that parents are exaggerating their own support for their children so as to not appear to be neglecting their children" says Dierker. Specifically, the students were asked how their parents supported them in the following areas:

- With homework and communication with school
- Encouragement and expectations
- Encouraging cognitive development (e.g. by reading or making music together)

Over three surveys, the researchers assessed how these three forms of support changed in relation to school performance. "The study of twin pairs does have some potential limitations. For example, there may be systematic differences in how parents of twins and parents of non-twins interact with their children. Previous research, however, has not established that twins are treated differently



than siblings by their immediate family, so we believe that our results are generalizable beyond twin families," Dierker explains.

One parent group supports both children equally

"We conclude from our results that parents in families with a lower socio-economic status do not make any distinction when it comes to supporting their children. Our study reverses the assumption that families with a lower social status only support children with the best chances of advancement," says the Rostock researcher. However, the research does show that in families with a higher socio-economic status, parents do in fact provide more support for the child with the poorer grades. This may be because of a fear of social decline which is a stronger motivator in families with a higher social status. "Here we see more help with homework and communication with the school, and more expectations and encouragement. We assume that highly educated parents also try to encourage their possibly less gifted child through forms of support that are not directly aimed at promoting cognitive skills". Without follow-up surveys this study cannot show whether this support is effective and whether these efforts are successful.

Influence on social mobility

These studies are important additions to the study of social mobility. "High-achieving children from lower social classes do not have the same resources, networks and support as children from higher social classes who are protected from social decline by their parents. The question remains to what extent these differences in parental support contribute to low social mobility for the next generation," says Dierker.

About the MPIDR

The Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (MPIDR) in Rostock investigates the structure and dynamics of populations. The Institute's researchers explore issues of political relevance, such as demographic change, aging, fertility, and the redistribution of work over the life course, as well as digitization and the use of new data sources for the estimation of migration flows. The MPIDR is one of the largest demographic research bodies in Europe and is a worldwide leader in the study of populations. The Institute is part of the Max Planck Society, the internationally renowned German research organization. www.demogr.mpg.de

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