Dreaming in Spain: 
Parental Determinants of Immigrant Children’s Ambition

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ABSTRACT

We examine determinants of educational and occupational aspirations and expectations among children of immigrants in Spain on the basis of a unique data set that includes statistically representative data for foreign-origin secondary students in Madrid and Barcelona plus a sample of one-fourth of their parents. Independently collected data for both generations allow us to establish effects of parental characteristics on children’s orientations without the confounding potential inherent on children’s reports about parents. We analyze first determinants of parental ambition and, through a series of step-wise regressions, the effects of these goals and other parental and family characteristics on children’s aspirations and expectations. A structural equations model synthesizes results of the analysis. The model confirms some predictions from the existing research literature, but rejects others. Parental goals, knowledge of Spanish, sex and children’s age relative to class year as shown to be the major determinants of children’s level of ambition. Implications for theory and policy are discussed.
Dreaming in Spain: Parental Determinants of Immigrant Children’s Ambition

For a long time now, the research literature on educational and occupational achievement has singled out the role of adolescent aspirations as a key determinant. Beginning with the classic Wisconsin model of status attainment, the same literature has also identified parental socio-economic status and parental expectations as being, in turn, major causes of adolescent ambition (Sewell et al, 1969; Sewell and Hauser, 1972; Haller and Portes, 1973). Results demonstrating the causal link between aspirations and subsequent achievement have been based on longitudinal studies in the United States that singled out ambition as a necessary condition for adult attainment. Put differently, young people who aspire to a university-level education and a professional career may or may not get there; but those who do not aim at these goals will surely not achieve them (Portes et al. 1978; Haller 1982; Feliciano and Rumbaut 2005).

Similar evidence for immigrant youths has been limited by the dearth of longitudinal studies focused on this population. In the United States, only one such study of the immigrant second generation has been completed – the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS). This project was based on representative samples of children of immigrants in South Florida and Southern California interviewed at average age 14 and followed over a decade into early adulthood. Results of this study will be reviewed later. For the time being, it suffices to note that they confirmed the strong positive association between early aspirations and expectations and subsequent achievements. (Portes et al.2005, 2008; Feliciano and Rumbaut 2005).

Additional supportive evidence comes from other large longitudinal samples of U.S. high school students that, while not focused specifically on children of immigrants, contain sufficient
cases from this universe to arrive at reliable conclusions (Kao and Tienda 1998; Hao and Pong 2008). So far, research on this topic in other countries has been limited, thus restricting the empirical base of theoretical models of status attainment to U.S. data. In particular, there are so far few studies of immigrant youth aspirations in other major receiving countries, including those of Western Europe. This paper aims at partially correcting this gap by presenting results from the first phase of a large, statistically representative sample of second generation students in a major European country. It makes the additional contribution of employing, as predictors of children’s ambition, parental characteristics and outlooks ascertained directly from the parents rather than indirectly from children’s reports. This makes this data set unique for the study of immigrant youths’ ambition.

Review of the Literature and Hypotheses

A strong and consistent finding in the research literature is that parental human capital and, for immigrants, the educational levels brought from the home country play a decisive role in molding children’s aspirations (Inoue 1999; Kao and Tienda 1998; Feliciano 2006). In addition, the Wisconsin status attainment model predicts that a good portion of the family status influence on adolescent aspirations is mediated by parents’ own level of ambition (Sewell and Hauser 1972; Haller and Portes 1973). More recent studies focused on second generation youths in the United States find that family structure also has a significant effect, with children raised by both biological parents displaying higher levels of ambition. (Haller et. al. 2011).

A great deal of work has been devoted to ethnic/national differences in educational and occupational aspirations. The balance of these studies indicates that significant variation exists, although its direction is uncertain. One study comparing differences among Hispanic students in
the United States found significantly higher levels of college aspirations among Cuban youths than among those of Mexican and Puerto Rican origin. The latter two groups’ ambition was below the level of non-Hispanic whites although this level is attributable to the lower Mexican and Puerto Rican parental SES; however, higher-than-average Cuban levels of aspirations remained even after controls for parental status were introduced (Bohon et. al. 2006). Louie (2006) compared Dominican and Chinese adolescents, finding that their differential optimism and pessimism toward the future depend largely on the reference group with whom they compare themselves: Dominicans feel that they are doing better than both native minorities in the United States and their counterparts in the home country; the Chinese are more pessimistic because they compare themselves against their own highly successful compatriots.

