

It Takes a Family: The Effects of Social and Cultural Capital on Educational Achievement

Abstract:

Social scientists, educators, and policy makers have long been concerned with equality in education. Nowhere is this concern greater than in the education of non-mainstream students—lower socioeconomic status, minority and immigrant groups. Much attention has been focused on the material and financial resources of the schools serving these students. My paper focuses on the social and cultural capital available to non-mainstream students, and the subsequent effect on educational achievement. Using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, I have looked at students who categorize themselves as white, black, Asian, or Hispanic. Using the statistical program SPSS, I then used the factors of reading scores, socioeconomic status, parental involvement with education, and parental engagement with schools to look at the effects of social and cultural capital among groups. I further adjusted the findings for the effects of the combined factors of socioeconomic status, parental involvement in education, and parental engagement with schools. The results show that social and cultural capital does have an effect on the educational achievement of non-mainstream students in the United States. This information will be useful to educators and policy makers concerned with this subject.

Introduction

“Every child must be encouraged to get as much education as he has the ability to take. We want this not only for his sake – but for the nation's sake. Nothing matters more to the future of our country: not military preparedness – for armed might is worthless if we lack the brain power to build a world of peace; not our productive economy – for we cannot sustain growth without trained manpower; not our democratic system of government – for freedom is fragile if citizens are ignorant.”

President Lyndon B. Johnson, special message to the Congress (1965)

Social scientists have been concerned with educational problems faced by non-mainstream students – lower socioeconomic class, minorities, and immigrant children – since the beginning of the twentieth century (Gibson and Ogbu 1991). Foremost anthropologists and sociologists of every generation since then have documented the schooling experiences of these children. This research has led to efforts to improve the school success of these children. Being a minority student has been correlated with unequal educational opportunity and high rates of failure in schools. A growing concern has been low scholastic achievement among minority groups in the United States, and consequent exclusion from higher education and employment opportunities (Frederickson and Petrides 2008). Recent research has also indicated that there may be significant differences in the patterns of adaptation and school adjustment between immigrant and non-immigrant minorities.

Many factors have been shown to influence the rates of educational success among minorities, including but are not limited to gender, socioeconomic status (Gibson and Ogbu 1991), parents' educational achievement, mother's work status (Berends, Lucas, and Peñaloza 2008), and racial or ethnic affiliation. In the case of children who have recently immigrated to the United States, the degree of English language proficiency is also a factor in their scholastic success (Berends, Lucas, and Peñaloza 2008). This can be compounded by a lack of bilingual

teachers available in the classrooms.

These issues will be addressed within the framework of the theories of cultural capital and social capital. Cultural capital can be stated in three forms: the embodied state, or nature of the mind and body; cultural goods, such as books, pictures, and other material goods produced by the particular culture; and the institutionalized state of the culture. Social capital can be identified as the “actual or potential resources” associated with membership in a certain group (Bourdieu 1986).

This paper addresses the effects of racial and ethnic affiliation of the child and socioeconomic status of the family upon the educational success of the minority student. In addition, the factors of parental involvement with the child's education both at home and with the school will be included in the research data.

Using these theories, this paper analyzes the effects of available capital upon the scholastic success of minority students. Specifically, it endeavors to determine which types of available capital contribute most to the students' accomplishment in school, and the absence of which factors are most detrimental to their success. Data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study are used for this study.

While previous research has addressed the educational and social factors related to scholastic achievement for various minority groups, little attention has been paid to comparing and contrasting data for each group to find the most common factors. This research attempts to combine the information from these studies and evaluate the factors which generate the greatest scholastic success consistently for all groups. In this manner, the educational system can focus on obtaining educational equality and a greater degree of scholastic success for all children.

Literature Review

Social/Cultural Capital

Much of the work concerning social and cultural capital in the United States today is based upon the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's theory stated that individuals who are located in diverse social settings and have dissimilar background experiences will become socialized differently from each other (Cookson 2006). Particularly relevant to the discussion of social capital and education are the three types of social capital discussed by Coleman (1988); obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms. Coleman also states that most sociologists hold the view that individuals are guided by social rules, norms, and obligations; this serves as a framework to explain actions within a social context and also make clear the ways in which these actions are formed by that social context. The structure of these backgrounds also serves to form the amounts and types of resources which individuals are able to draw upon throughout their lives (Cookson 2006). Differences in the types of social capital were seen when studied across racial and ethnic groups (Pong, Hao, and Gardner 2005).

The concept of cultural capital was first developed by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron to explain the force of culture on class systems and the connection between social action and social structure. Cultural capital is important in understanding the process by which social stratification is sustained (Lamont and Lareau 1988).

