



Parents social and resource capital: Predictors of academic achievement during early childhood

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ABSTRACT

Although research in the area of academic achievement has expanded over the past several years, questions about the individual and social factors, especially in early childhood, remain unanswered. The purpose of this study is to examine to what extent parents and teacher/school's social capital and resource capital predict academic achievement in early childhood. It is also the purpose of this study to examine the usefulness of social capital theory in claiming and understanding of academic achievement in early childhood. This study utilized the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Class of 1998–1999 (ECLS-K). Children and their parents who participated in the study in the Spring of 1999 (baseline) and the Spring of 2002 (third grade) was the focus of this research. Results from this study found that parent's resource capital is a better predictor of children's academic achievement than parents' social capital. This study also discusses the findings in relation to implications for future research and policy work.

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1. Introduction

One of the challenges of today's society is how to reduce the inequalities in educational and occupational attainment among students from diverse socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds (Majoribanks, 2002). Majoribanks suggested that having parents who are active in their child's learning and school activities is positively associated with children's learning and various school outcomes. Subsequently, educational organizations have designed methods that address inequalities by involving parents in the learning experiences of their children at home and at school. However, little is known about the specific characteristics of parents and teachers with regard to academic achievement during the early childhood years. Although we do know some of the predictors of academic achievement, most of the research so far has examined the factors that affect academic achievement in adolescents. Results are inconclusive as to the individual and social factors that affect academic performance in students (Mullis, Rathge, & Mullis, 2003). The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which parents' social capital and resource capital predict academic achievement in early childhood utilizing the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Class of 1998–1999 (ECLS-K). Children and their parents who participated in the study in the spring of 1999 (baseline) and the spring of 2002 (third grade) were the focus of this research.

1.1. Family social capital

For this study, parent social capital was measured using indicators of parent involvement with their child's school, family structure, and marital status. Coleman's (1988, 1989, 1990) social capital theory delineates the complexity of relationships among distal social spaces, immediate family settings, and an individual's behavior. Coleman suggested that family influences are separated into three distinct components comprised by financial, human, and social capital. According to Coleman (1988), human capital reflects the resources that parents use to create a positive leaning environment. In contrast, family social capital is defined by the resources that individuals may access through social ties (Frank & Yasimoto, 1998). As such, the amount and quality of academically-oriented interaction between parents and children—their interpersonal relationships, family structure, and greater community attributes—impacts their academic performance (Mullis, Rathge, & Mullis, 2003).

Coleman (1988) proposed that familial background offers social, financial, and human capital as resources for youth. He argued that social capital serves as the medium through which children access their parent's financial and human capital. Therefore, social capital can be measured by the quality and quantity of networks that connect children with the resources of their parents. Moreover, this notion of connectedness extends outside the family and into other social environments. Coleman argued that a person's actions are shaped by social context and not simply by the financial and human resources available to them.

Some families have more of these resources than others. Advantaged families have high stocks of financial, human, and social capital

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(Croninger & Lee, 2001). However, Coleman and Hoffer made distinctions between disadvantaged and deficient families. According to them, disadvantaged families are those families from ethnic or language minority backgrounds, with few monetary resources, and include parents with limited educational backgrounds. Deficient families are those families with only one parent, have parents who are involved in work activities more than family activities, and contain other structural weaknesses. Both disadvantaged and deficient families are growing in numbers in our schools (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). Consequently, a child's family background affects his or her goals and attitudes toward learning opportunities and school. Families' help students focus on and finish the work assigned at school—a value placed upon the institution itself (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). The social capital developed within the family has wide ranging effects on the student's opportunities, development, and behavior (Putnam, 2000).

In terms of social capital, children are not seen separately from their parents. As Leonard (2005) stated, "social capital in the lives of children is seen as a bi-product of their parents' relationships with others and as a result, their own social capital networks are rendered invisible" (p.607). Accordingly, for children social capital is seen as an asset that they can utilize later in life, rather than during their childhood. Thus, the primary concern of children is not with having social capital themselves, but with the ability of adults to transfer the stock of social capital to them, and then later in life, the children can cash in on their generated social capital (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000). Marrow (1999) noted that research fails to explore how children actively generate their own social capital, and even make links for their own parents' social capital.