In the European context, it is unclear whether systematic differences exist among children of different nationalities and whether such differences persist after controlling for parental human capital, family structure, and other variables. In one of the few cross-national studies in this field, Buchmann and Dalton (2002) compared the effects of peers and parents attitudes in twelve countries. Their findings supported the Wisconsin model’s prediction of significant parent and peer influences on aspirations in countries with “relatively undifferentiated” secondary school systems; in those with strong tracking systems, such as in many European countries, parents and peers made much less difference, as the decisive event became the type of school that children attended in early adolescence. These comparative findings point to the potentially significant influence of school type, a factor generally neglected in studies based on U.S. samples. A partial exception is the attention bestowed on differences between students attending public and Catholic private schools that consistently favor the latter
in terms of both aspirations and subsequent achievement (Coleman 1988, 1993; Portes and MacLeod 1996).

Studies of immigrant youths in other countries have consistently supported the influence of pre-migration parental status on children’s aspirations, and of these on academic achievement. Overwhelmingly, these studies have been conducted in the Anglophone world and in Israel and, in most cases, they have depended on student reports for the measurement of parental and family variables. (Strand and Winston 2008; Andres et. al. 2007; Bodovski and Benavot 2006). Based on a large longitudinal study of Australian youths, for example, Marjoribanks (2003) reports that family background had large effects on adolescents’ aspirations, and that the latter had the strongest effect on young adults’ educational achievement. Such findings are subject to confounding, because children’s views and outcomes can retroactively influence their answers on parents’ characteristics.

Findings from this Australian study coincide, however, with those reported by the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) in the United States. The latter confirmed the strong effect of parental human capital on adolescent aspirations. In contrast to previous studies in the U.S. and elsewhere, CILS included a parental survey which made it possible to establish the effects of family socio-economic status and parental ambition directly. The study also distinguished between “aspirations” as ideal goals and “expectations” as realistic ones. Employing as dependent variables educational and occupational achievement in early adulthood plus a “downward assimilation index,” a recent analysis based on CILS data found: 1) strong effects of both aspirations and expectations in promoting subsequent achievement and in preventing downward assimilation; 2) resilient differences in aspirations, expectations, and achievement among immigrant nationalities, even after controlling for family socio-economic
status and other predictors; 3) no significant differences in the net effects of aspirations and expectations, both being essentially interchangeable as predictors of subsequent achievement (Haller, et al. 2011).

The CILS data also identified two other important causal factors. First, the previously cited effect of family composition was in evidence as children growing up with both biological parents had significantly higher levels of ambition. Second, gender differences were important: girls had higher aspirations and expectations and were better able to translate them into subsequent educational achievement (Fernández-Kelly and Konczal 2005; Feliciano and Rumbaut 2005). Both effects were attributed by researchers to the power of family social capital. Social capital tends to be higher in stable two-parent families where both parents can team up to guide the child; girls are more apt to be supervised and be less independent than boys, thus being more influenced by parental aspirations (Portes and Rumbaut 2001: Ch. 9). These effects have been replicated by other U.S. studies (Hao and Pong 2008), but not in other countries.

Efforts to test the “segmented assimilation” model derived from the CILS project have come up with additional factors potentially influencing second generation ambition. Based on his study of second generation Mexicans, St.-Hilaire (2002) identified length of U.S. residence as having a significant negative effect on aspirations, while fluency in English increased them. Menjivar (2008) focused her attention on the legal status of Salvadoran families, finding that children of unauthorized parents or those in an insecure legal situation had significantly lower and less stable educational expectations. Portes and Rumbaut (2001: 228) also reported that native-born children of immigrants had significantly higher expectations than those born abroad.
Based on this diverse array of results, it is possible to advance several hypotheses concerning determinants of aspirations and expectations among immigrant youths. Drawing on the principal studies conducted so far, we can predict that: 1) parental education and occupation will have strong positive effects on children’s ambition, whether measured by ideal aspirations or realistic expectations; 2) family composition (two-parent families) will have a similar significant role; 3) knowledge of the host country language and length of residence in the country among parents will also increase children’s aspirations; 4) these parental effects will be largely mediated by parents’ own level of ambition for their children; 5) girls will have higher aspirations and expectations than boys; 6) type of school will have a significant effect, with private school students displaying a significant advantage; 7) knowledge of the host country language among children will also be associated with higher ambition, net of the other predictor variables.

