



Roots of Ambition: Career Aspirations Among Rural Secondary School Students in Banswara, Rajasthan, India

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Abstract

This study investigates determinants of career aspirations among secondary students in rural Banswara district, Rajasthan, India, where cultural, structural, and informational barriers necessitate a context-specific approach to understanding aspiration formation. Focusing on school-level students is critical, as early choices regarding subjects and universities' entrance exams substantially impact future educational and career opportunities. Addressing a notable gap in the literature, which has largely concentrated on university-level aspirations, this research uses a semi-structured survey of 80 students from five secondary schools representing government, private, and government-aided institutions. The survey, administered in Hindi, explored key themes: parental influence, socioeconomic status, institutional support, gender norms, role models, and self-motivation. Most students aspire for financially stable government employment. Younger participants emphasised service-oriented goals, while older students prioritised job stability and higher income. Distinct gender patterns emerged: girls favoured teaching and clerical posts, boys preferred engineering and skilled trades. Socioeconomic background, especially parental education, strongly influenced career aspirations, with lower parental educational attainment correlating with vocational or manual job preferences. Although only 7% explicitly cited parental influence as decisive, parental educational background shaped students' perceptions of higher education's value and their likelihood of career discussions with teachers. Girls received less encouragement at home and were also less likely to seek school-based guidance. Remarkably, access to infrastructure or digital resources had limited effect on career awareness; students relied primarily on family and teachers for information. Direct exposure to professionals in students' desired career, effectively reducing knowledge gaps. These findings expand our understanding of early-stage, rural aspirations, with implications for designing interventions like government and school policies focusing on financial aid and mentorship to address gender and socio-economic disparities in rural students' career development.

Keywords: *Youth, Aspiration, Role of Parents, Gender Gap, Institutional Support, Motivation*

1. Introduction

Career aspirations, often defined as “an individual’s expressed career-related goals or intentions” (Silvia, 2001), can be described as an individual’s long-term future-oriented goals or ambitions, encompassing the professions, positions, and achievements one aspires to make. Aspirations have a motivational component (Sherwood, 1989); they are goals that individuals are willing to invest time, effort, or money to attain. There are various determinants and influences on the career aspirations of an individual, including family income levels, role models, gender, location, educational choices, and self-motivation.

A career makes up a significant portion of an individual’s life and “is crucial to any individual as career selection has a far-reaching impact on the individual in terms of lifestyle, status, income, security, and job satisfaction” (Beatrice 2010). An appropriate career aspiration among youth is essential for the rest of an individual’s life, and it is important to understand how these aspirations are formed and what impacts them.

Aspirations are particularly relevant at the secondary level, as students are required to make key decisions about subject selection for secondary school and decisions about which course-specific university entrance exams to prepare for, especially in the Indian context. In India, the existing scholarship on youth aspirations has primarily focused on an older demographic, such as college or university students who are more aware of multiple career opportunities and requirements (Doni, 2020; Nandi et al., 2022). However, little research exists regarding aspirations among school children, especially in rural India. This study aims to explore this less-researched aspect of aspirations.

To critically explore factors that influence and condition aspirations among school children, this paper looks beyond socioeconomic factors, by examining the role of gender, social networks, and role models. In this regard, Bourdieu’s theoretical framework offers a nuanced understanding of aspirations as socially structured rather than purely individual or psychological. His concept of “habitus”, a system of dispositions shaped by one’s social background, argues that aspirations emerge from the lived experiences and social environments that individuals come to acquire by birth through their primary process of socialisation (Bourdieu, 1977). Rather than being freely chosen, aspirations are conditioned by one’s position in the social structure and the types of capital they possess.

Following Bourdieu’s theory of habitus, aspirations are not merely individual preferences but are socially conditioned by one’s environment and access to capital- economic, social, and cultural resources available to them (Bourdieu, 1986). Individuals with greater access to these forms of capital are more likely to aspire to high-status careers or educational opportunities, while those with limited capital may adjust their goals downward to align with what feels realistic or attainable. Furthermore, the field shapes aspirations, or the structured social space within which individuals act, where one’s position determines what is seen as possible or desirable. Through the process of *symbolic violence*, individuals may internalise dominant norms and unconsciously accept limitations on their aspirations, perceiving certain goals as beyond their reach (Bourdieu, 1990). In this way, Bourdieu helps us understand aspirations as deeply embedded in structures of inequality, shaped by social position, access to resources, and the broader institutional context.

Largely, two major avenues define youth aspirations. First is their social identity, which is shaped by socioeconomic conditions, gender norms, geographic context, social network, and role models, of which this study will focus on socioeconomic strata, role models, and an emphasis on gender. The second important factor is their academic training, which provides them with the skills necessary for securing suitable employment opportunities. Traditionally, education has been hailed for its emancipatory role, as a

way to liberate students from poverty and social constraints, and for personal growth. In the current competitive and globalised world, the value of education lies in terms of the employment it can generate. Recently, education programs themselves are geared towards particular career roles, even beyond vocational training and into the school space. The emphasis by not only communities, but also secondary education, on careers with 'high value' employability impacts career aspiration.

To understand the nuanced nature of career aspiration, this study focuses specifically on school children, as often the motivations for aspiration start early and determine specific specialised educational programs chosen by students to achieve their goal. While the existing scholarship has mostly focused on the urban populace, this study focuses specifically on students in rural Banswara region of Rajasthan, offering grounded insight into the various factors shaping career aspirations. Such an approach allows for identifying barriers that both shape aspirations and prevent rural youth from translating their potential, interests, and confidence into a realistic future. While rural education has been extensively studied, covering aspects such as dropout rates, access, quality, and the impact of policy, this paper aims to explore a potentially less researched domain: its influences on aspirations. A crucial area that has potential for further research is the link between educational opportunities and the aspirations among secondary school students.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Aspirations as Socially Constructed

Aspirations are increasingly recognized as being shaped not solely by individual agency but through broader social and structural forces. Gutman and Akerman (2008) assert that aspirations are influenced by various factors, including family background, socio-economic status (SES), and access to resources. Their study finds that children from higher SES backgrounds typically hold higher educational and occupational aspirations, while those from lower SES backgrounds often internalize more limited goals. Parental expectations, self-worth, and academic self-efficacy also play key roles in aspiration formation.

In India, a similar trend is evident. Many young people aspire to careers in police forces, engineering, and management, professions associated with the public sector and offer security of tenure, income, and upward mobility. Educational pathways are frequently assessed for their ability to lead to secure employment, particularly in low and middle-income households (Nandi et al., 2022).

In addition to social factors, parental influence is among the most significant factors shaping career aspirations. Jacobs et al (2006) found that parents' career expectations for their children at age 15 strongly predicted the children's actual careers by age 28. Eccles et al. (2000) highlight that parents' beliefs about their children's abilities directly influence the types of careers children consider viable.

Brasier (2008) notes that both active (e.g., course discussions) and motivational (e.g., encouragement) forms of parental involvement are positively associated with college aspirations. However, this influence tends to wane with age. Additionally, parents also present role models for their children and guide their wards to follow a similar path to achieve their aspirations. Such role models typically consist of close relatives, family friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and in some cases parents themselves, who are presented as desirable due to their similarity of origin, in terms of social identities like caste, religion, region, class, and offer a desirable and achievable dream of achieving mobility inducing career aspirations; often acting as intergenerational aspirations—encouraging their children to achieve more than they could (Nandi et al., 2022). Sharing of success stories and exposure to role models further enhances aspirations by shaping a psychological environment that normalizes achievement.

Further, gender and caste-based stereotypes further influence the formation of aspirations. Francis (2002) illustrates that while girls' ambitions have become more expansive over time, boys' aspirations remain high, and relatively stable. Obura et al. (2012) and Ikonen et al. (2012) document how societal norms assign gendered value to occupations, constraining youth—particularly girls—from pursuing nontraditional careers. These dynamics are reinforced by parental attitudes and peer norms.

2.2 Socioeconomic Status and Aspirations

In addition to familial influence, an individual's socioeconomic status and access to resources are another critical factor determining aspirations. Studies (Guyon & Huillery, 2020; Mali, Tekale, & Shaikh, 2015) consistently show that limited household wealth leads to narrower career aspirations among rural youth. This is particularly stark in rural India, where poverty constrains access to textbooks, coaching, and academic mentorship, creating a structural barrier to upward mobility. Bijapurkar (2020) found high overall optimism among Indian youth, but anxiety levels around future uncertainty remain elevated. While aspirations are broadly high, socioeconomic constraints skew the outcome trajectories for marginalized groups (Das, 2023).