Family/School Relationships

Family background and the resulting effect on children's scholastic experience has been a

dominant issue in the field of sociology. Most of the studies in the past have focused on educational outcomes due to family factors, but more recent work has begun to focus on the process through which these outcomes are created. Although factors such as the curriculum, classroom settings, and the relationships between student and teachers have been studied, the relationship of parental involvement to achievement has not been investigated as much (Lareau 1987). Lareau posits that cultural factors relating to social class influence the parents' participation in their children's education. A link between parents' relationship to teachers and administrators was also seen; parents who formed partnerships with the schools offered an advantage to their children's achievement, while children whose parents put the responsibility for education entirely on the school were negatively affected.

Lareau's comparison of two schools – one middle-class and one working class – showed a marked difference in parents' responses to teachers' request for parental contribution (Lareau 1987). Parents in middle-class families have a tendency to aggressively schedule and assess their children's learning, making deliberate efforts to encourage and stimulate their growth and development. The working-class parents are more inclined to allow their children to develop naturally and spontaneously, while providing basic support for their endeavors (Lareau 2003 as cited in Cookson 2006). This shows the relationship between families and schools as either independent (in the working-class school) or dependent (in the middle-class school). A mixture of reasons was given for the ways in which parents contributed to their children's education. Examples cited were parents' education, the view of parent/teacher responsibilities, information parents had about the child's schooling, and material resources available at home (Lareau 1987). Both groups of parents shared the same educational ideals; it was their way of encouraging education that differed. The level of involvement demonstrated by the parents is shown to be linked to the level of social and cultural resources held by the families.

Family background and capital can be separated into three general types of capital (Coleman 1988): financial, human, and social. Financial capital is defined as the amount of income or wealth which the family possesses. Human capital, in this context, is the amount of education of the parents, which can serve as a learning resource for the children. Social capital within the family is different from social capital within the community. Social capital within the family is the amount of time spent in interactions between parent and child, the effort which the parent makes to encourage learning abilities of the child (Coleman 1988). Therefore, if the human capital of the parents is not shared with the children in the context of family social capital, it is immaterial to the educational achievement of the children.

Most of the research addressing the effect of parenting styles on school achievement has either focused on white students or all minority groups combined into a single group. Pong, Hao, and Gardner (2005) conducted a study which concentrated on only two ethnic groups, Hispanics and Asians. They found that parenting styles vary between racial and ethnic groups. And although there were evident differences in social capital in different racial and ethnic groups, these differences did not necessarily indicate outcomes in scholastic achievement for those students.

Hispanics were at an economic disadvantage compared to white students, and were also less likely to have well educated parents and both parents present in the home. In contrast, Asians were more likely to have well educated parents and higher family incomes (Pong, et al. 2005).

Factors Determining Scholastic Achievement

Social capital within the family has been shown to have various effects upon student achievement. Notably, lack of family social capital seems to increase drop-out rates among teenagers. The number of siblings of a student can also be a factor in achievement. Parental attention which is diffused among multiple children is not as favorable for each child's achievement levels, but some compensation is seen by the effect of the mother's expectations for higher education for the student (Coleman 1988).

When parents shared the decision making in matters regarding the students' daily life with the children, an increase in school success was shown. Increased communication about school events was also seen to have positive affects (Pong et al. 2005).

Social capital outside the family and within the school environment can be described by parental involvement in school organizations. These may include such groups as parent teacher associations (PTA) and booster groups. Involvement in organizations of this kind help to build and strengthen relationships between parents and teachers, as well as with other adults involved with the school. Positive relationships of this nature produce additional social capital for the child (Pong et al. 2005). In addition, all foreign born parents, regardless of ethnicity, were shown to have more elevated expectations regarding their children's achievement than do native born white parents in the United States.

Teaching Methods

In the realm of psychological research, evidence suggests that stereotype threat may also have an effect upon scholastic achievement and test scores. Stereotypes regarding certain groups and their inherent abilities to perform academically can have a negative effect upon those groups, especially among members who identify most strongly with that group. Although the absence of measurement bias is essential to testing, the psychological expectations of the individuals being tested can affect the outcome of the scoring. If an individual expects to do well because of common stereotypes regarding their particular social class or other group, they often perform better. Conversely, if the stereotype for that group is seen as low achievement, individuals may perform less well because of the attitude with which they approach the test (Wicherts, Dolan and Hessen 2005).

Hypothesis

This study adds to the existing literature regarding family and social capital in contributing to educational achievement of minority students. Additionally, this paper goes beyond previous studies by including data regarding the potential affect of minority and bilingual educators upon the student. The information used in this study is analyzed and used to answer questions regarding the effect that parental involvement in children's education has on predicting scholastic achievement in minority students. Furthermore, it will try to determine what effect, if any, sensitivity to a student's minority status by educators has on the achievement of those students.