We thus posit a causal sequence in which immigrant parents’ socio-economic characteristics translate into different expectations for children and these lead in turn to different levels of ambition among youths. These outcomes should also be influenced by children’s own circumstances, including their gender, school type, and knowledge of the language.

**Immigration to Spain**

Traditionally, Spain has been a country of out-migration, sending millions of migrant workers, first to Latin America and, in the post-World War II period, to Northern Europe. Since joining the European Common Market and, subsequently, the European Union, the country experienced a sustained process of economic growth that brought it into the ranks of the developed world. As a result, labor out-migration not only ceased, but reversed course leading to
the return of millions of former emigrants (Cachon 2009; Calavita 2005). Since the early 1990s, Spain has found itself in the role of net recipient of major migration flows, first from nearby Morocco, and subsequently from Latin American countries, Eastern Europe, and even Asia (Carvajal Gomez 2006). As a consequence of these flows, the foreign-born population grew by leaps and bounds and, by 2010, had reached 5.7 million persons or 12.1 percent of the population (Santa-Olalla 2010). The figure is very close to the proportion of the foreign-born in the U.S. population (13 percent), despite the much shorter period of Spain-bound migration -- scarcely twenty years.

Inevitably, first generation immigrants spawned a second generation that currently represents the fastest growing component of Spain’s population aged 18 and younger (Aparicio 2006; Cachon 2009). Not traditionally a country of immigration, Spain was ill-prepared to guide the process of incorporation of its new immigrants and, especially that, of their children. The arrival of this young population into the schools and in the streets has been accompanied by much uncertainty and considerable anxiety among the Spaniards about what the phenomenon portends for the nation as a whole (Pajares 2009; Aparicio and Tornos 2008). Journalistic articles about the growth of Latin American youth gangs or the danger of Islamic fundamentalism among young Moroccans and other second-generation Muslims have proliferated, while the national government and those of the country’s autonomous regions (comunidades) have rehearsed numerous policies seeking to integrate second-generation youths into the schools and avoid early, but disturbing signs of downward assimilation (Borasteros and Barroso 2008, Diez Nicolas 2006).

So far, however, few empirical studies of the Spanish second generation have been conducted and those that exist are based on convenience or local samples (see Aparicio 2006;
Aparicio and Tornos 2008; Gualda 2009). By all counts, this is still a young population, the great majority of whom are still in the primary and early secondary school years. At this age, a key consideration, in addition to demographic characteristics, is the orientation of these youths toward the future and, in particular, their goals. If, as seen previously, aspirations and expectations are major predictors of the life course in adulthood, it makes a great deal of difference how children of immigrants see the future in their new country and how they perceive their chances of moving upwards in its hierarchies of wealth and status (Portes et. al. 2010).

No data set exists so far in Spain that includes large and representative surveys of both migrant children and their parents. A study of second generation goals and their determinants thus offers a chance of casting light on a so-far unknown population, while simultaneously testing existing theories of adolescent ambition in a different national context. As seen previously, theoretical propositions about the origins of adolescent aspirations and expectations derive primarily from U.S. studies. Applying these hypotheses in a different national setting provides an opportunity both to establish their generalizability and to extend and refine them.

**Methodology**

The data set on which the following analysis is based is the product of a collaborative effort between university-based research centers in the United States and Spain, with the goal of interviewing representative samples of second generation youths in their principal areas of concentration in Spain and following them over time. The study aimed at replicating the research design of the previously discussed Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS), in the United States. To this end, researchers sought the approval and support of education authorities in Madrid and Barcelona – the two largest immigrant-receiving cities in the country
Having obtained it, the research team proceeded to draw random samples of secondary schools in each metropolitan area, stratified by type of school (public vs. private) and by geographical location. Complete lists of schools were made available for this purpose by the respective education superintendencies (consejerías). The stratified sample design maintained the same sampling fraction by school type and by region within each metropolitan area, thus making it self-weighting with respect to the relevant universe. (Kish 1967; Firebaugh 2007).