Additionally, place-based identity and community ties influence aspirations in subtle ways. Youth in rural settings often feel ambivalence toward postsecondary education because it implies geographic mobility (Parsons as summarized in RSF, 2022). This emotional cost of migration may outweigh perceived benefits, especially when educational or job opportunities feel uncertain (RSF, 2022).

2.3 School Environment and Institutional Influence

Gupta (1987) established a strong link between academic performance and aspiration: students with high grades tend to set broader career goals. However, Peila-Shuster (2017) observed emerging uncertainty around career planning, given unstable academic outcomes in contemporary educational contexts. In rural communities, this uncertainty is intensified by inadequate institutional support.

As critical contributors to a student's academic journey, teachers and school environment play a role in shaping aspirations. Soe (2020) found that students benefit significantly from teachers who provide individual support, monitor progress, and intervene when academic risk is present. Such teacher-student relationships contribute to higher academic self-efficacy and stronger aspirations.

Ames (1992) suggests that competitive, performance-oriented school environments boost academic achievement, which in turn, enhances aspirations. School language policies—such as mandating English-medium instruction—can also serve to expand students' cultural capital and open new aspirational pathways.

Breen (1989) further argues for the importance of comprehensive guidance programs in schools, especially in rural areas. These programs, involving coordinated input from teachers, counselors, and administrators, can create structured support for students' educational and career planning.

In the case of rural youth, agricultural distress and rural economic decline also shape the aspirations of youth belonging to farming communities. Nandi et al. (2021) demonstrate that agrarian hardship pushes rural youth to move away from farming aspirations. Without supportive policy interventions, these youth often face narrow aspirational windows and high aspiration failures. Cash-transfer and rural-skilling programs like Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY) may help mitigate these structural barriers by improving access to vocational training and employability (DDU-GKY site summary, 2025).

2.4 Social Reproduction and Bourdieu's Framework

Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of *habitus*, *cultural capital*, and *doxa* offer a robust theoretical framework for understanding how aspirations are socially conditioned. *Habitus* refers to internalized dispositions which are shaped by one's environment and social experiences (Swartz, 1999). These dispositions influence what individuals perceive as possible or desirable.

Children raised in environments where higher education is valued are more likely to aspire toward academic and professional achievement. Conversely, children in communities where employment is prioritized over education may form more limited aspirations. Ball (2003) emphasizes that schools themselves operate within specific *doxa*—sets of unspoken assumptions—where elite institutions reinforce high aspirations through abundant resources, while under-resourced schools perpetuate lower expectations. Reay (2010) supports this view, highlighting how unequal access to capital constrains upward mobility.

Multiple studies show that rural students face specific structural barriers in forming and realizing aspirations. Studies by Haller & Virkler (1993), Rojewski and Kim (2003) found that rural students are less likely to aspire to postsecondary education. Due to a variety of environmental factors, rural students have lower confidence, plan less for the future, and are less supported by parents and teachers in pursuing higher education. McIntire & Pratt (1989). Davidson (1996) and Conger and Elder (1994) further add that strong generational ties often instill a sense of obligation to remain within the community, influencing decisions related to education and career. Burnell (2003) found that rural students frequently align their career goals with locally available opportunities, rather than pursuing more ambitious or geographically distant aspirations.

2.5 The Importance of Role Models

The presence of a role model—someone seen as worth emulating—can reveal both the psychosocial well-being of adolescents, and the aspirations they project for themselves. Beaman et al. (2012) found that the presence of female leaders in village councils narrowed the gender gap in aspirations by 32% for adolescents. Azmi et al (2014) found that Indian students often cited celebrities, teachers, and parents as key role models worthy of imitation, demonstrating how exposure to diverse figures can expand perceived possibilities.

In this regard, gender norms also play a vital role. Francis (2002) found that girls' career ambitions have grown increasingly ambitious over time, while boys' aspirations have remained relatively static. Obura, Ajowi, and Aloka (2012) observed that students tend to classify certain careers along gender lines. Ikonen et al. found that such stereotypes are often reinforced by parents and peers.

While the factors shaping aspirations are well documented in both western and Indian contexts, there is a notable gap in the reviewed scholarship regarding how these dynamics play out among school children in rural India. This study seeks to explore this knowledge gap through primary research conducted through a semi-structured survey and in-depth qualitative interviews conducted among students aged 14-19 in the Banswara district of Rajasthan, India. The aim is to provide a grounded, community-specific understanding of the social, economic, and institutional influences on youth aspirations in a rural setting.

3. Research Questions

1. What is the nature of aspirations among school children in rural India?
2. To what extent do parents and socio-cultural factors like gender, parental education, and occupation influence the career aspirations of lower-income students from Banswara, Rajasthan?
3. How does institutional support, in terms of teacher support, career guidance, and external organisation, impact career aspirations of rural youth from Rajasthan?

4. Research Method

To explore the above research questions, this study follows a mixed-methods approach involving the use of a semi-structured questionnaire and in-depth interviews conducted among school children enrolled in five schools in the Banswara district of Rajasthan. The questionnaire consisted of 30 questions, including multiple-choice and closed-ended items, alongside 7 open-ended questions, some of which allowed for “Other” responses with space for elaboration. This format was chosen to ensure both breadth and depth: quantitative responses allow for statistical analysis and identification of general patterns, while qualitative inputs provide richer, more nuanced insights into students’ aspirations and reasoning.

The key variables for this study included parental education and employment, which were used as indicators for socioeconomic background and influence; presence of role models to assess how exposure shapes career imagination; institutional support, especially teachers and access to career guidance; and gender, to examine how it intersects with other factors in shaping career aspirations.

The questionnaire was administered to 102 students, ranging from Grades 9 to 12, across five schools in Banswara district. Data was collected from schools located in three specific areas: the villages of Borewat and Veerpur, and the town of Banswara. These regions were selected for their rural, low-income profile and agricultural base. The local economy predominantly revolves around the cultivation of maize, wheat, rice, and cotton, and the population consists largely of marginal farmers and agricultural laborers.

Literacy rates in the region reflect gender disparities. Banswara town has a literacy rate of 83.1% (with male literacy at 91.70% and female literacy at 74.1%). Borewat has a similar male literacy rate of 83.31%, but female literacy drops to 44.02%. The overall literacy rate is 63.78%. In Veerpur, the literacy rate stands at 46.20%, with 60.0% for males and 32.27% for females.

A non-probability, convenience sampling method was adopted across five schools selected across the three mentioned areas. These schools were accessed through personal networks and the cooperation of school teachers, making sampling of schools feasible within the time constraints of this project. To have a nuanced understanding of the motivations and patterns of aspirations, four batches of students from Grades 9, 10, 11, 12, with 10 students randomly selected from each grade. Although a total of 102 respondents were surveyed, after eliminating incomplete responses, a total of 80 respondents were finally used for this study. This sampling strategy allowed us to target young scholars aged 14 to 19 years¹, as this age group is often a critical period for forming long-term career aspirations. These grades are also important as students begin to briefly explore a critical pedagogy of sciences, social sciences, and

¹ Although students traditionally complete their high school by the age of 18, in rural areas, students often join the school late, take gap years or are often required to repeat a year due to insufficient grades.

humanities in school and begin making key decisions related to their educational and career futures. Moreover, Indian tertiary education admissions are often determined through highly competitive, course-specific national entrance exams, more commonly the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) for engineering, the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) for medicine, and Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) for administrative services, which require extensive preparation, and students often enter into specific coaching classes as early as Grade 9-10 (Kumar, 2017; Kanabar, 2010). Studying this age group allows the examination of factors like paternal support and influence.

