

How can role models influence young people to choose an entrepreneurial career?

Role models such as parents, local entrepreneurs, and teachers can influence young people to choose an entrepreneurial career, and the stronger the identification with role models the greater the influence. It is therefore important that young people meet different entrepreneurial role models as it increases their chance of meeting those who will inspire them.

Parents' influence

Many studies show that parents' occupation influences young people's choice of occupation; they more often choose an entrepreneurial career if their parents are self-employed. Already from an early age, children of self-employed parents show much higher ambitions to become an entrepreneur and higher self-confidence in performing entrepreneurial tasks.

In a comparison between the influences of heredity and environment, the influence of environment proved to be much greater. Parents can transfer competences, practical work experience as well as financial resources to their children and in this way encourage their children to choose an entrepreneurial career. According to social learning theory, children are during their childhood and adolescence especially influenced by parents' characteristics, for instance perseverance, risk tolerance and preferences for independency and uncertainty.

Parents can function as entrepreneurial role models for their children, often along same-gender lines; thus a self-employed father's influence on his son is approximately twice as big as his influence on his daughter, and, in the same way, a self-employed mother's influence on her daughter is approximately twice as big as her influence on her son.^{1,2}

The influence of entrepreneurs in the local environment / childhood neighbourhood

School and local environment also play a considerable role. Actually, the majority of entrepreneurs do not have self-employed parents, but were influenced by a high prevalence of skilled entrepreneurs in the local area in which they grew up. This confirms the theory that entrepreneurial skills can be learned, and that this acquisition happens through the meeting with a productive entrepreneurial environment.³

Teachers' influence

Teachers are important, because they influence young people during the period of life where they create their own

identity and make choices about education and future career. Again, the teacher's gender plays an important role.

Only very few studies examine the influence of entrepreneurial role models during teaching, but studies have shown that authentic and "real" tasks are typically very motivating for students. It is therefore naturally assumed that meeting real entrepreneurs would also be motivating. The question is how this meeting between students and entrepreneurial role model should take place.

In several countries, Company Programme has used real entrepreneurs as teachers. However, a study of these experiences showed that Company Programme had the greatest impact when taught as single subjects/topics by educated teachers who included local businesses in the students' assignments. It had the least impact when taught by entrepreneurs who focused their teaching on making business plans. This indicates that a collaboration with the business sector is positive, because it is motivating to students to get the opportunity to work with authentic and real assignments. But it also shows that teachers cannot be replaced by persons from the business sector with no pedagogical background.^{4,5}

A Dutch study has shown that role models influence both by creating attention on entrepreneurship and by motivating people to get started, by giving people confidence that they can succeed, giving guidelines for entrepreneurial action, and by providing support and advice. Entrepreneurs have typically been inspired by role models who are close, for instance family and colleagues.

Common to all role models is that their influence on young people is strongest when there are also other similarities such as gender and nationality. In an educational context, it is therefore important to use different entrepreneurial role models, so that students with different backgrounds meet several sources of inspiration and identification possibilities.⁶

¹ Lindquist, M., Sol, J. & van Praag, C.M. 2015. Why do Entrepreneurial Parents have Entrepreneurial Children? Journal of Labor Economics, 33, (2), 269-296

² Hoffmann, A., Junge, M. & Malchow-Møller, N. 2014. Running in the family: Parental role models in entrepreneurship. Small Business Economics, 44(1), 79-104.

³ Guiso, Pistaferri & Schivardi, 2015. "Learning Entrepreneurship From Other Entrepreneurs?" NBER Working Paper No. 21775.

⁴ Bosma, N., Hessels, J., Schutjens, V., van Praag, M. & Verheul, I. 2012. "Entrepreneurship and role models". Journal of Economic Psychology, 33(2), 410-424.

⁵ Moberg, S.K. 2015. JA Europe & MetLife Evaluation Report Secondary school students 2014-15 School year. JA Europe Report.

⁶ Bosma, N., Hessels, J., Schutjens, V., van Praag, M. & Verheul, I. 2012. "Entrepreneurship and role models". Journal of Economic Psychology, 33(2), 410-424.