Within each school, all second generation students were included. Following CILS, “second generation” was defined as children with at least one foreign-born parent, whether born in Spain or brought to the country before age 12. By convention, those born in the host country are known as the second generation “proper,” while those brought at an early age from abroad are defined as the “1.5 generation” (Rumbaut 2004). It is well-known that most immigrant-origin youths in Spain attend public schools, but a significant minority has found its way into state-supported private schools, mostly Catholic affiliated.² As seen previously, Catholic school students have repeatedly been found to have higher aspirations and achievements in the United States. The present data allow us to test this relationship in a different national context.

Geographically, the sample was also stratified by geographical region to insure that all schools in each metropolitan area were included. Because of the concentration of schools in the central cities, a simple random sample would have excluded those in many outlying areas. In total, 101 schools took part in the study in Madrid and 79 in Barcelona.

Basic secondary education in Spain is compulsory and students are, overwhelmingly, in the early adolescent years. These two features are methodologically convenient because they guarantee that a school-drawn sample will be representative of the respective age cohort, as
almost all of its members are still in school. Significant school abandonment in later years gradually reduces the overlap between enrolled students and the respective age cohort. The study targeted the first, second and third years of basic secondary school (ESO in its Spanish acronym) because they include the population of average age 14 that was the target universe. The procedure employed to complete the questionnaire – assembling all eligible students in a classroom at a designated time under the supervision of project staff – insured that practically all eligible respondents in the randomly selected schools took part in the study. The total Madrid sample numbers 3,375 cases; in Barcelona, 3,530. The two samples are statistically representative of the universe of second generation youths in each city in the specified age cohorts.

Approximately one year after completion of these surveys, the project undertook a new study of parents to complement the data obtained from children. To this end, letters were sent to all the home addresses supplied by students with an attached questionnaire to be completed by their parents. The letter explained the goals of the project and promised an incentive in the form of a sizable money prize to be awarded by random draw among those returning completed questionnaires. Reminders were sent to parents not responding to the original letter. In total, approximately 700 usable questionnaires were obtained, a figure that represented less than half of the target sample for the parental survey – 1,750 cases or one-fourth of the children’s sample.

The project team then turned to telephone data supplied by students and spent the entire summer and part of the fall of 2010 calling home numbers in Madrid and Barcelona. The team kept a moving tally of completed questionnaires to insure that they would be roughly balanced between both cities and that all major nationalities in the original survey were represented. In total, data were obtained from 1,843 parents representing 28 percent of the original student
survey. The major nationalities in both surveys are identical: In the parental sample, they include Ecuador (28%), Morocco (10.5%), Colombia (7.8%), Peru (6.7%), the Dominican Republic (5.5%), and Romania (5.1%). Among second generation children born abroad, but brought at an early age to Spain, the corresponding figures were: 28.6% (Ecuador); 7.1% (Morocco); 8.4% (Colombia); 6.1% (Peru); 5.2% (Dominican Republic); and 5% (Romania). No other nationality in either sample exceeded 5 percent of the total.

**Descriptive Results**

Table 1 presents comparable descriptive characteristics for both surveys, broken down by city of residence. The table includes variables for the respondents themselves, as well as children’s reports on parental characteristics and vice versa. The average age of children included in the original survey is 13.9, while the mean age of parents is 42.6. The child sample is evenly balanced by gender, but this is not the case among parents given the greater propensity of mothers to stay at home and, hence, be more accessible for interviews. Data on family structure and language spoken at home yielded similar results in both surveys: over two-thirds of the children lived with both biological parents and close to three-fourths spoke Spanish at home. This proportion was somewhat lower in Barcelona where Catalan-speaking families represented between 2 and 3 percent.

Fluency in Spanish was high in both samples. The Knowledge of Spanish Index (KSI) is a summed scale of reported ability to speak, understand, read, and write the language. Self-reported language ability has been shown to be a reliable indicator of actual knowledge in a number of past studies (Fishman 1966, 1969; Lopez 1982; Rumbaut 1995). Our index ranges from a low of 1 (little knowledge) to 4 (perfect fluency). As shown in Table 1, both parents and
children score high on average, although mean scores in Madrid are somewhat higher than in Barcelona.

Table 1 about here

Children’s reports of their parents’ characteristics are generally within an acceptable range when compared to parents’ own responses. However, one-third of the children reported that they did not know their parents’ education. Figures in Table 1 suggest that most of these answers come from children whose parents had low levels of education, as shown by the large parent-child discrepancy in the lowest educational category.