5. Research Findings

Table 1: Nature of Respondents

Category	Distribution	Frequency	Sample Share
Age	14-15	25	31.25%
	16-17	33	41.25%
	18-19	22	27.50%
Gender	Male	30	37.50%
	Female	50	62.50%
Grade	Class 9	18	22.50%
	Class 10	16	20.00%
	Class 11	19	23.75%
	Class 12	27	33.75%
Type of School	Government	42	52.5%
	Private	17	21.25%
	Aided	21	26.25%

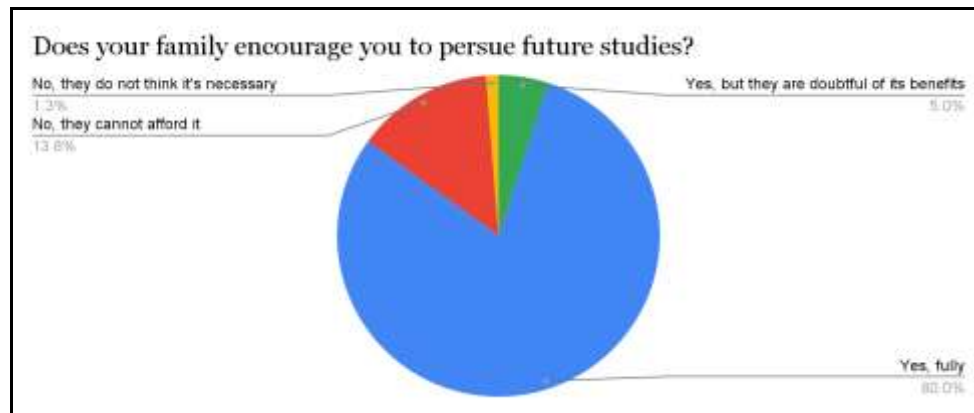
In order to get a comprehensive understanding of rural students, an effort was made to have a sample fairly distributed across age and grade levels. The largest share was of ages 16–17, and Grade 12. Female students made up a slightly larger share of the sample (62.5%), as well as students from government-run schools (52.5% of the sample).

Table 2: Family Profile of Respondents

Category	Distribution	Frequency	Sample Share
Father's maximum level of education	No formal education	23	28.75%
	Primary	20	25.00%
	Secondary	22	27.50%
	College/University	13	16.25%
Mother's maximum level of education	No formal education	32	40.00%
	Primary	28	35.00%

	Secondary	11	13.75%
	College/University	9	11.25%
Father's occupation	Farmer	46	57.50%
	Shopkeeper	6	7.50%
	Business	6	7.50%
	Teacher	5	6.25%
	Unemployed	4	5.00%
	Tailor	2	2.50%
	Other	9	11.25%
Mother's occupation	Homemaker	49	61.25%
	Farmer	14	17.50%
	Teacher	4	5.00%
	Other	13	16.25%

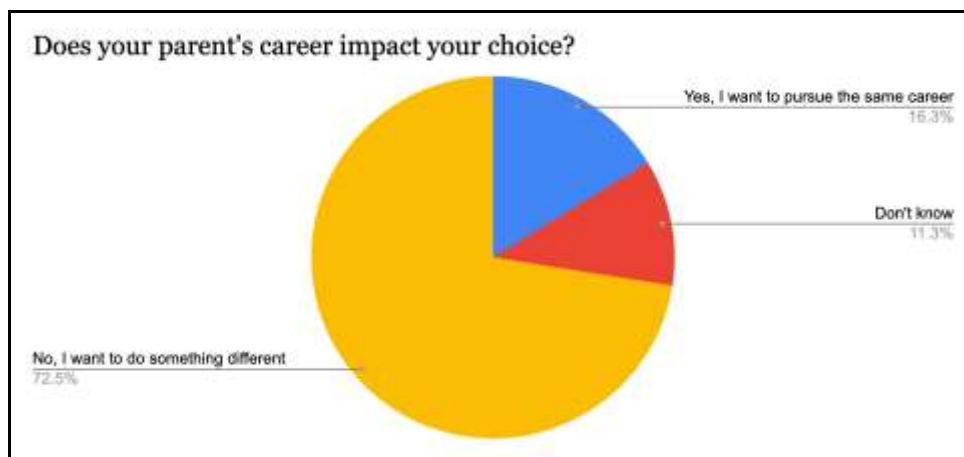
In addition to individual demographics, it is important to situate findings within the familial context, as family remains a key influence on career aspirations. Data on fathers' education and occupation was available for 78 of the 80 students; two students reported not having a father present in the household. A majority of fathers (57.50%) are employed in the primary sector, particularly farming, followed by self-employment such as shopkeeping (7.5%) or having a similar business (7.5%). In contrast, only 17% of mothers are employed. Most mothers are homemakers (61.25%), with 17.5% working on family-owned farms. Parental education levels are generally low, with only 13.5% having completed higher education. Among mothers, 37.8% completed only primary school, while 35.1% had no formal education.



Graph 1: Proportion of Students Encouraged to Pursue Higher Education

In addition to examining the family structure, it is imperative to assess parental attitudes and the degree of support provided for future educational pursuits. Despite a largely low parental educational level, 80% respondents reported that their parents encourage them to actively pursue higher educational programs, and only 13.8% reported parents disapproving due to lack of financial resources required for

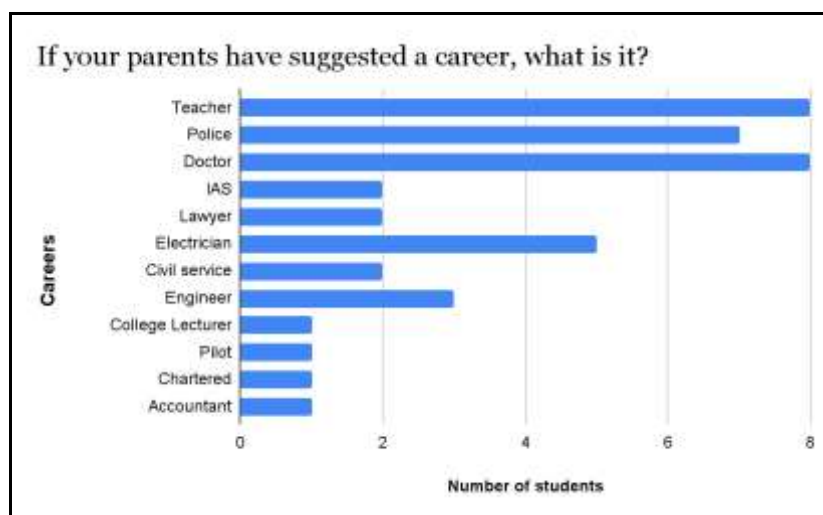
higher education. Thus, 13.8% of students experience a structural hurdle towards their aspiration right from their homes.



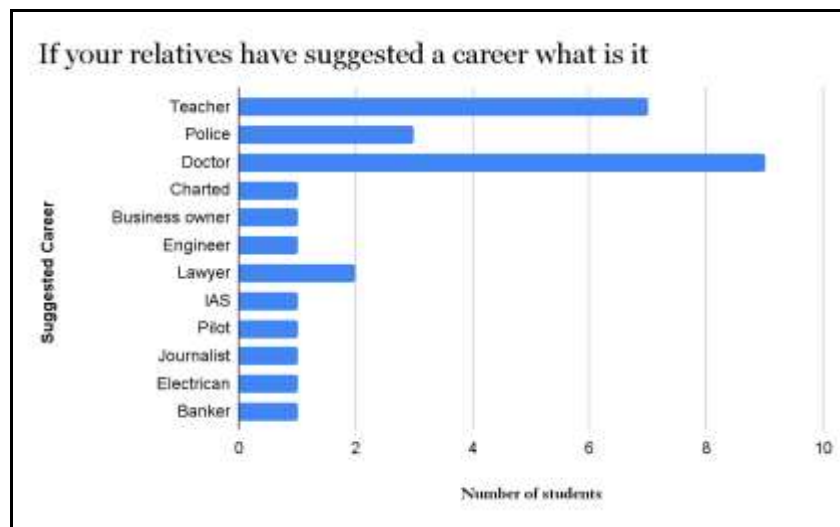
Graph 2: Impact of parental careers on student choice

A key dimension of evaluating parental influence and the impact of socioeconomic status is discerning whether students intend to follow their parents' professional paths. The findings reveal distinct patterns in these aspirations. Approximately 72.5% of students expressed interest in pursuing a career different from that of their parents, suggesting an aspiration for upward educational mobility for both parents and students. Approximately 15% of respondents wished to continue the same career as their parents, while 11% students were unsure of their future careers.

Alongside parental influence, extended family also plays a role in shaping aspirations. Around 82.5% of students reported discussing careers with their parents—26.9% said their parents left the decision to them, while 68.1% received specific suggestions. Additionally, 46.8% had similar conversations with relatives. Still, 15.4% reported never having career-related discussions with either parents or relatives. The specific careers suggested by parents and relatives as a result of career conversations are outlined below. Irrespective of the source of such discussions, the most commonly suggested careers, as visible from Graphs 3 and 4, are those of a teacher, doctor, and police.

