



Accumulating advantages over time: Family experiences and social class inequality in academic achievement

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ABSTRACT

Children from different family backgrounds enter schooling with different levels of academic skills, and those differences grow over time. What explains this growing inequality? While the social reproduction tradition has argued that family contexts are central to producing class gaps in academic achievement, recent quantitative studies have found that family experiences explain only a small portion of those inequalities. We propose that resolving this inconsistency requires developing a new measure of family experiences that captures the continuity of exposure over time and thus more closely reflects the logic of the social reproduction tradition. Results using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten cohort (ECLS-K) show that, consistent with previous quantitative research, time-specific measures of family experiences have little explanatory power. However, cumulative family experiences account for most of the growing inequality in academic achievement between children from different social class backgrounds over time. These findings support claims from the social reproduction tradition, and contribute more broadly to the understanding of how family experiences contribute to social inequality.

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1. Introduction

Children from different family backgrounds enter schooling with different levels of academic skills, and those differences grow over time (Bodovski and Farkas, 2008; Bodovski and Youn, 2012; Cheadle, 2008, 2009; Fryer and Levitt, 2004; Yeung and Pfeiffer, 2009). What explains this growing inequality in academic achievement between children from different family backgrounds? There are two primary contexts that could contribute to increasing inequality: schools and families. While schools may seem like an obvious culprit, their role in increasing inequality has been challenged since the Coleman Report (Coleman, 1966). As such, the family has become a central focus of inquiries about the growing inequality in academic achievement (Alexander et al., 2001; Condrón, 2009; Downey et al., 2004).

One sociological tradition that has been particularly prominent in explaining how class-specific family experiences contribute to inequalities in children's academic achievement is the social reproduction perspective (e.g., Bernstein, 1971; Bourdieu, 1990; Kohn, 1963; Lareau, 2003). According to this perspective, the family is a central component of the stratification processes because it is within the family that children are socialized into their class positions. That is, parents interact with children, expose them to specific experiences, and create a family environment in which to raise children that varies according to social class background. As a consequence, children develop specific skills, attitudes, tastes and preferences, only some of which (the ones associated with the middle class) are rewarded by social institutions such as schools. These

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class-specific differences in family experiences thus contribute to producing gaps in academic achievement and reproducing social inequality across generations.

Although the social reproduction perspective provides a potential explanation for social class inequality in academic achievement, only some of its propositions have been supported in recent quantitative research. Studies relying on quantitative methodologies have reaffirmed that family experiences vary across social classes and are associated with children's educational outcomes. However, family experiences seem to account for only a relatively small proportion of the gap in academic achievement between children from different social classes (e.g., Bodovski and Farkas, 2008; Dumais, 2002; Cheadle, 2008; Roksa and Potter, 2011). This discrepancy suggests that either family contexts are not as important as the social reproduction perspective argues or that quantitative studies are not fully capturing the concepts implied in the social reproduction tradition.

While one solution to this conundrum could be to try to measure more aspects of family contexts, we suggest that resolving this discrepancy does not lie in collecting more information on family experiences (although that could be valuable) but in changing the measurement of family experiences to more closely mirror the concepts embedded in the social reproduction arguments. The social reproduction perspective emphasizes stability and consistency in family experiences. According to this perspective, children's exposure to their family is not a one-time occurrence or something that can be adequately captured in a specific survey wave. It is an on-going process that builds on itself and in doing so creates the environment in which family socialization processes occur. Documented differences in family experiences across social classes mean that children not only receive unequal exposure at any given moment, but experience this inequity continuously year after year. Recent quantitative studies examining these relationships, however, have tended to conceptualize family experiences as time-specific and thus temporally independent socialization experiences. We propose that this approach to specifying family experiences explains the relatively weak findings in the quantitative studies and that cumulative family experiences would play a more prominent role in explaining social class inequality in academic achievement.

To test this proposition, we replicate time-specific measures of family experiences commonly used in previous research, and develop a measure of cumulative family experiences, which more closely reflects the logic of the social reproduction tradition. Subsequently, we examine whether these different measures of family experiences help account for increasing inequality in academic achievement between children from different social class backgrounds between kindergarten and eighth-grade. Results using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten cohort (ECLS-K) show that children from different social class backgrounds are exposed to different levels of educationally beneficial family experiences year-after-year, leading to differential levels of accumulated experiences over time. Notably, these differences in cumulative experiences account for a substantial proportion of the growing inequality in academic achievement between children from more and less advantaged families over time. In contrast, time-specific measures of family experiences often used in previous research have much less explanatory power. These findings support the social reproduction perspective and demonstrate the importance of understanding how family experiences accumulate over time and contribute to disparities in academic achievement and reproduction of social inequality across generations.

2. Literature review

Children from more advantaged families are more likely to arrive at school with higher levels of academic skills than children from less advantaged circumstances, and this disparity in skills grows over time (Alexander et al., 2001; Cheadle, 2009, 2008; Downey et al., 2004). Recent research has convincingly argued that most of the test score gap between children from more and less advantaged families results from non-school factors (i.e., family factors, see Condron, 2009). While different aspects of family-life, such as family structure, economic resources, and healthy living, contribute to these growing gaps, an extensive body of sociological literature has focused on family processes and parenting practices. The social reproduction perspective in particular has been prominent in highlighting the role of family experiences in transmitting social class advantages to children.

2.1. Family experiences and social reproduction

Previous research has consistently shown that family experiences tend to vary by social class (for recent reviews, see Farkas, 2003; Hoff et al., 2002). Kohn (1963, 1977) conceived of family experiences as essential to the stratification process. “[P]eople's positions in the class system are related to virtually every aspect of their lives. . . [and] . . . none, certainly, is more important than the relationship of social class to parental values and child-rearing practices (pg. 48).” Additionally, Bernstein (1975) highlighted how middle class children gained advantages in social settings, such as schools, because of the visible and invisible skills that parents conveyed across generations. Visible skills represented knowledge and skills that could be assessed using objective criteria, while invisible skills had diffuse and unclear methods of evaluation. More importantly, while invisible skills were arbitrarily judged, they simultaneously influenced the evaluation of more objective (i.e., visible) skills. According to Bernstein, middle class parents transmitted the “right” invisible skills, thus providing additional advantages to their children in the evaluation of visible skills at school.

This line of reasoning closely resembles work by Bourdieu (1973, 1990) who considered a broader set of cultural practices in the transmission of class advantage. According to Bourdieu, the family is the primary source of children's habitus and cul-

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