For purposes of the present study, the most important questions are those that tap ambition toward the future. As already noted, educational aspirations refer to ideal goals for the future, while educational expectations are realistic levels believed to be within reach. As shown in Table 1, both parental aspirations and expectations are much higher than among children. Seventy-seven percent of parents aspire to a university degree for their offspring, but only 40 percent of the latter set their sights that high. Expectations are much lower for both generations but, while 46 percent of parents realistically expect their children to attain a university or a postgraduate degree, only 23 percent of their offspring agree. These patterns hold, without major differences, in both Madrid and Barcelona. A final notable discrepancy is in life plans for the future: the overwhelming majority of immigrant parents (85%) wishes and expects their children to stay in Spain; surprisingly, only one-fourth of the youths agree. The rest wishes to move
elsewhere, primarily to North America (23%) or other Western European countries (15.8%). This discrepancy suggests that, while most first generation immigrants envision Spain as their final country of destination and settlement; most of the second generation sees the country, at least in adolescence, as a platform for life elsewhere.

**Multivariate findings**

A. *Determinants of Parental Ambition and School Involvement*

We examine first determinants of parental ambition for their children and parental behaviors conducive toward achieving these goals. For this analysis, we consider both parental aspirations and expectations, broken down in the categories shown in Table 1, plus a measure of parental participation in school activities. The Parental School Involvement Index (PSII) is a summated scale of standardized scores in four items indicating actual parental participation in school-related activities. As predictors of each of these variables, we use the parent’s age, gender, years of residence in Spain, marital status, acquisition of the Spanish nationality, socio-economic status, and knowledge of Spanish. Marital status (“married”) and Spanish nationality (“yes”) are dummy variables; knowledge of Spanish is measured by the index described previously (Parental KSI); socio-economic status (PSES) is also an index constructed as the unit-weighted sum of the responding parents’ education and occupational status; those of his/her spouse, if any; and total family income. The PSES index is standardized to mean 0, standard deviation 1. Finally, we include dummy variables for all nationalities in the sample numbering at least 25 cases. The reference category is the rest of the parental sample comprising all other nationalities (N=204).
Table 2 presents ordered multinomial logistic regressions for parental aspirations and expectations and ordinary least squares results for the continuous PSII scale. All regressions employ list-wise deletion of missing data and robust standard errors to correct for the school-clustered character of the original sample. List-wise deletion is generally the most conservative and least biased way of handling missing data (Firebaugh 2008). Results are similar across the three dependent variables. Parental socio-economic status and knowledge of Spanish are the principal determinants of school involvement; each of these effects exceeds five times its standard error. Lesser, but still significant positive effects on PSII are associated with marital status (married) and length of residence in the country. With this array of variables controlled, most individual nationalities have no significant effect, with the notable exception of the Chinese. Chinese parents in Spain are far less likely to involve themselves in school programs or activities; the corresponding negative coefficient exceeds 10 times its standard error. The coefficient of determination indicates that this set of predictors does a reasonable job in accounting for differences in parental school involvement, explaining 22 percent of the variance.

Determinants of parental educational aspirations and expectations are largely the same as for School Involvement. In both cases, parental SES and knowledge of Spanish are the principal determinants, each associated with higher levels of ambition. No other, non-nationality predictor has a major effect on either variable. Several significant effects are associated, however, with
nationalities, all of them reducing aspirations or expectations relative to the rest of the sample. The strongest and most consistent effect is associated with Chinese parents whose levels of educational ambition for their children are far lower than for other nationalities in the sample.

The disparity between these findings and the high levels of ambition reported among Chinese immigrant parents in the United States (Zhou et al. 2008; Zhou 1992; Hao and Pong 2008) suggests that there is something unique to the Chinese immigrant population in Spain. Since family socio-economic status and knowledge of Spanish are controlled, this result cannot be attributed to higher poverty or lack of linguistic fluency. In contrast to the United States, the average education and language knowledge among Chinese immigrants in this sample is quite low. In addition, however, the Chinese in Spain appear to form tightly knit, inner-looking communities focused on economic mobility through small entrepreneurship (Gibson and Carrasco 2009; Yiu 2011). This orientation may be reflected in the low hopes of these parents for their children’s success under the Spanish educational system.