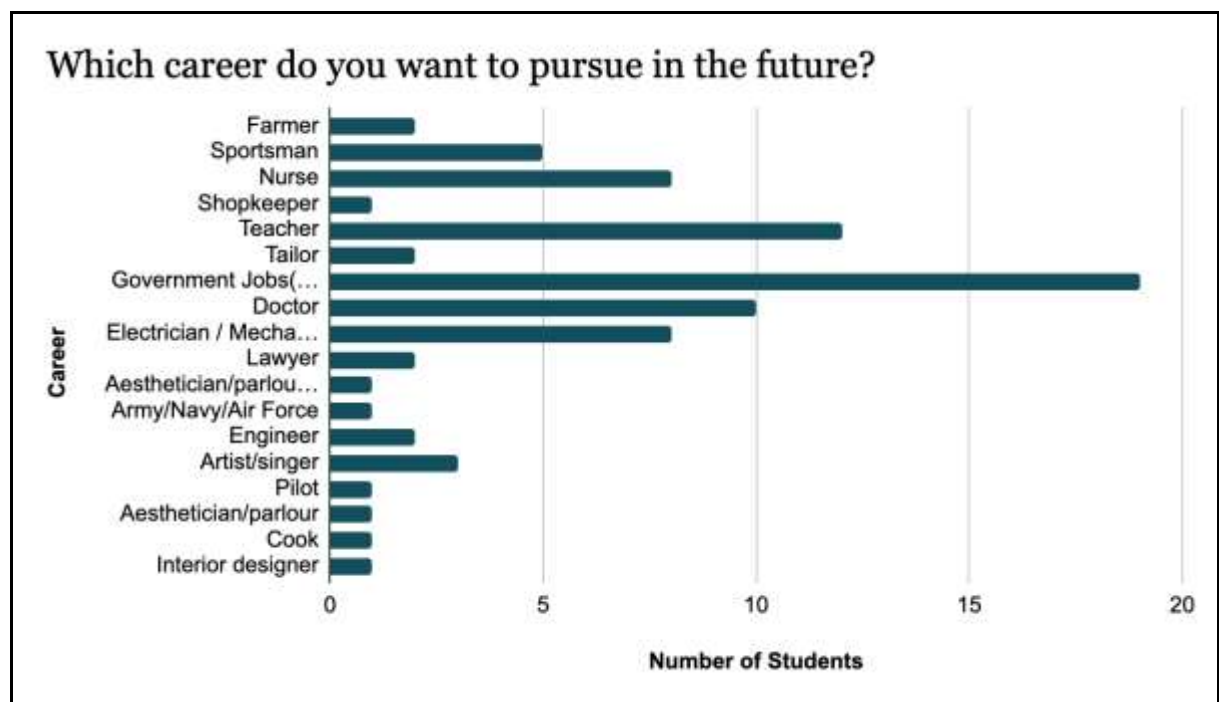


Graph 3: Career Suggestions Offered by Parents



Graph 4: Career Suggestions Offered by Relatives

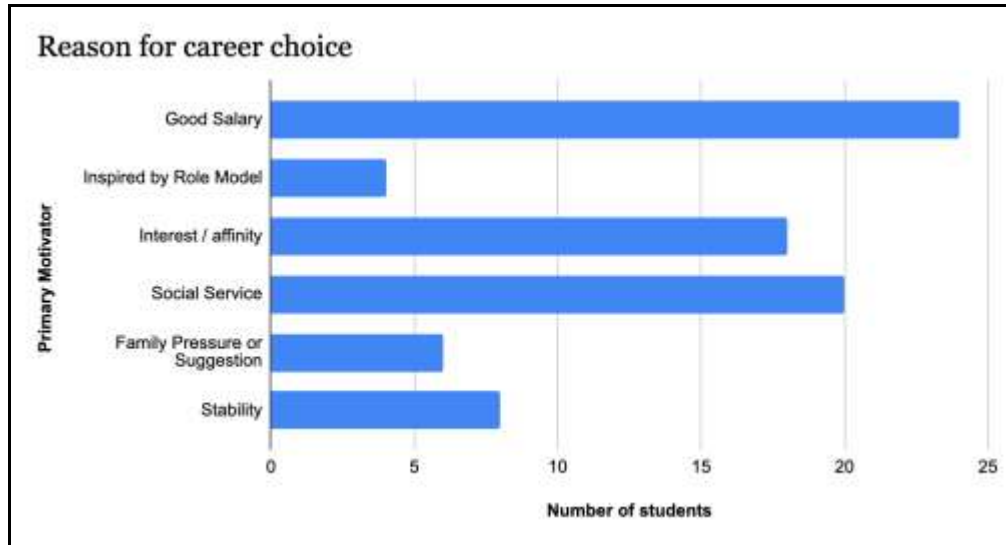
The findings reveal that parents tend to suggest careers like teacher and doctor in equal measures; meanwhile, relatives are more inclined to recommend medicine. The careers that students themselves aspire to are presented in the section below.



Graph 5: Career Aspiration among Students

The largest proportion of students aim for a government job, for example as a police officer or an administrative officer (26.3%). The next most common responses are teacher (15%), doctor (12.5%), and nurse (10%), aligning with the preferences of parents and relatives. Electrician also emerged as a desired career choice for 10% of respondents.

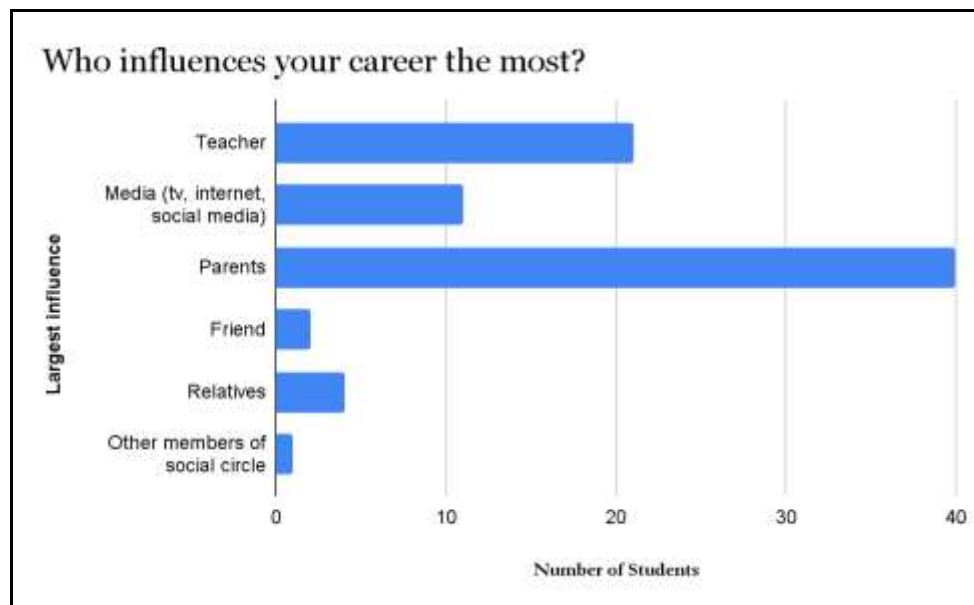
To gain insight into the factors influencing students' vocational preferences, respondents were asked to indicate their primary motivations for pursuing a particular career. The results are presented below:



Graph 6: Students' self-reported reasons for pursuing careers

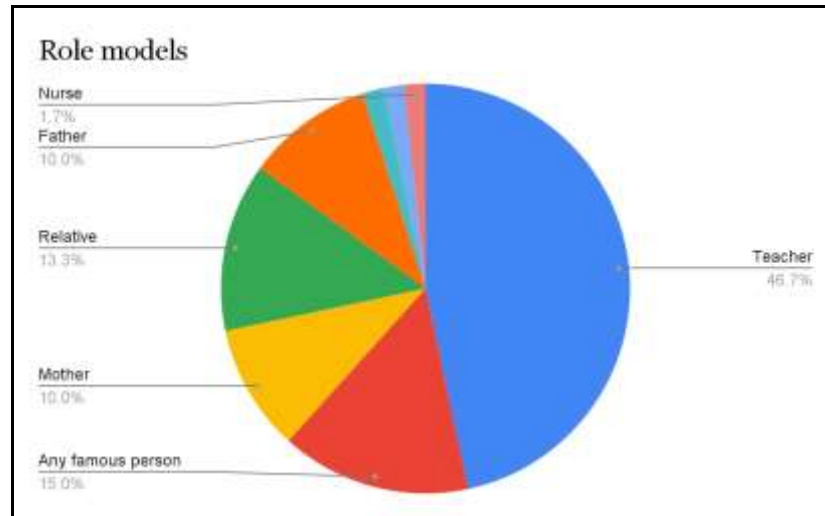
The most common responses were good salary (30%), desire for social service (25%), and personal interest or affinity (22.5%).

To further examine the factors influencing students' career decisions, respondents were asked to identify their primary source of influence. Parents emerged as the most significant influence, cited by just over 50% of participants. Teachers were reported as the second most influential group.



