

CHAPTER 3

FAMILY EDUCATIONAL CAPITAL AND STUDENTS' OUTCOMES

INTRODUCTION

The general propositions presented in Chapter 1 suggest that relationships between family contexts and students' school outcomes are mediated, in part, by more immediate family educational capital. That is, if we understand the nature of students' family learning environments we can explain, to a large extent, differences in the educational outcomes of students from diverse social and cultural contexts. The potential impact that supportive family learning environments may have on students' school success is suggested in the following claims by Coleman (1991) and Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1993). Coleman states:

Research shows conclusively that parents' involvement in their children's education confers great benefits both intellectual and emotional, on their children. Thus, a major issue facing education today is this: How to improve educational outcomes for children in the face of contradictions in family functioning, when strong families are so important for children's learning? (p. 1)

Similarly, Wang et al. (1993) observe:

In contrast to distal variables, which are more removed from students' day-to-day lives, the home is central to students' daily experience. Consequently, the home functions as the most salient out-of-school context for student learning, amplifying or diminishing the school's effect on school learning. (p. 278)

It is not clear, however, which family characteristics are the most important for students' school success, or to what extent relationships between parent-child interactions and school outcomes are independent of family background. In a large-scale analysis of US students, Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell (1999) conclude that "Further research on cultural capital and [family] educational resources is warranted... the mediating effects of cultural-educational resources on racial and class achievement outcomes are not as strong as one might expect. It may be that their conceptualization is too vague for a clear and systematic application to education-specific processes and outcomes" (p. 173).

In this chapter I review research that examines associations between refined measures of immediate family capital and students' school-related outcomes. Typically, quantitative investigations have investigated either parents' descriptions of family influences or children's perceptions of family experiences. These two orientations can be related to an early theory of personality proposed by Murray (1938) in which he suggested that learning environments can be assessed by their alpha and beta press. I begin this chapter by exploring research that has measured the alpha press or the parents' descriptions of family influences. In particular, I present the work of Bloom and of Rosen to identify a set of potentially alterable

family variables that can be combined to form an understanding of a family's learning environment. I use some of the family variables suggested by Bloom and Rosen to define family educational capital in analyses I present of relationships between family background, family educational capital and school outcomes.

If our understanding of family influences is to advance we need to examine measures of children's perceptions, or the beta press, of family experiences. There are suggestions that school outcomes are related more strongly to children's perceptions of parental behavior than to what parents actually do in the home. Later in the chapter, I use measures of both the alpha and beta press of families to investigate relationships between family contexts and adolescents' aspirations.

From the analyses of my own data I suggest a set of propositions about relationships among family background, more immediate family educational capital and students' educational outcomes. These propositions are restricted, however, as they are generated from investigations of Australian students. I examine the representative nature of the propositions by reviewing related research from various international settings. From these international studies and from my own investigations, I present a set of refined general propositions regarding the impact of family educational capital on students' school outcomes.

The research that is reviewed and presented in this chapter is categorized under the general headings (a) the press of family environments, (b) family capital and adolescents aspirations: a test of the mediation-moderation model and (c) family capital and school outcomes: international settings.

THE PRESS OF FAMILY ENVIRONMENTS

In the development of an early theory of personality, Murray (1938) suggests that if the behavior of individuals is to be understood then it is necessary to devise a method of analysis that "will lead to satisfactory dynamical formulations of external environments" (p. 16). Murray proposes that an environment might be classified by the kinds of benefits and harms it provides. If the environment has a potentially beneficial effect then individuals typically approach the environment and attempt to interact with it. In contrast, if the environment has a potentially harmful effect, Murray claims that individuals attempt to prevent its occurrence by avoiding the environment or by defending themselves against it. The directional tendency implied in the framework is designated as the press of the environment. A distinction is made between an environment's alpha press "which is the press that actually exists, as far as scientific discovery can determine it" and the beta press "which is the subject's own interpretation of the phenomena that is perceived" (p. 122). In the following section, three sets of investigations are examined that represent attempts to measure the 'alpha press' of family educational capital. These

are Bloom's subenvironment model, Rosen's family achievement syndrome and my own analyses from the Adelaide study.

The Alpha Press of Family Environments

Bloom's Subenvironment Model

It was not until Bloom (1964) and a number of his students examined the environmental correlates of children's affective and cognitive outcomes that a 'School' of research emerged to assess the alpha press of family environments. Bloom defines environments as the conditions, forces and external stimuli that impinge on individuals. It is proposed that these forces, which may be physical or social as well as intellectual, provide a network that surrounds, engulfs and plays on the individual. As Bloom (1964, p. 187) suggests "such a view of the environment reduces it for analytical purposes to those aspects of the environment which are related to a particular characteristic or set of characteristics." That is, the total context surrounding an individual may be defined as being composed of a number of subenvironments. If the development of a particular characteristic is to be understood then it becomes necessary to identify that subenvironment of press variables which is potentially related to the characteristic.

In the initial subenvironment studies, Dave (1963) and Wolf (1964) examined relations between the educational capital of families in Illinois and measures of 11-year-olds' academic achievement and intelligence, respectively. Dave defined the family learning environment by six press variables, labeled as achievement press, language models, academic guidance, activeness of the family, intellectuality in the home and work habits in the family. In Wolf's study, the educational capital of the home was described by three process variables that were labeled as press for achievement, press for language development and provisions for general learning. The press variables in each study were assessed using a semi-structured parent interview schedule. When combined into predictor sets the press variables had large significant associations with arithmetic problem solving, reading, word knowledge performance and intelligence test scores.