B. Children’s Educational Plans

We consider next the extent to which parental variables bear on children’s ambition. First, we examine determinants of educational aspirations and expectations, followed by occupational plans. Dependent variables for the first part of the analysis are the ordinal-coded children’s educational goals presented in Table 1. We use step-wise ordered logistical regression with robust standard errors and listwise deletion of missing data for reasons explained previously. The first step includes parental objective characteristics previously used as predictors of parental aspirations and expectations. The second step adds the two indicators of parents’ ambition. In the third step, children’s objective characteristics are entered, including age,
gender, year in school, place of birth, school type, and knowledge of Spanish. Place of birth is a
dummy variable coded 1 if the child was born in Spain and 0 if born abroad; school type is coded
1 for youths who attended private, mostly Catholic schools, and 0 otherwise. Knowledge of
Spanish is measured by the KSI index described previously. The last step adds parental national
origins, with dummy variables for all nationalities numbering at least 25 cases. City of residence
is also included in this step.

Table 3 presents results of the analysis for educational ambition. Parental factors
affecting children’s goals are similar whether one considers ideal or realistic plans. Family
socio-economic status (PSES) plays the lead role, followed by knowledge of Spanish (PKSI)
and, in the case of expectations, years of parental residence in Spain. The last two effects cease
to be significant once parental goals for children enter the equation, but the family status effect
continues to be statistically significant. Corresponding to theoretical expectations, both
regressions indicate that the influence of parental objective characteristics on children’s school
plans is largely mediated by the parents’ own goals. The addition of children’s own
characteristics eliminates the effect of parental aspirations but not those of expectations or family
SES, indicating that these variables are resilient determinants of children’s level of ambition.

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Table 3 about here

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Among children’s traits the strongest predictors are age, followed by language ability and
school year. With the latter variable controlled, the effect of age is strongly negative indicating
that youths who are older than their respective school cohort tend to adjust their educational
plans downwards. This effect is equally strong for aspirations as for expectations. School year, on the other hand, has the opposite effect, with the more advanced students being the most ambitious. Knowledge of Spanish also has a strong and positive effect on both dependent variables, a result that corresponds to the original hypothesis. Girls display significantly higher educational aspirations, but not expectations. The positive gender effect on aspirations corresponds to a similar and consistent finding in the American literature, as discussed previously, absence of this effect on educational expectations indicates a greater downward assessment of realistic opportunities among girls than boys in the Spanish context.

When parental national origins and city of residence are added, little changes, except for a few negative effects among children from several Latin American nationalities. Without exception these effects are negative. Ecuadoreans, the largest group in the sample, display net lower levels of educational ambition. These nationality effects are, however, not very strong. With other variables controlled, the Chinese negative effect observed among parents disappears indicating no disadvantage among Chinese children, once family status and parental expectations are taken into account.

Overall, these results indicate that parental characteristics do affect their offspring’s educational plans. They do so primarily through parents’ own realistic expectations, followed by socio-economic status. Parental school involvement has no influence. These effects are not mediated by children’s own characteristics, although several of the latter have a strong and consistent influence on both dependent variables. Age and school year work at cross-purposes, with more advanced students displaying higher levels of ambition, but those older than their class peers adjusting them downwards. With these variables controlled, national origins have
only a few scattered effects, indicating that most differences among youths from different nationalities are accounted for by this set of predictors.

**C. Children’s Occupational Plans**

As previously noted, the original survey measured children’s occupational aspirations through a closed ordinal item and occupational expectations by an open item where respondents filled the occupation that they realistically expected to hold as adults. This procedure was adopted to avoid frivolous responses about ideal goals and to concentrate the attention of respondents on the jobs that they actually aimed at.\(^5\) Accordingly, we place greater weight on determinants of occupational expectations, although results for both dependent variables are presented. Aspirations are coded as a dichotomy: professional-executive occupations are coded 1, and others 0. We examine determinants with a step-wise binary logistic routine using list-wise deletion of missing data. Open occupational expectations were coded into occupational prestige scores employing the PRESCA-2 scale, developed specifically for Spain by Carabaña and Gomez Bueno (1997). This is a reliable interval-level scale and, hence, we regress it on the same step-wise predictors using an ordinary least squares (OLS) routine. Robust standard errors are used throughout the analysis. Table 4 presents the results.