Graph 7: Influences on student aspirations

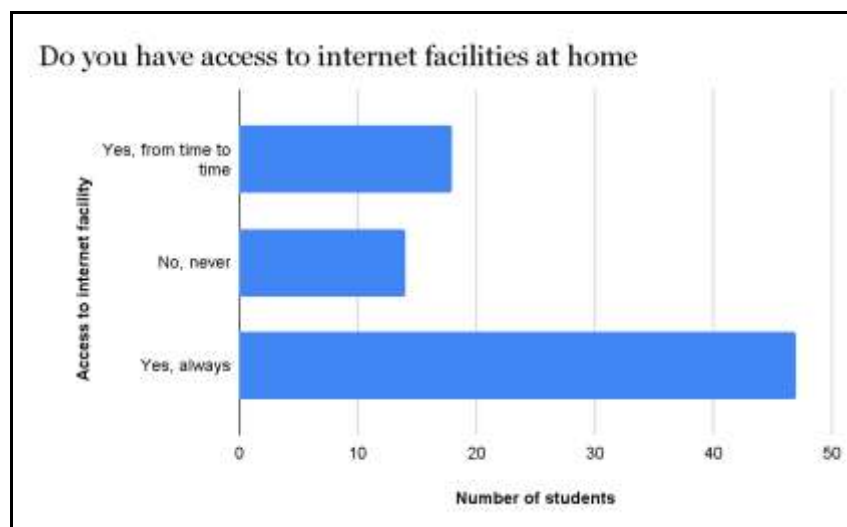
Alongside parents, teachers also emerge as significant influences on students' aspirations. Understanding the nature of this influence is key, particularly when these adults are seen as role models.



Graph 8: Role models of students

The most frequently cited role models are teachers (46.7%). The next largest is of famous personalities (15%), followed by relatives (13.3%), then mothers (10%) and fathers (10%). Notably, for the majority of students, role models were not individuals from the students' desired career fields: rather, people from students' immediate environment.

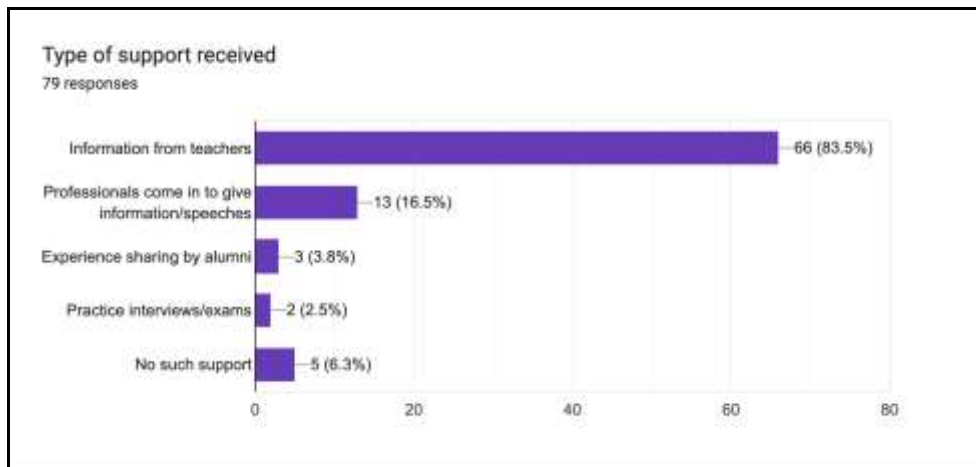
Understanding existing institutional support and access is essential to identifying gaps in access and shaping suggestions about the nature of interventions needed to enhance student aspirations.



Graph 9: Internet access

One key aspect of access is internet connectivity. Over 50% of students reported having regular access to the internet at home, while 17.5% indicated occasional access and 16% reported having no access at all.

Students were asked to report the nature of institutional support. A large majority of students cited information from teachers as their primary source of support in school. This suggests that teachers are a significant influence, both as role models and as the source of career information. This is demonstrated below.



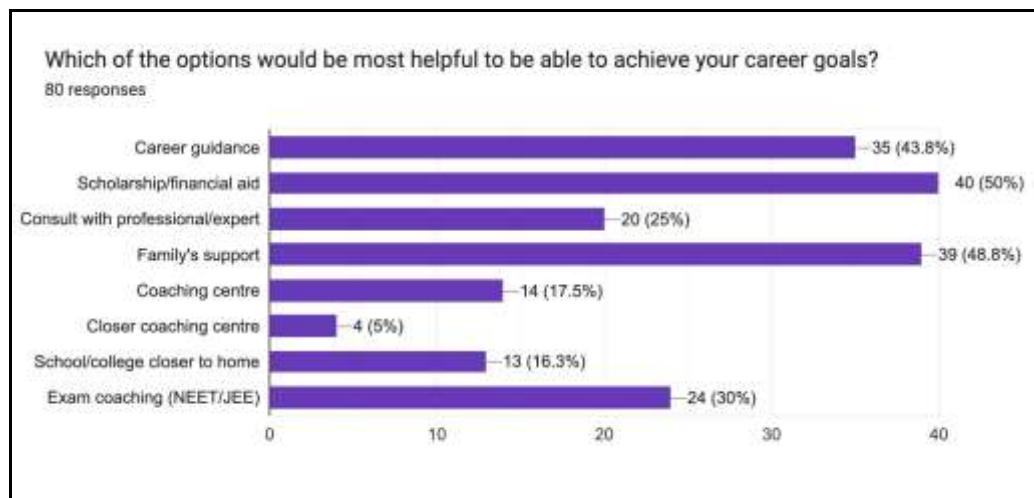
Graph 10: Institutional support received by students

“Information from teachers” most commonly noted by students (83.5%). 13% of students also state professionals come to give talks/speeches. Students were asked to report on the frequency of this support, as well as any resources made available to them. These responses are summarized below.

Table 3: Frequency and nature of institutional support received by students

Category	Distribution	Frequency	Sample Share
Career guidance frequency	Once a year	40	50.00%
	Twice a year	13	16.25%
	Thrice or more a year	24	30.00%
	None	3	3.75%
What resources does your school have that help in career development?	Books relating to career	41	51.25%
	N/A	20	25.00%
	Career counselling	17	21.25%
	Internet for research	10	12.50%

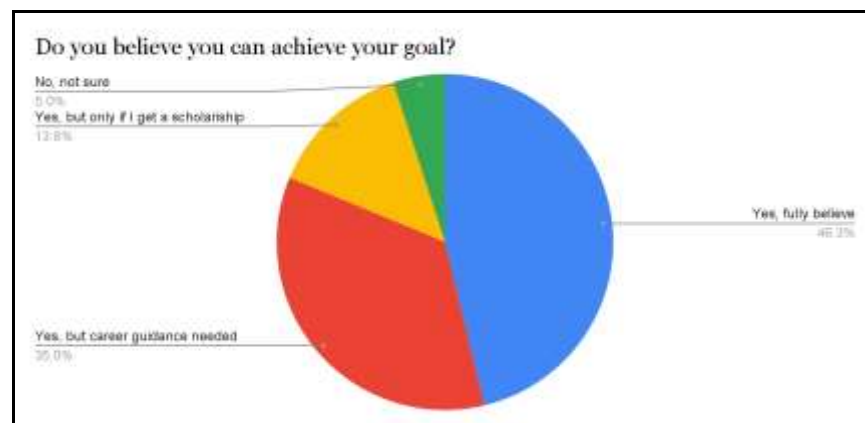
In addition to assessing existing provisions, students were also asked to identify interventions they believe would most impact their ability to achieve their career goals, to assess which are their primary challenges.



Graph 11: Most Impactful Interventions for Career Achievement

Among the key barriers identified by rural students in pursuing their career aspirations, the most frequently cited was the need for scholarships, followed by limited family support and insufficient career guidance. Given their rural location, lack of sufficient economic resources, and access to career-related information often proves to be a significant setback among students. An open-ended question asked students to explain any intervention they feel would be of most help. A majority of respondents identified a desire for quality coaching centres for exams, as well as financial aid.

However, responses from the study revealed that despite these barriers, the students in this sample expressed a largely optimistic outlook, as illustrated in the graph below.