Lareau (2003) suggests that parental investment will (a) play a significant role in children's educational achievement and (b) will not be associated with racial or ethnic differences when socioeconomic status (SES) is adjusted for. Chin and Phillip (2004) (as cited in Cheadle 2008) indicate that when parental involvement results from resources, parental efforts should mediate economic and educational components of SES, and Cheadle and Amato (2007) (as cited in Cheadle 2008) indicate that parental involvement should mediate minority differences when SES is adjusted for.

In this study, an attempt will be made to show that (1) the level of parental involvement in children's education will affect growth in educational achievement after school entry and (2) diversity and sensitivity to minorities by the school will mediate racial/ethnic differences in children's learning after controlling for SES.

Data and Methods

Data Used

The data used for the analysis in this paper came from the ongoing ECLS-K, a unique nationally representative data source that was designed to study social group (i.e., race/ethnicity and socioeconomic background) differences in children's socioemotional and cognitive development. The ECLS-K data were collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 2000 2004) using a three stage stratified sampling procedure. The first stage consisted of geographic areas, the second stage was schools within the area, and the final stage was the students within those schools. A sample of approximately 23 children from each of more than 1,000 public and private schools offering kindergarten programs was selected from this sample.

Information was gathered from the children, their families, teachers, and school administrators. A total of 21,260 children throughout the country participated by having a child assessment or parent interview in the fall and/or spring of kindergarten. The children were in kindergarten when sampled. Base year data were collected in the fall of 1998 and spring of 1999. This is useful in this study because it provides an overview of scholastic achievement in elementary level education, as well as an indication of the correlation between family and school experiences to children's progress after entering school.

The blueprint of the ECLS-K had been guided by a construction of children's progress and instruction that emphasizes the relations between the child and family, the child and school, the family and school, and the family, school, and community. The study paid close attention to the role that parents and families have in helping children adjust to school and in sustaining their education throughout the elementary school. It has also gathered information on how schools prepare for and respond to the varied backgrounds and experiences of the children and families of their communities.

Method

In order to measure the correlational effects of both parental involvement and school sensitivity on minority scholastic achievement, the statistical program SPSS will be used to perform a regression analysis of the data. This information will then be looked at within the framework of social and cultural capital.

Variables

The sample was approximately 60 percent white, 13 percent black, 17 percent Hispanic, 5 percent Asian, and 5 percent "other" (Cheadle 2008). Since the study included heterogeneous groupings, such as Hispanic and Asian, who were more prone to be from immigrant families, questions regarding whether a non-English language was spoken at home were included to differentiate these children, who may have difficulty in obtaining help with English-based assignments at home.

Family structure is important in studying the relationship between family resources and children's scholastic success, as well as the link between race and socioeconomic conditions.

Two-parent, continuously married, families are compared to other families who were comprised of stepparents, single parents, and children who lived with someone other than their mother or father (grandparents or others). Information regarding the ratio of children to adults in the household is also included to study the effects of family size in relation to family capital and education. Another component of the family capital aspect is the educational expectations which parents have for their children. SES is also being included in this analysis. SES is a standardized measure composed of parental occupation, education, and income.

The underlying patterns of parental educational investment that Lareau (2003) reported are identified using measures of the children's use of language, and parental interactions with the educational institutions. Parental involvement with the school is identified with six dichotomous indicators asking whether any of the adults in the household have, within the past year, (1) attended an open house or back-to-school night, (2) attended a PTA or PTO meeting, (3) been to a regularly scheduled parent-teacher conference with the child's teacher, (4) attended a school or class event, (5) volunteered at school or served on a committee, and (6) discussed child's progress with the teacher.

Additional questions regarding parental efforts toward the children's education at home are also included here. Questions analyzing the access that children have to learning materials at home, as well as time spent in interactions between parents and children were used to determine parents' attitudes toward educational involvement outside of school.

Results

Table 1 shows the demographics of the students in the survey. The largest racial affiliation is white students, followed by blacks and Hispanics, with a small percentage of other minorities (10.2 percent of the sample) represented. The majority of the students surveyed had parents who were married, and also came from families who were at or below the poverty level.

Table 1: Demographics

	Percentage		Percentage
<u>Ethnicity of Child</u> (N=21260)		<u>Poverty Status of Family</u> (N=21260)	
Hispanic	16.7	Below poverty level	19.1
American Indian	2.4	At or above poverty level	80.9
Asian	6.4		
Black/African American	15.5	<u>Family Status</u>	
Pacific Islander	1.4	Mother in household	98.1
White	62.5	Father in household	79.0
<u>Marital Status of Parents</u>			
Married	69.8		
Separated	4.7		

Descriptive statistics for the variables measured are shown in Table 2. The gap in reading scores when measured by race is large, with white students scoring an average of 2.63 points per

SD (standard deviation) more than the average, while Asian students scored an average of 8.92 points per SD lower than average. This shows a gap of 6.29 points per standard deviation between racial groups on test scores, with black and Hispanic students scoring 2.03 points per SD below average and 6.17 points per SD below average, respectively.