Among parental objective characteristics, two display significant effects on occupational aspirations: parental knowledge of Spanish and family structure. Children growing up with both biological parents have higher ideal goals. The effect is not very strong, however, and it does not carry into realistic job expectations. Parental knowledge of the language does have a significant effect on the latter, as does family socio-economic status. However, when parents’ own goals enter the equation, the language effect disappears. Family SES continues to have a significant
effect, to which are added the net effect of parental realistic goals. The addition of children’s variables does not eliminate parental influences on youths’ aspirations, but completely wipes them out from job expectations.

Thus intact families, parental knowledge of Spanish, and parental expectations continue to positively influence idealistic goals, but they have no direct bearing on realistic job plans. Parental influences on the latter are entirely mediated through children’s own characteristics, of which school year and gender are paramount: more advanced students display higher expectations, as do females. As seen previously, the gender effect on educational aspirations runs in the same direction, while that on educational expectations is insignificant. On the other hand, girls voice higher job ambition levels than boys, an effect strongly present on both dependent variables. In accord with the previous educational findings, age reduces occupational aspirations and expectations, while children’s knowledge of Spanish increases them. The gender and language coefficients correspond to the original hypotheses. The strong age effects were not anticipated, nor were those of school year. As in the case of educational ambition, this pair of effects works at cross-purposes.

With this array of variables controlled, there are practically no effects of national origins, nor of city of residence. Children of Argentine parents are the only ones to differ significantly from the rest of the sample, the effect being negative on both dependent variables. Overall,
parents appear to have lesser influence on their offspring’s occupational than their educational plans. This is arguably due to two factors: first, the more immediate character of educational plans for children who are still in school may make these plans more amenable to parental influence. Second, parental goals for children were measured for education but not occupation, which makes them have a closer link to and, hence, influence on the former. The most consistent effects emerging from our analysis are those of family SES, parental realistic expectations, and parents’ knowledge of Spanish, to which are added the influence of children’s own characteristics, as described above.

Results of the analysis are arguably more interesting for what they do not find. For example, parents’ school involvement, measured by a reliable index, shows no significant effect on any dependent variable, nor does attendance at private (mostly Catholic) schools. Private school students do have a significant absolute advantage in both aspirations and expectations, but this effect disappears once other variables are taken into account. This lack of a net effect in favor of private school students differs from U.S. findings, where attendance at private Catholic schools yields a significant advantage (Coleman 1988, 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). This result may be a reflection of the more egalitarian character of the Spanish secondary school system.  

Similarly, few significant nationality effects are found and none is particularly strong. This is not because there are no absolute differences among nationalities, but because they are reduced to insignificance once other predictors are controlled. A series of reverse step-wise regressions (not shown) indicate, for example, much lower aspirations and expectations among Chinese children, corresponding to the pattern already detected among their parents. This difference disappears and even turns positive (in the case of educational aspirations) when other
variables are controlled. By and large, parental ambition and other parents’ characteristics play the lead role in reducing initial differences among children from different countries of emigration.

Thus, we find little that is unique to specific immigrant nationalities. Only a few Latin American groups have lower net levels of ambition, but these effects are not substantial. The sizable absolute disadvantage of Chinese children is largely accounted for by the very low levels of aspirations and expectations among their parents. This pattern appears due both to the low average education that Chinese immigrants bring to Spain and to the unique characteristics of this ethnic community focused on small entrepreneurship (Yiu 2011).

**Conclusion**

Comparing this set of findings with the seven hypothesis listed at the start, we readily see that some predictions are supported, but not all. For example, the strong predicted effects of family composition fail to materialize, as do those of private school attendance. On the other hand, two unexpected effects appear consistently: higher school year significantly increases ambition; while age, with school year controlled, reduces it. As seen in Table 1, aspirations and expectations of immigrant youths in Spain are rather modest. While 40 percent aspire to an university degree of higher, less than one-fourth think that they would realistically get there.

Data from national surveys of secondary students in Spain indicate that the level of ambition among the native-born is still lower; in addition, results from the OECD-sponsored 2006 survey of almost 20,000 secondary students in the country show that the occupational expectations of immigrant children are somewhat higher than among the native-born, although the difference is not statistically significant (OECD 2007). Overall, the limited available
evidence suggests that immigrant children are not handicapped relative to the native-born in terms of ambition, but that modest levels are common to both (Gibson and Carrasco 2009).