Graph 12: Student confidence in achieving career aspirations

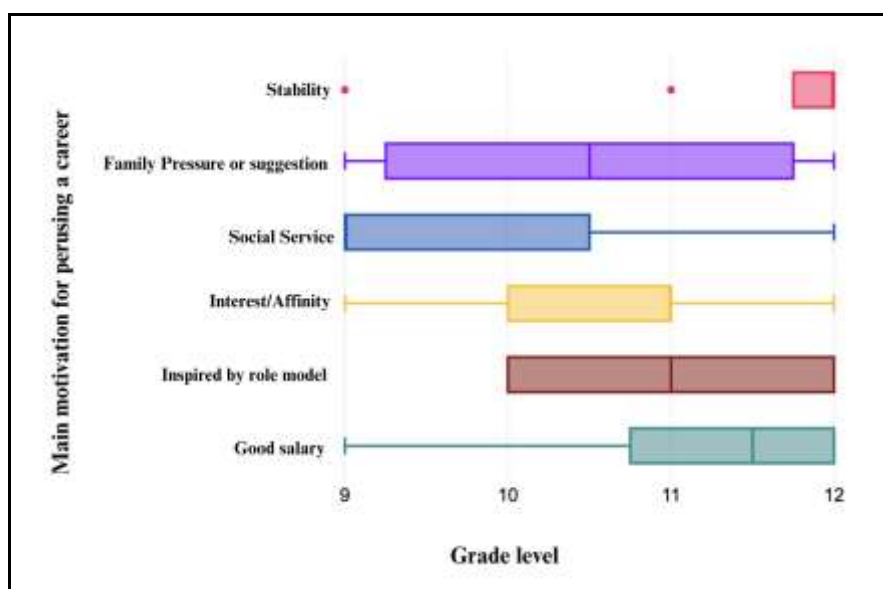
Only 5% of the students reported uncertainty about whether they could achieve their career goals. 46.3% fully believe they can achieve their career aspirations. With appropriate guidance, an additional 35% expressed confidence in reaching their aspirations, while about 13% believed that access to a scholarship would enable them to do so.

5. Research Analysis

While respondents reported a diverse set of career aspirations, for the purpose of analysis, their responses were classified into the following categories: healthcare professionals (including doctor, nurse), public sector professions (including police force, administrative officer, army), education (teacher), semi-skilled/skilled labour (farming, electrician, tailor), engineering, professional sport, and others.

5.1 Variation in Career Aspirations by Grade Level

To explore differences in motivations across grade levels, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. The null hypothesis proposed no significant difference between reason for pursuing a career and grade level, while the alternative suggested that such a difference exists. The results indicated a statistically significant difference ($p < .001$), leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis.



Graph 13: Students' reported main motivation for pursuing a career

This finding aligns with a clear developmental trend. Younger students, with a median grade level of 9, are more likely to cite idealistic goals such as "social service." In contrast, older students, who are more aware of the concept and consequences of career choices, tend to prioritise practical considerations such as "stability" and "good salary." The presence of role models was also observed to be a bigger source of influence for students across grades 10, 11, 12, with a median of 11, suggesting that career-related discussions begin relatively late in students' educational trajectories.

5.2 Influence of Gender on Career Aspirations

To examine whether a relationship exists between gender and the motivations behind specific career aspirations, a Kruskal–Wallis hypothesis test was conducted. In contrast to grade level, no statistically significant association was found, with a p-value of 0.17. The leading motivations were consistent across both male and female respondents: the most frequently cited reason was a desire for a good salary (30%), followed by a commitment to contributing to society (25%), and then personal interest or affinity (22.5%).

Table 4: Chi-square test results for relation between gender and motivations of career aspirations

	Chi2	df	p
Gender	7.76	5	.17

Although motivations were consistent across genders, differences emerged in the types of careers aspired. A second Kruskal–Wallis test was conducted to determine whether gender significantly shaped career choices. The null hypothesis assumed no difference, while the alternative posited that career preferences varied by gender.

The table below presents the calculated ranks for each career category, along with group sizes and median gender values (male = 1, female = 2).

Table 5: Calculated ranks for career aspiration categories by gender

Groups	n	Median	Mean Rank
Semi-skilled/skilled labour	15	1	28.83
Professional sport	5	1	23.5
Healthcare professionals	18	2	46.61
Other	5	2	47.5
Education	12	2	38.83
Public sector	23	2	48.54
Engineering	2	1	15.5
Total	80	2	

Table 6: Chi-square test results for relation between gender and nature of career aspirations

	Chi2	df	p
Gender	18.89	6	.004

The p-value of 0.004 falls below the 0.05 significance threshold, indicating a statistically significant difference between male and female students in the types of careers to which they aspired.

To identify which career categories contributed to this difference, a Dunn–Bonferroni post-hoc test was conducted. A significant difference was found between the aspirational categories of

skilled/Semi-skilled labour and public sector jobs, with an adjusted p-value of 0.048. Female students were more likely to select careers in the public sector, while male students more frequently opted for skilled or semi-skilled labour. No other pairwise comparisons yielded statistically significant results after adjustment, suggesting that differences across the remaining categories may be due to chance. However, the mean rank values offer additional insight: since lower ranks correspond to male students (coded as 1) and higher ranks to female students (coded as 2), categories with higher mean ranks—such as public sector and healthcare—were more commonly chosen by female students. In contrast, categories with lower mean ranks, such as skilled labour, professional sport, and engineering, were more frequently selected by male students.

5.3 Parental Influences on the Nature and Determinants of Career Aspirations

Having explored how individual traits shape aspirations, the analysis next turned to family involvement. A Chi-square test of independence revealed a statistically significant association between parental involvement in career discussions and students' stated motivations for their career choices ($p = 0.041$). Students who engaged in such discussions were more likely to cite "good salary" and "social service" as their primary motivations. In contrast, relatively few of these students identified family pressure as a determining factor, indicating that parental involvement was generally perceived as supportive rather than directive. Conversely, students whose parents did not engage in these conversations and left the decision entirely to them were more likely to cite "personal interest or affinity" as their main reason for pursuing a particular career.

These findings suggest that the nature of parental engagement, whether it involves guidance or autonomy, may determine whether students are driven by extrinsic considerations or intrinsic interests in shaping their career aspirations.

Beyond shaping motivations, parental support also influenced students' confidence in achieving their goals. A significant relationship was also found between perceived family encouragement to pursue higher education and belief in being able to achieve one's desired career goal. A $p = 0.015$, and Cramér's $V = 0.30$ indicating a significant, moderate effect. Students with full family support were far more likely to fully believe in their ability to reach their goals, while students facing financial or motivational barriers at home expressed greater uncertainty or reliance on scholarships.

Given this strong link between family background and both the direction and strength of student aspirations, the next section explores how socio-economic status further mediates these effects.

5.4 Influence of Socio-Economic Strata

Parental education level was used as an indicator of socio-economic status (SES), given its strong association with access to resources, decision-making power, and knowledge transmission within families. Internet access at home was used as one of the indicators for household income, as consistent access to digital infrastructure typically reflects a household's financial capacity, particularly in rural or low-income settings.

Table 7: Link Between Paternal Education Level and Support for Higher Education

	Does a student's family encourage them to pursue higher education?					
		Yes, fully	Yes, but they are doubtful of its benefits	No, they cannot afford it	No, they do not think it's necessary	Total
Father's maximum level of education	No formal education	18.87	1.18	2.65	0.29	23
	Primary	16.41	1.03	2.31	0.26	20
	Secondary	18.05	1.13	2.54	0.28	22
	College/university	10.67	0.67	1.5	0.17	13
	Total	64	4	9	1	78

Table 8: Results of chi-square test

	Chi2	df	p
Father's maximum level of education - Does a student's family encourage them to pursue future education?	22.24	9	.008

A Chi-square test was performed between the maximum level of education completed by a student's father, and whether their families encourage them to pursue future education. The alternate hypothesis states that the higher the father's education level, the more likely the student is to be encouraged to pursue further education. The null hypothesis is that there is no significant relation between the two measured attributes. The test revealed a statistically significant relationship. The calculated p-value of .008 is lower than the defined significance level of 5%. The Chi-square test was therefore significant and the null hypothesis was rejected.