1.2. Family structure

In the United States, it is predicted that with the increase in divorce and non-marital childbearing, at least 50% of children will spend part of their childhood living in a single parent household (Majoribanks, 2002). Research that has examined relationships between family structure and student outcomes has tended to show that in relation to two-parent families, children living in single parent homes have higher drop-out rates, are more vulnerable to pressure from their friends to engage in deviant behaviors, have lower academic achievement, and are more likely to be in trouble with the law (Majoribanks, 2002). Thus, the benefits of having a two-parent home have been shown to be greater for elementary school students than for high school students. It is also noted that young adults from single family homes are also more likely to enter low-social status occupations.

Mulkey, Crain, and Harrington (1992) examined relationships among early family background, family structure, parent involvement, students' school and after-school behavior, family economic conditions and student's academic performance. They revealed that the effects of living in a single parent house on student academic performance could be attributed almost entirely to the student's early family background. Once the social context characteristics were taken into consideration, the residual effect of the one parent's absence was explained by the economic circumstances of the family (Mulkey, Crain, & Harrington, 1992). Mulkey et al. concluded, "Consistent with previous studies, this analysis shows that the effect of a single parent upbringing on the evaluation of students in school—whether by standardized tests or by grades, is small" (p. 61). Similarly, Dronkers (1994) found that children from two-parent families have more school success than children from one parent families, but it should be noted that the difference is not a very important one. He also found that living in a single parent or two-parent home is not a very important factor in the educational success of children.

For single parent families, Majoribanks (2002) claimed that the absence of a parent is likely to be related to a decrease in total parental involvement which in turn is associated with children's poorer

learning outcomes. Biblarz and Raferty (1993) found that children in single parent homes are less likely than those in two-parent homes to report that the parent is the most influential person in their life. Moreover, the absence of fathers has a particularly negative socialization influence that is especially harmful to boys. Biblarz and Raferty (1999) also found that children from single mother families consistently do better than those raised in single father or stepfamilies, once socioeconomic status has been taken into account. Single father families and step father headed families have about the same negative effect on children's attainment.

It is generally accepted that the quality of parent–child interactions during childhood has an important association with school success and the eventual social-status attainment of young adults. Kellaghan, Slone, Alvarez, and Bloom (1993) found that the home environment is the most powerful factor in determining the school learning of students, their level of school achievement, their interest in school learning, and the number of years of schooling they will receive. Therefore, parents and the home environment are very important to children who are in school.

1.3. Parent involvement

Parental involvement is a broad concept that entails many behaviors ranging from help with homework to being an active member on school committees. Consequently, much of the research in this area is mixed. Many studies (Hakofa & Fincham, 1995; Ginsburg and Bronstien, 1993; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992) examining parental involvement appear to incorporate many aspects of parental behavior, measuring both the home and school involvement with parents. In addition, much of this research seems to group general parent–child interactions with more specific school-focused parent–child behaviors. Although these studies have provided invaluable insight into the complex familial relationship processes that affect children's school performance, there is clear need for both research and theory that addresses specific school-focused parent–child interactions.

Researchers (Martinez-Pons 1996; Scott-Jones, 1995; Kellaghan, Slone, Alvarez, and Bloom, 1993) have developed conceptual models that look more specifically at parent–child interactions and school outcomes. Some have looked at parental involvement in the home from a broad perspective, incorporating general school-focused behaviors in the home. Seginer (1986) discussed parental supportive behaviors and categorized them into instigative and responsive behaviors. In Epstein's (1992) description of parent–school involvement, the construct of monitoring and assisting has been used to explain parental involvement in the home.

Others have developed conceptual frameworks that illustrate specific types of parental involvement in the home. Kellaghan, Slone, Alvarez, and Bloom (1993) divided parental involvement into five main areas: (1) work habits of the family, (2) academic guidance and support, (3) stimulation to explore and discuss ideas and events, (4) language environment, and (5) academic aspirations and expectations. Using a social-cognitive perspective, Martinez-Pons (1996) proposed that parents model, encourage, facilitate, and reward their children's self-regulation of learning. Finally, Scott-Jones (1995) reviewed many types of parental involvement and determined that four main categories exist: (1) valuing, (2) monitoring, (3) helping, and (4) doing.

Despite the variety of conceptualizations that have been put forth to explain parental involvement, it nonetheless seems to be important in the children's academic performance. Several researchers have reviewed various parental influences related to academic outcomes and concluded that parental involvement is consistently found to be positively related to better grades in school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). In a recent meta-analysis of parent involvement and academic achievement, Fan and Chen (2001) found a moderate and meaningful relationship between parental involvement and children's academic success.

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