



## Family poverty, school-based parental involvement, and policy-focused protective factors in kindergarten

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### ABSTRACT

Multilevel models of data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort ( $N = 19,375$ ) revealed that the negative association between family poverty and school-based parental involvement in education varied according to family and school factors targeted by large-scale policy interventions. Specifically, the association was weaker when parents and teachers had higher levels of educational attainment. In contrast, the association was stronger when schools had greater parent outreach. Also, the moderating role of parent education was stronger for two stably partnered biological parents than for other parents. These findings underscore the need to examine protective factors in research on the family process model and shed light on policy-amenable factors that potentially improve the early educational experiences of poor children.

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Academic disparities between poor and more affluent children are evident at the very start of formal schooling. For example, poor children score significantly lower than both middle- and upper-class children on measures of math and reading achievement during kindergarten (Gershoff, Aber, Raver, & Lennon, 2007; Lee & Burkam, 2002). Given the implications of early educational outcomes for academic trajectories (Pianta, Cox, & Snow, 2007), understanding how poverty influences early achievement and identifying factors that protect against poverty effects, especially policy-amenable factors, are important goals for social science researchers.

Recent research suggests that parents' management of their children's education is a key mechanism through which poverty affects early educational outcomes (Cooper, Crosnoe, Suizzo, & Pituch, *in press*; Crosnoe & Cooper, *in press*; Gershoff et al., 2007), a pattern that affirms the role of parental involvement in No Child Left Behind (NCLB; Epstein, 2005) and Race to the Top Fund (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Less is known, however, about the institutional and organizational factors that can be leveraged to block poverty from disrupting parents' involvement in their children's education. In this study, I address this issue by extending a core theoretical perspective of human development—the family process model (Elder, 1999; McLoyd, 1990). Specifically, I examine (1) the potential for aspects of home and school contexts to condition the association between family poverty and school-based parental involvement in kindergarten and (2) variation in the proposed moderation model by family structure during kindergarten.

I pursue these goals with data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K). ECLS-K is a nationally representative sample of American kindergarteners created by the National Center for Education Statistics for research on early childhood and education aimed at informing social policy. The longitudinal nature of the data and wide range of home and school measures, which help to address omitted variable biases, as well as the representativeness of the data, which promotes generalizability, make ECLS-K ideal for examining socioeconomic disparities in school-based

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parental involvement and the reactivity of these disparities to conditions and programs in the larger ecology of early childhood.

## 1. Poverty, child development, and the family process model

Ample evidence demonstrates the pernicious effects of poverty on all domains of child development. For example, children raised in impoverished families are at an increased risk for physical health problems such as obesity and asthma, mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, and behavioral problems such as ADHD and antisocial disorder compared to their middle- or upper-class peers (Currie, 2005; Samaan, 2000). As discussed, family poverty also has a substantial impact on cognitive and academic outcomes. During elementary school, poor children earn lower grades and test scores, and they are more likely to be retained or placed in special education than nonpoor children (Blair & Scott, 2002; Entwisle & Alexander, 1993; Gershoff et al., 2007; Lee & Burkam, 2002; Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002). Given evidence that the negative consequences of family poverty are more pronounced during early childhood than later on (Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998), this period may represent a time of maximum academic risk for poor children.

Explanations for the association between poverty and child development have often centered on the lack of material resources available to poor children and their families, but a growing body of literature suggests that at least some of the developmental significance of poverty is filtered through family processes. In one of the earliest studies to describe family processes underlying the developmental risks of poverty, McLoyd (1990) proposed a model grounded in ecological and life course theories to examine how poverty and economic loss affect African American children's socioemotional development. According to this model, poverty is a highly disorienting and upsetting experience that introduces stress and discord into the family by disrupting parents' mental health, relationships among family members (e.g., partner and parent-child relationships), and positive parenting beliefs and behaviors. Given the significance of the home environment for child development, these changes are then manifested in less healthy socioemotional development.

Subsequently, family processes have been implicated in the effects of poverty on a wide range of socioemotional and behavioral outcomes in youth of all races (Conger et al., 1992; Mistry, Biesanz, Taylor, Burchinal, & Cox, 2004; Mistry, Vandewater, Huston, & McLoyd, 2002; Parke et al., 2004). The family process model has also been extended to children's educational experiences, with research pointing to parent depression, child stress, and poor parenting behaviors as potential mediators (Burchinal, Roberts, Zeisel, Hennon, & Hooper, 2006; Crosnoe & Cooper, in press; Evans & Kim, 2007; Gershoff et al., 2007; Gutman & Eccles, 1999; Noble, McCandliss, & Farah, 2007; Yeung et al., 2002). During early childhood, education-related parenting, in particular, appears to be a key family process through which poverty and economic disadvantage influence academic outcomes (Cooper et al., in press; Foster, Lambert, Abott-Shim, McCarty, & Franze, 2005; Gershoff et al., 2007; Mistry, Biesanz, Chien, Howes, & Benner, 2008).

Despite strong empirical and theoretical grounding for the family process model, important gaps in the literature have yet to be addressed. For example, although education-related parenting is a documented mechanism linking family economic status and early learning, researchers have yet to expand upon family process models of early education to examine factors that potentially block poverty from disrupting parental involvement. Identifying ways to reduce the negative impact of poverty on *school-based* parental involvement (e.g., meeting with teachers, attending school events) is a critical extension of this research given its early academic importance for low-income populations (Lee & Bowen, 2006) and its connection to education policy. For example, the parental involvement provision of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) aims to promote school-based involvement in particular and family-school connections in general as a means of reducing social and economic disparities in learning. Yet, guidelines for increasing parental involvement at school, especially the involvement of low-income families, are vague (Epstein, 2005). Consequently, identifying factors that protect against the risks to school-based involvement posed by family poverty, especially those that are amenable to policy intervention, may provide valuable information to schools. One way of doing so, the approach taken here, is to examine the protective role of factors already targeted by large-scale policy efforts focusing on low-income children, their families, and their schools.

## 2. The present study

The negative association between family poverty and school-based parental involvement is well established, including in analyses of ECLS-K (Cooper et al., in press; Crosnoe & Cooper, in press; Gershoff et al., 2007; McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro, & Wildenger, 2007). The low involvement of poor parents during kindergarten may be especially problematic because the beginning of school represents a major life transition during early childhood. The transition from home to school requires children to adjust to a new environment, negotiate relationships with new authority figures and peers, and conform to a new set of expectations (Pianta et al., 2007). Children's experiences and performance during this transition year set the stage for future academic progress, launching children into trajectories of achievement (Barnett, 1996). Consequently, the lower involvement levels of poor parents during kindergarten may have negative consequences for their children's ability to transition into and through the early years of schooling.

Explanations for the association between poverty and low parental involvement often focus on the barriers faced by poor parents. For example, poor parents may work long hours in multiple and/or physically demanding jobs and have fewer means of transportation. For these parents, a lack of time, energy, and access may constrain attempts at school involvement (Edin & Lein, 1997; Lareau, 2003). Moreover, poor parents may be less optimistic about their children's educational chances and

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