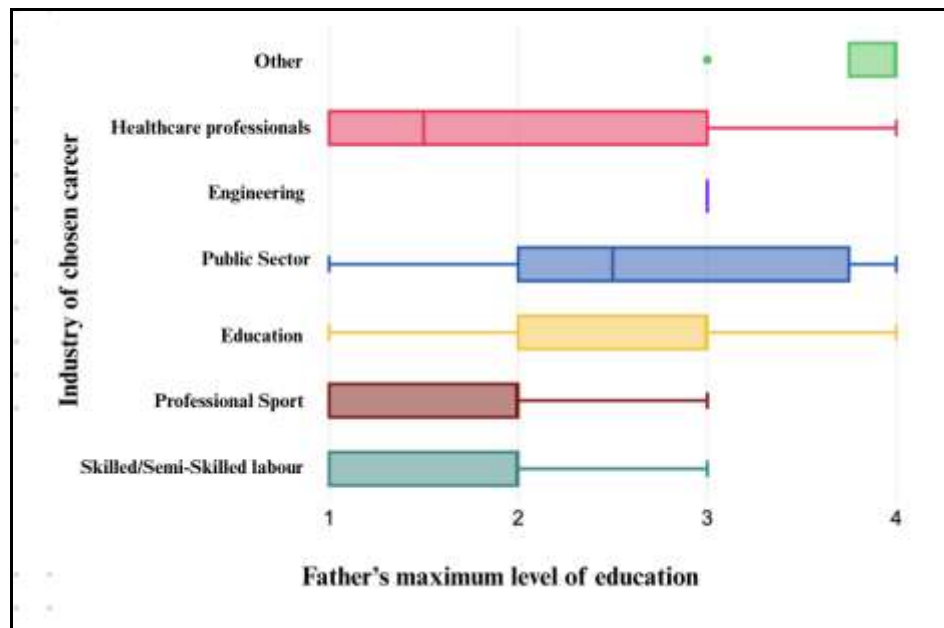
Therefore, the tests reveal that a student whose father has completed university is more likely to be encouraged to pursue further education than a student whose father has completed no formal education. A similar pattern was also observed with mother's education, as well as internet access, with greater internet access highly correlated (with a significance of 0.001) to being encouraged to pursue future education. This suggests that income is the most significant barrier to a family's support of future education.

To further understand the impact that SES has on student aspirations, a Kruskal-Wallis test was applied to analyse whether a relationship between father's maximum level of education and the specific career chosen exists. The 'no formal education' was coded as 1, 'completed primary education only' as 2, 'completed secondary education only' as 3, and 'completed college/university' as 4.

Table 9: Table of ranks

Groups	n	Median	Mean Rank
Skilled/Semi-skilled labour	15	2	26.27
Professional sport	5	2	29.1
Healthcare professionals	18	1.5	32.86
Other	4	4	67.63
Education	12	3	46.83
Public sector	22	2.5	45.84
Engineering	2	3	54.5
Total	78	2	

The Kruskal-Wallis test revealed a statistically significant difference between groups, $p = 0.004$; therefore, rejecting the null hypothesis.



Graph 14: Influence of parental education on career aspirations

A Dunn-Bonferroni test was conducted to analyse which specific differences were significant, and a significant difference was found in the category of “skilled/semi-skilled employment”, which had a low rank, as well as “others”, which encompassed careers such as law, business, and college lecturers. This suggests that skilled-semi/skilled employment is most often associated with low parental education, while careers such as law are associated with greater parental education, ie. SES.

These patterns intersect with gender, which remains a moderating factor in whether students receive support to pursue education. A Chi-square test ($p = 0.017$, Cramér’s $V = 0.36$) revealed that male students were more likely to receive encouragement to pursue higher education compared to female

students. This imbalance extends to parental career suggestions as well. A Kruskal–Wallis test ($p = 0.026$) showed that male students were more often encouraged to pursue trades or technical fields, while females were encouraged toward public service, civil roles, or professional careers such as government jobs. The table below demonstrates this further.

Table 10: Link between gender and profession suggested by parents' profession by parents

Profession	Gender of student		Total
	Male	Female	
Teacher	3.28	4.72	8
Police	2.87	4.13	7
Doctor	3.28	4.72	8
IAS	0.82	1.18	2
Lawyer	0.82	1.18	2
Electrician	2.05	2.95	5
Civil service	0.82	1.18	2
Engineer	1.23	1.77	3
Chartered accountant	0.82	1.18	2
Total	16	23	39

Table 11: Link Between Gender and Support for Higher Education

		Does your family encourage you to pursue future education?				Total
		Yes, but they are doubtful of the benefits of studying	Yes, fully	No, they cannot afford it	No, they do not think it's necessary	
Gender	Male	1.5	24	4.13	0.38	30
	Female	2.5	40	6.88	0.63	50
Total		4	64	11	1	80

Gender also influences the type of career suggested to students by their parents. A Kruskal-Wallis test revealed a statistically significant difference with $p = 0.026$. Mean rank comparisons indicated that careers like Electrician and Engineer were more often suggested to male students, while careers such as IAS, Civil Service, and Chartered Accountant had higher gender ranks, suggesting they were more often suggested to females or more balanced.

Table 12: Table of ranks of suggested careers

Groups	n	Median	Mean Rank
Teacher	8	2	20.69
Police	7	2	25.21
Doctor	8	2	20.69
IAS	2	2	28
Lawyer	2	1.5	18.25
Electrician	5	1	8.5
Civil service	2	2	28
Engineer	3	1	8.5
Chartered accountant	2	2	28
Total	39	2	

Together, these findings show how socioeconomic background and gender identity jointly influence the career pathways students are encouraged to pursue—through structural (education, income) and cultural (gender roles) mechanisms.

5.5 Institutional Support

Beyond home environments, school plays a key role in shaping aspirations. A Chi-square test revealed no statistically significant association between the source of career information—whether through teachers, parents, or media—and students’ specific career aspirations. Furthermore, the source from which students obtained career information did not vary to a statistically significant degree based on parental education, internet access, gender, or age. These findings suggest that access to career information is relatively uniform across the student population in the Banswara district, regardless of demographic or socioeconomic factors.

Engagement is important to evaluate alongside access. In an effort to understand the factors shaping engagement, a Chi-square test was conducted to evaluate the relationship between family support and student engagement with career discussions.

Table 13: Relationship between Family Support and Career-related discussion with teachers

	Have you ever personally discussed your career with a teacher?			
Does your family encourage you to pursue future education?	Yes, I got all the information I need	Yes, need more support	No, have not	Total
Yes, fully	30	22	12	64
Yes, but they are doubtful of the benefits of studying	2	2	0	4
No, they cannot afford it	0	3	8	11
No, they do not think it's necessary	0	0	1	1
Total	32	27	21	80

A statistically significant relationship was found ($p = 0.003$). Students who reported receiving encouragement from their families were substantially more likely to choose to seek school-based guidance.

Table 14: Chi square test results

	Chi2	df	p
Does your family encourage you to pursue future education? -Have you ever personally discussed your career with a teacher?	20	6	.003

Table 15: Relationship between gender and whether students have discussed their careers with a teacher

	Chi2	df	p
Gender - Have you ever personally discussed your career with a teacher?	8.16	2	.017

A Chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine the association between gender and whether students had personally discussed their career with a teacher. The result was statistically significant, with a $p = .017$. Therefore, male students were more likely to have career conversations outside home.

A Kruskal–Wallis test revealed a statistically significant association between gender and perceived access to career information, $\chi^2(2) = 8.06$, $p = .018$. With males coded as 1 and females as 2, the highest mean rank was observed among students who had not received any career information, indicating a greater proportion of female students in this group. Post hoc Dunn–Bonferroni analysis confirmed a significant difference between students who had received sufficient information and those who had not ($p = .014$). These findings suggest that female students were significantly less likely to have personally discussed their career plans with a teacher.

Further analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between gender and access to institutional resources, such as knowledge of scholarships and career guidance programmes. Interestingly,

no statistically significant differences were observed in these areas, indicating that gender is not a determining factor in students' awareness of formal information sources.

Beyond institutional resources and family support, students frequently turn to role models, who play a critical role in shaping aspirations by offering both direction and motivation.

5.6 Influence of Role Models

A Chi-square test revealed a strong, statistically significant association ($p=.01$) between the level of family encouragement towards future education and a student's self-reported primary career influence. Students who receive support from their family are more likely to identify their parents as a key influence. Students with limited, or no family support, particularly those lacking support due to lower household income, place greater influence on teachers, media, or extended social networks.

To evaluate the impact of having contact with a professional in a desired career—regardless of whether the individual is considered a role model—on student confidence and career knowledge, a Spearman's rank-order correlation test was conducted. The results indicated a moderate, positive correlation ($p = .005$) between students having met a professional in their desired career and their awareness of the pathway required to pursue that career. This finding suggests that exposure to career professionals is associated with increased career-related knowledge among students.

6. Discussion

The analysis above revealed certain similarities with existing scholarship, but also critical to differences in terms of motivations and factors that influence career choices and aspirations among young students in rural India.

Age was found to be a significant motivator behind career aspirations. The motivations behind choosing a particular career change across age groups, with older students prioritising stability and higher income-yielding careers, while younger and less informed respondents reported choosing careers with less material benefits and emphasised their desire for careers that would contribute to social services. Interestingly, the specific careers students reported aspiring to did not differ significantly by age group, only the motivators did.