Most of the subenvironment studies in the 'Bloom School' have examined the family correlates of cognitive measures. In contrast, Weiss (1974) identified two sets of press variables in an investigation of relationships between family capital and measures of 11-year-olds' achievement motivation and self-esteem. The press variables for academic motivation were generation of standards of excellence and expectations, independence training and parental approval; while for self-esteem they were parental acceptance, evaluation of the child and opportunities for self-enhancement. Generally, the press variables had moderate relationships with the affective characteristics. Weiss (1974) concludes:

these results support the thesis that a sub-set of the total environment can be identified and measured for individual personality characteristics. However, the results were dependent on the criterion used. Unlike the studies of cognitive characteristics, it is

more difficult to establish the validity of criterion instruments for personality characteristics. (p. 147)

The analyses of Bloom's subenvironment model suggest that when family educational capital is defined by proximal social-psychological dimensions, it is possible to measure potentially alterable variables that combine to have medium to large associations with children's learning outcomes. Bloom (1980) claims:

If we are convinced that a good education is necessary for all who live in modern society, then we must search for the alterable variables which can make a difference in the learning of children. Our basic research task is to understand further how such alterable variables can be altered and their consequent effect on students, teachers and learning. (p. 16)

In a review of the subenvironment research, Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, and Bloom (1993) identify five family measures that may be considered to be significant alterable variables. They are designated as work habits of the family (i.e., preference for educational activities over other activities), academic guidance and support (parents' guidance on school matters and the provision of facilities in the home for school learning), stimulation to explore and discuss ideas and events (opportunities in the home to explore ideas, events and the wider social context; and the use of games, hobbies and other imagination provoking activities), the language environment of homes and parents' academic aspirations.

Kellaghan et al. (1993) conclude:

The socioeconomic level or cultural background of a family need not determine how well a child does at school. Parents from a variety of cultural backgrounds and with different levels of education, income, or occupational status can and do provide stimulating home environments that support and encourage the learning of their children. It is what parents do in the home rather than their status that is important. (p. 145)

Similarly, Redding (1999, p. 5) suggests "with reasonable certainty we can state that poverty may statistically predict lower school performance, yet families that provide a stimulating, language-rich, supportive environment defy the odds of socioeconomic circumstance." It is such claims about the independent nature of the relationships between distal family background, family educational capital and students' school outcomes that are examined throughout this chapter.

In general, analyses that have adopted Bloom's subenvironment model have identified a set of alpha press variables that tend to have medium to large associations with cognitive measures and to be related more modestly to affective characteristics. One of the strengths of these investigations is that they use parent interviews to assess family capital, thus limiting the difficulty of interpreting relationships that may be biased when students provide information on both family predictor and outcome measures. Such bias might be more of a problem in studies that examine affective rather than cognitive outcomes. A restriction of the subenvironment research has been the relatively small sample sizes of families used in the analyses. The Bloom subenvironment research has, however, identified a significant set of family educational capital variables. Some of these variables also form part of Rosen's family achievement syndrome.

Rosen's Family Achievement Syndrome

In one of the most significant attempts to construct a social-psychological framework for the study of family educational capital, Rosen (e.g., 1956, 1959, 1961, 1962, 1973) developed the concept of the family achievement syndrome. He proposes that achievement-oriented families may be characterized by variations in the interrelated components of achievement training, independence training, achievement-value orientations and educational-occupational aspirations. Rosen suggests that achievement training and independence training act together to generate achievement motivation, which provides children with the psychological impetus to excel in situations involving standards of excellence. Strong achievement motivation tends to develop "when parents set high goals for their children to attain, when they indicate a high evaluation of their competence to do a task well, and impose standards of excellence upon problem-solving tasks. This complex of socialization practices has been called achievement training" (Rosen, 1961, p. 574). During independence training parents "seek to teach their children to do things on their own (self-reliance) in a situation where they enjoy relative freedom from parental control (autonomy)" (Rosen, 1962, p. 612). That is, while achievement training aims at getting children to do things well, independence training attempts to teach children to do things on their own.

Achievement-value orientations are defined as "meaningful and affectively charged modes of organizing behavior-principles that guide human conduct. They establish criteria which influence the individual's preferences and goals" (Rosen, 1959, p. 55). Rosen proposes that the learning of achievement-oriented values can be quite independent of the acquisition of the achievement motive. While value orientations are probably acquired when verbal communications in families are quite complex, it is considered that achievement motivation is generated from parent-child interactions early in the child's life when many of the interactions are emotional and non-verbal. Within the achievement syndrome, therefore, achievement values help to shape children's behavior so that achievement motivation can be translated into successful school-related outcomes.

Rosen states, however, that although achievement motivation and value orientations affect students' outcomes by influencing their need to excel and their willingness to plan and work hard, they "do not determine the areas in which such excellence and effort takes place" (Rosen, 1959, p. 57). Unless parents express high educational and occupational aspirations, Rosen proposes that the other family influences will not necessarily be associated with academic success in school.

In studies of social mobility, Rosen examines the achievement orientations of families from French Canadian, Greek, Jewish, African American, Southern Italian and Anglo-American groups. The analyses indicate that parents from these groups place different emphases on the dimensions of the achievement syndrome and that ethnic group variations in mobility can be explained, in part, by group differences in family-achievement orientations. Rosen's family syndrome provides a significant framework to examine ethnic group differences in the socialization practices of parents who are also from different social-status contexts.

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