All theory implies simplification. In our case, we aim at producing a succinct statement that highlights the principal trends observed in these data. For this purpose, we make use of structural equation models (SEM), estimated through the MPLUS and AMOS routines. SEM has the advantage of yielding several goodness-of-fit indicators that show how well or poorly a hypothesized model fits the data. In addition to the indices constructed previously, we make use of two latent variables for this analysis: Parental Ambition reflects the combined influence of parental educational aspirations and expectations; Children’s Ambition reflects the child’s educational and occupational aspirations and expectations. For the model to converge, one of the latter indicators was fixed at 1.

This model is presented in Figure 1. It makes use of four exogenous variables: parental SES, parental knowledge of Spanish, child’s age and child’s gender. Double-pointed arrows indicate unanalyzed correlations. Parental Ambition is hypothesized to depend on parents’ SES and knowledge of Spanish. Year in School is a function of child’s age; and child’s Knowledge of Spanish is hypothesized to depend on parents’ language fluency and level of ambition. Finally, Children’s Ambition is dependent on their parents’ own goals plus the child’s age, school year, gender, and knowledge of Spanish. The model makes use of just 42 out of 90 available sample moments, thus leaving 48 degrees of freedom.

Figure 1 about here
This level of parsimony is one of the reasons for the reasonably good indicators of fit. In particular, Steiger’s root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is very close to the standard criteria of .05 and the Tucker Lewis Index (TLI), an indicator independent of sample size, exceeds .90 as does the CFI (Maruyama 1998). The model also does an acceptable job in accounting for variance, explaining 32 percent in the final endogenous variable – Children’s Ambition. Causal determination of the other endogenous variables is weaker, although all hypothesized effects are significant at the .001 level.

Aside from parsimony, the model has the advantage that the causal direction of effects is largely unambiguous. For instance, it is much more likely that parental language knowledge affects children’s rather than vice versa. For theoretical purposes, the most important effects are those bearing on the final dependent variable, and they are all causally unambiguous. The strongest of these effects corresponds to parents’ own ambition. This accords with theoretical expectations dating back to the Wisconsin status attainment model (Sewell et al. 1969; Haller and Portes 1973). The finding is important because parental orientations were measured independently from children’s, avoiding the confounding effect of children’s retroactive reports.

All hypothesized effects are positive, except that of age which strongly reduces ambition. The model confirms the superiority of female aspirations, supporting a regular finding in the U.S. literature. From a practical standpoint, the most significant effects are those of age and knowledge of Spanish because both are amenable to external intervention. Older youths relative to their class peers are at peril of educational stagnation and subsequent occupational failure. They should thus benefit from external assistance programs that prevent discouragement and help them reset their expectations.
On the contrary, fluency in Spanish leads to higher ambition among both parents and children. It is likely that the lower educational goals among certain immigrant groups are related, in part, to their poor command of the language. Strengthening public programs to facilitate language acquisition among immigrants is the logical, practical implication of these findings. Overall, they indicate a patterned process of status attainment, not too different from that found in the United States but where, apart from the transmission of goals across generations, the roles of age and linguistic competence are paramount.
REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

1 Data for this analysis comes from the Longitudinal Study of the Second Generation (ILSEG in its Spanish acronym) conducted by a consortium between the Center for Migration and Development at Princeton University and the Institute of Migration Studies of the University of Comillas in Madrid. It was supported by the Spencer Foundation of Chicago and the Community of Madrid. Responsibility for the contents is exclusively ours.

2 These are known as “concerted” schools because they are state supported, but privately administered.

3 “Educación Secundaria Obligatoria.”

4 The item components of PSII include the following questions coded on a four-point scale from “Never” (lowest) to “Almost always”.
   1) Talks to his/her child about what happens in school.
   2) Helps his/her child with school homework.
   3) Talks to his/her child about what she/he study in the future or his/her plans after finishing school.
   4) Attends parent’s reunions at school.

5 Measurement of occupational expectations in this survey is similar to that employed in the OECD- Sponsored Program of International Student Achievement (PISA) that conducts regular large surveys of secondary students in 50 countries, including Spain. (OECD 2007).

6 The sample included state-supported private school, but not those exclusively private. The latter charge high tuition fees and, hence, are attended by children of affluent families. Few children of immigrants are found in these schools, which was the reason to exclude them from the study. Hence, we lack information to determine whether attendance to this type of school yields a net advantage in terms of future plans.