Approximately 86.7% of agrarian fathers were reported to encourage their children to pursue higher education, with none suggesting agriculture as a career path. These findings align with Nandi et al. (2022), who found that farmer parents in South India heavily discourage their children from pursuing agriculture.

A large majority of parents and students from the region aspired for government jobs, such as the Indian Police Service (IPS), Indian Administrative Service (IAS), and Indian Railways and described them as prestigious, well-paying, and reliable sources of livelihood, especially in the rural context.

This study found female students in particular aspire for public sector employment, compared to male students who are more likely to aspire for farming or skilled trades. This finding aligns with others done in India, such as Doni (2020), who have observed a similar gender distribution. Among female students, teaching or clerical work is often perceived as more "appropriate" or "respectable". Male students were observed to have been socialized to prioritize income and manual work, and reported contributing to the family livelihood as an important source of motivation

While 6.7% of boys selected engineering as their desired career, only 2% of girls expressed the same preference. This stark gender disparity reflects broader patterns of occupational segregation. Moreover, these findings stand in sharp contrast to trends observed among urban youth in India, where careers in engineering and business management are consistently reported as the most desirable and sought-after (Gupta, 2004). Such a finding, however, echoes with Eccles (2009), who argued that girls have lower confidence in math and science, or place less subjective value on careers in these fields. These perceptions are shaped by broader socialization influences from family, school, and peers, which may subtly reinforce traditional gender expectations and guide students toward or away from certain career paths.

Parental influence was expected to play a substantial role in shaping students' career aspirations, as suggested by prior research. Jacobs et al (2006) found that parents' gender-typed occupational expectations were significantly associated with their children's career expectations and eventual choices. However, just three out of 80 students reported parental pressure or direct suggestion as the main driver behind their career choice. These findings suggest that parental influence does not overtly influence decision-making, but influences students in more implicit ways.

Parental education level was also used as an indicator of socio-economic status (SES), given its strong association with access to resources, decision-making power, and knowledge transmission within families. The analysis revealed that in the rural context of this study, although positive, there is a weak correlation between parents' level of formal education and their encouragement for pursuing higher education. For instance, children of secondary school graduates are more likely to be encouraged than those of primary school graduates, which aligns with findings by Pandey et al (2023), who found that parental education is an indicator of how far students go in their career. The type of careers that students aspired to also changed, depending on the maximum level of education attained by a student's father. At lower education levels, students aspired for skilled/semi-skilled labour, including jobs such as electricians, but with higher levels of parental education, career aspirations shifted to those such as law and owning a business. This aligns with existing research, such as by Guyon & Huillery (2020), or Mali, Tekale, & Shaikh (2015), who find that disadvantaged family backgrounds lead to narrower aspirations.

This encouragement (or lack thereof) is both, a product of, and a contributor to the *habitus* shaped by a student's social environment. As Bourdieu (1986) argues, when parents lack educational exposure, they may struggle to confidently support higher education pathways, even if they value upward mobility.

Families of male students were more likely to encourage them to pursue future education than female students. This aligns with traditional cultural beliefs of a patriarchal society, where men are described as being more career-driven, while women are described as primarily being engaged in domestic household duties. Rao (2012) observed, "Men and women in rural North India reinforce traditional gender roles to maintain social order".; A similar reflection was recorded in this study.

Belief in career goals is influenced by parental discussions, with students who have had a conversation with their parents about their desired career reporting a greater level of confidence in being able to achieve their career. Brasier (2008) suggests that having the support of a parent, regardless of whether they are able to share information about the specific career, influences students' aspirations and success later in life, which is why these students feel more confident. Between the variables, "Are you confident you can achieve your desired career" and "Do you know the steps to reach your desired career", statistical tests revealed no significant correlation. This goes against traditional beliefs and research by Aley and Levine (2020), who found a direct correlation between confidence and knowledge of career path. In this sample, confidence is high overall, but knowledge is limited.

This disconnect raises questions about the nature of students' confidence. It is possible that some students felt pressured to say they "fully believe" in their ability to achieve their goals due to social desirability bias. Another explanation could be that many students had not yet critically assessed the feasibility of their desired careers—such as highly competitive government jobs—leading to higher confidence. Very few reported pursuing concrete steps toward achieving them. In this sense, these may be more idealised career goals than active, actionable aspirations. This lack of realistic career thinking may partly result from limited student initiative in independently exploring career pathways.

Despite marked disparities in internet access and institutional resources, no statistically significant difference was found in either career awareness or in the nature of students' career aspirations. Students from government schools lacking internet access demonstrated comparable levels of career awareness to peers in better-resourced assisted schools equipped with internet, career-related materials, and counselling. This finding challenges existing literature—such as Ball (2003), who argued that limited school resources constrain aspirations, and Breen (1989), who emphasized the formative role of school counsellors. In this sample, access to school counsellors did not correspond with a discernible difference in career aspirations.

This suggests two key issues: the institutional resources available are likely the same across rural areas, irrespective of their sectoral origin; secondly, in addition to inadequate quality and access, students are also not fully utilizing the digital or institutional support provided, and instead rely heavily on their immediate social networks for guidance—the most cited sources of information being parents and teachers. This makes it evident that access alone is not sufficient; without active encouragement or structured support, students may not take the initiative to seek out or critically evaluate career information. Analysis on student initiative demonstrates a significant association between the level of family encouragement and whether a student has personally discussed their career with a teacher. Students who reported full family support were more likely to have had a career discussion with a teacher and to feel they had received all the information they needed.

In contrast, students whose families could not afford further education or did not see value in it were disproportionately represented among those who had not had any career discussion with a teacher. This indicates that students lacking family support, arguably those who most needed school guidance, are less likely to receive it, highlighting an important access gap.

This reliance on parents and teachers as primary sources of guidance reflects the students' habitus, an internalization of social conditions and expectations. Even when institutional resources are available, the doxa of their environment discourages independent exploration. This is especially visible among female students, who were proportionally less likely to have discussed career options with a teacher. This aligns with the earlier finding that male students are more likely to be encouraged by their families to pursue higher education. Since family support appears to play a critical role in prompting students to seek out teacher guidance, female students are less likely to reach out for help. This emerges as a double barrier as female students may be missing out on both of the major sources of support for career guidance for youth in Banswara district—parents and teachers.

Role models play a well-documented role in shaping career aspirations. Beaman et al. (2012) argue that exposure to role models in a desired career increases students' aspirations toward that path. In contrast, the present study found a marked misalignment between the role models students cited and the careers they hoped to pursue. This mirrors findings by Azmi et al. (2014), where the most frequently mentioned role models were "any famous person," followed by "teachers." In this Banswara district sample, 46.4% of students cited teachers as their role models. This likely reflects limited exposure to professionals across diverse fields. Moreover, since the survey was administered through teachers,

students may have felt some pressure to respond favourably, contributing to the overrepresentation of teachers as role models.

Nonetheless, a relationship between students having met a professional in their career and knowing the path to their career suggests that it does not fill an aspiration/confidence gap, but a knowledge gap. Lack of information and guidance has come through as the biggest challenge students face, aside from lack of funds. Therefore, role models play a critical role in shaping aspiration.

7. Conclusion

This study sought to explore the complex and layered nature of career aspiration formation among secondary school students in rural Banswara. Far from being driven solely by personal ambition or access to resources, aspirations are shaped by intersecting factors such as gender norms, familial education, institutional support, and limited exposure to diverse careers.

Using a mixed methods approach, this study reveals several critical findings, such as the critical role of parental influence, the widespread aspiration for government jobs, and a notable gap between student confidence and concrete career planning. The research also revealed a double disadvantage for female students, who often receive less encouragement both at home and at school. Importantly, exposure to role models was observed to significantly help students gain clarity about possible careers; interestingly, students from better-resourced schools did not demonstrate higher levels of career awareness than their peers, suggesting that infrastructure alone is not sufficient without structured support or guidance.

Although this study could have benefitted from a larger sample size, both in terms of survey and interview responses, the study nevertheless offers valuable insights. Many of the findings resonate with existing research, but this research offers more nuanced insight into how age, gender, family support, SES, role models, and institutional access interact in shaping students' aspirations during the formative years of schooling. Future research can expand these insights through larger and more diverse samples, incorporating urban-rural comparisons and longitudinal tracking. There is also a clear need to examine the potential of structured, school-based guidance, particularly among girls, as a means to bridge the gap between aspiration and real-life outcomes.

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