Table 2 also shows a marked gap between races in socioeconomic (SES) levels, with a range of .69 points per SD from highest group (whites) to lowest (Asian). In addition, the level of parental involvement with children's education as well as parental involvement with children's school is shown in Table 2. Parental involvement was reported with a range of .26 points per SD between races, with whites reporting the highest levels (.33 points per SD) and blacks reporting the lowest (-.07 points per SD). The levels of parental engagement with the school showed a much different pattern reported. Whites again showed the highest levels reported (1.75 points per SD) while in this category Hispanics had the lowest reported scores (.00 points per SD). The gap in school engagement was reported as 1.75 points per SD between racial groups.

Table 2: Descriptive

	Total	White		Black		Asian		Hispanic	
		<u>Unstd.</u> <u>Coeff.</u>	<u>Std.</u> <u>Coeff.</u>	<u>Unstd.</u> <u>Coeff.</u>	<u>Std.</u> <u>Coeff.</u>	<u>Unstd.</u> <u>Coeff.</u>	<u>Std.</u> <u>Coeff.</u>	<u>Unstd.</u> <u>Coeff.</u>	<u>Std.</u> <u>Coeff.</u>
Reading Score	19917	2.63	-.10	-2.03	-.06	-8.92	-.21	-6.17	-.14
R ² = .100		(.35)		(.40)		(.43)		(.45)	
SES	20141	-.00	-.00	-.57	-.26	-.69	-.25	-.54	-.20
R ² = .129		(.02)		(.03)		(.03)		(.03)	
Parent Involvement	10293	.33	.14	-.07	-.02	.05	-.01	.17	.04
R ² = .020		(.06)		(.07)		(.07)		(.07)	
School Engagement	18007	1.75	.15	1.11	.07	-.35	-.02	-.00	-.00
R ² = .020		(.19)		(.21)		(.23)		(.23)	

*p<.05;**p<.01;***p<.001

Table 3 displays the Reading Test scores of students when adjusted for the combined factors of SES, parental involvement with education, and parental engagement with schools. With these adjustments all groups except whites showed an improvement in test scores: blacks saw an increase of .68 points per SD, Asians had an increase of 2.3 points per SD, and Hispanics

showed an increase in test scores of .72 points per SD. This suggests that these factors are important for the academic success of minority students, with the largest influence occurring in the Asian students.

Table 3: Adjusted

	White		Black		Asian		Hispanic	
	<u>Unstd.</u> <u>Coeff.</u>	<u>Std.</u> <u>Coeff.</u>	<u>Unstd.</u> <u>Coeff.</u>	<u>Std.</u> <u>Coeff.</u>	<u>Unstd.</u> <u>Coeff.</u>	<u>Std.</u> <u>Coeff.</u>	<u>Unstd.</u> <u>Coeff.</u>	<u>Std.</u> <u>Coeff.</u>
Reading Score	.00	.00	-1.35	-.04	-6.62***	-.15	-5.45***	-.12
R ² = .100	(.65)		(.72)		(.78)		(.77)	

p<.05;p<.01;***p<.001**

Discussion

This study included data on minority students, separated into the categories of black, Asian, and Hispanic contrasted with the data regarding white students. This separation shows the effects of social and cultural capital on differing groups. It should not be assumed that all minority groups will have the same levels and types of social and cultural capital.

This study shows that Asians reported the lowest socioeconomic status, blacks reported the lowest level of parental involvement, and Asians reported the lowest school engagement. Asians also showed the lowest reading scores. The highest socioeconomic status of the minority groups was reported by Hispanics, the highest parental involvement was reported by Hispanics, and the highest school engagement was reported by blacks.

When adjusted for the combined factors of SES, parental involvement with education, and parental engagement with schools, the results were not significantly different between groups. Asians continued to have the lowest scores, followed Hispanics and blacks, respectively. However, with these adjustments all groups except whites showed an improvement in test scores: blacks saw an increase of .68 points per SD, Asians had an increase of 2.3 points per SD, and Hispanics showed an increase in test scores of .72 points per SD. This suggests that these factors are important for the academic success of minority students, with the largest influence occurring in the Asian students

Although specific data was not used to determine the sensitivity of educators to minority students, survey questions used to gather data indicate that the educators are aware of the ethnic and immigrant status of students. Further studies may include specific data regarding minority and bilingual educators in the classrooms.

As suggested by Lareau (2003) parental investment will play a significant role in children's educational achievement. Additionally, as indicated by Chin and Phillip (2004) (as cited in Cheadle 2008) when parental involvement results from resources, parental efforts should mediate economic and educational components of SES, and Cheadle and Amato (2007) (as cited in Cheadle 2008) that parental involvement should mediate minority differences when SES is adjusted for.

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