

Differences between Hispanic and non-Hispanic families in social capital and child development: First-year findings from an experimental study

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Abstract

Disadvantages faced by Hispanic children in the U.S., compared to non-Hispanic Whites, have been widely reported. Economic differences account for some of the gaps, but the social isolation of Hispanic families also serves as a barrier to children's success. Whereas Hispanic families tend to have strong kinship networks, their social ties often do not encompass the school and other authority systems. As a result, Hispanic families may have less access to *social capital*, that is, relations of trust and shared expectations that foster the flow of relevant information and support social norms that contribute to children's academic and social development. To study the role of social capital in child development, we embarked on a school-randomized trial in two cities with large Hispanic populations: San Antonio, Texas, and Phoenix, Arizona. In this paper, we report on first-year data from what will be a three-year longitudinal study, including 24 of an eventual 52 schools and about 1300 of what will be a sample of over 3000 children. We aimed to manipulate social capital through an intervention called Families and Schools Together (FAST), a multi-family after-school program that enhances relations among families, between parents and schools, and between parents and children through a sequence of structured activities over 8 weekly sessions. In the first year, 12 schools were randomly assigned to participate in FAST, and 12 served as controls. Data come from district administrative records, surveys of parents prior to FAST, and surveys of parents and teachers immediately after FAST. Surveys prior to FAST confirm that Hispanic parents have less extensive parent-school networks compared to non-Hispanic Whites. Comparisons of school means on post-FAST surveys indicate that parents in FAST schools experience more extensive social networks than those in control schools, but the differences are much more apparent in Phoenix than in San Antonio. Similarly, a pattern of better behavioral outcomes for children in FAST schools is evident in Phoenix but not San Antonio. Individual-level comparisons suggest that for some outcomes, effects may be larger for non-Hispanic Whites than for Hispanics, which would undermine potential contributions to reducing inequality.

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1. Introduction

Numerous government reports and research studies have documented the disadvantages of Hispanic children in the United States.¹ Differences in social, behavioral, and academic development are evident before children enter formal schooling and increase as they age (Downey, von Hippel, & Broh, 2004; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 1997; Lee & Burkam, 2002; West et al., 2000). Test scores of Hispanic children lag far behind those of non-Hispanic Whites, and the gap has shown little sign of narrowing since the 1980s (Rampey et al., 2009).² Persistent gaps reflect continued immigration, as Hispanics who are proficient in English have caught up slightly with Whites over the last decade, while differences between Hispanics who are English language learners and those who are proficient in English have grown (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011). Cognitive inequalities among children are also closely linked to socioeconomic inequalities among their parents (Kao & Thompson, 2003). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), only 68% of Hispanic adults have high school diplomas, compared to 94% of Whites. Hispanics are three times as likely as Whites to live in poverty, and Mexican Americans, who make up 59% of the Hispanic population (and almost all of the Hispanics in our study), are particularly disadvantaged economically (Chapa & De La Rosa, 2004).

Furthermore, the salience of inequality between Hispanics and Whites will increase in the years to come, not only because Hispanics are the fastest-growing ethnic minority group in the U.S., but also because their population is significantly younger. About 34% of the Hispanic population is under the age of 18, compared to only 21% of the White population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Among second-generation Hispanics, the median age is only 13, meaning that a large majority of them are currently in school (Tienda & Mitchell, 2006). Constituting about 15% of the total U.S. population, the Hispanic population grew by about 57% between 1990 and 2000, whereas the total U.S. population increased by only 13% during that time. If current levels of educational disadvantage are unabated as the Hispanic population

expands, then an increasing fraction of the U.S. population will be insufficiently prepared for work and civic life. Thus, the problem is not one for the Hispanic community alone, but for U.S. society as a whole. Without effective intervention, many of these children will grow up to reproduce the disadvantages of their parents (Kao & Thompson, 2003).

2. Identifying and removing ecological barriers to success for Hispanic families

Hispanic families often perceive a sense of isolation from school systems, and several studies have noted that this isolation is a key barrier to the school success of Hispanic children (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). Although Hispanics commonly exhibit strong ties among families, these social ties typically do not encompass the school (Flores-Gonzales, 2002; Suarez-Orosco, Suarez-Orosco, & Doucet, 2003) and, more generally, do not include as many experts as the social networks of Whites (Cornwell & Cornwell, 2008). The networks of middle-class parents are significantly more likely to include educators and other professionals, but the networks of working-class and poor families tend to emphasize kinship groups (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003). As a result of these network differences, minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged parents perceive a sense of separation and distance from school authorities (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). As Larson and Rumberger (1995, p.166) reported in a study of Latino teenagers in California:

There were deep chasms in the relationship and communication between school and home. School personnel had many negative misconceptions about the motivations and values of parents. There was widespread belief that parents did not sufficiently value education and that they were unwilling to give sufficient time to rearing their children and participating in school activities. On the other hand, we found most parents to be fearful and alienated from school authorities while at the same time assigning expertise and responsibility to school personnel for educating their children.

2.1. Social capital and school success

A sense of distance from the school system prevents the development of family–school *social capital*, that is, relations of trust and shared expectations that may be embedded in social networks (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). A key marker of social capital is “intergenerational

¹ By “Hispanic,” we mean those who self-identify as being of Spanish or Latin descent. We use the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” interchangeably. We recognize that “Hispanic” is not a monolithic category, and we discuss some of the nuances of Hispanic identity later in the paper. Mora (2009) provides a cogent discussion of the history and meaning of “Hispanic” as a demographic category in the U.S.

² Hereafter, we use the term “Whites” to refer to non-Hispanic Whites.

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