

CHAPTER 5

SCHOOL CAPITAL AND OUTCOMES

INTRODUCTION

What are the experiences in schools that influence a child's life chances? After having examined the structural characteristics of schools I now turn to explore children's perceptions of their schools to provide a more complete answer to the question. The impact that a teacher may have on a child's eventual career is reflected in a reminiscence by the writer Jean Rhys. She grew up in Dominica and recalls:

I thought of poetry as an examination subject. The way we were taught in our literature class didn't alter this opinion. Parse and analyse the following. Point out the grammatical mistakes in the following. (p. 58) Then, like a bolt from the blue, came Mother Sacred Heart, a new nun from England who took the literature class. She had a very beautiful voice and read aloud to us. She introduced us to Shelley and I soon stopped thinking of Shakespeare and company as examination subjects. I was able to make my own discoveries, even my own enthusiasms. [She] may have been an unruly nun but she was certainly a splendid teacher. I date all my love of words, especially beautiful words, to her lessons. (Rhys, 1979, p. 60)

Joe Gormley, former President of the National Union of Miners in England has different memories of his school. In the final year of elementary school he was chosen to study for the special examination associated with entry to the local grammar school. He remembers:

There were about ten of us working for that exam, and every morning they looked at our homework. This particular day, most of the others had got their homework wrong, and I don't know what got into the headmaster, that day, but he caned the lot of us, even though mine was right. I thought, 'There's no future in this.' So on my way home that night, I walked down to the bottom of the market place, where there was a stream. I stood on the bank and took all my books and I threw them into that brook. The following day I told the headmaster what I'd done, and he looked at me and said: 'Well that's it, you'll always be a navvy.' Then he caned me again. I was eleven, and nobody passed the exam that year. But, when it was over, the headmaster said to me, 'Gormley, you'd have walked it.' (Gormley, 1982, p. 10)

Although there may be significant and even dramatic events that influence students' life chances, it is proposed in this book that relationships between family background and school outcomes are mediated, in part, by students' perceptions of the overall impressions of school experiences. In addition, it is suggested that relationships between these total experiences or school educational capital and outcomes are moderated for students from different family contexts.

In this chapter research is examined that investigates relationships between school educational capital, individuals' characteristics and school outcomes for

students with different family experiences. The research is categorized under the general headings (a) the Baltimore study, (b) perceptions of school educational capital and (c) school educational capital: a test of the family-school model.

THE BALTIMORE STUDY

One of the most interesting and sustained set of investigations that has examined relationships among family background, school capital and students' outcomes has used data from the Beginning School Study. Initially, the sample included 790 six year olds, selected from 20 randomly chosen schools in Baltimore, Maryland, with the children beginning first grade in 1982. The students, their parents and teachers have been involved in the longitudinal study many times over the ensuing years. From an analysis of the first graders, Alexander, Entwisle, and Thompson (1987) indicate how important teachers can be in shaping children's early school lives. They observe:

Teachers' own social origins exercise a strong influence on how they react to the status attributes of their students. In particular, low-status and minority pupils experience their greatest difficulties in the classrooms of high-status teachers. They are evaluated by their teachers as less mature, their teachers hold lower performance expectations for them, and their teachers score exceptionally low on perceived school-climate measures. Moreover, year-end marks and standardized-test scores of such pupils apparently are depressed by these indicators of pupil-teacher social distance and teacher disaffection. (p. 655)

In one of the follow-up analyses, Entwisle and Hayduk (1988) demonstrate that the quality of family and school capital available to children in early school years is associated with reading and mathematics achievement during middle high school years. They conclude:

If children's early social experiences have such long-lasting effects, much of the 'home background' influence measured in models of educational attainment in the secondary school may actually represent influences that were exerted much earlier in the schooling process. And long-lasting early 'teacher effects' may identify 'school effects' that have yet to be clearly identified. (p. 158)

In an attempt to disentangle the effects of family and school capital on children's early achievement, Entwisle and Alexander (1992) use the Baltimore data to examine relationships between winter and summer learning and mathematics performance. Winter learning refers to learning that takes place when school is in session and when children divide their time between home and school. As a result, it is proposed that such learning reflects family and school influences. In contrast, given that most children are on school vacation during the summer, learning which takes place during that time is considered to represent mainly family, or neighborhood, influences. Entwisle and Alexander compare children's gains in mathematics achievement over the summer with gains during the winter.

The results indicate:

The seasonal patterning of scores emphasizes the point that home disadvantages are compensated for in winter because, when school is in session, poor children and better-off children perform at almost the same level. Schools seem to be doing a better job than they have been given credit for. It is mainly when school is not in session that consistent losses occur for poorer children. (p. 82)

Entwisle and Alexander conclude, very optimistically, that:

If, as we have shown, schools are able to make up to some extent for the dearth of socialization resources in economically disadvantaged households, 'the school' is truly an institution that equalizes opportunity early in the game and perhaps over a longer period. Contrary to the idea that 'schools make no difference,' then, our data indicate that schools are most beneficial for those who need them most. (p. 83)

In a review of research that examines the impact of the summer vacation on achievement test scores, Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, and Greathouse (1996) conclude that the effect is more detrimental for mathematics than for reading and most serious for mathematics computation and spelling. They suggest that the summer break negatively affects the mathematics skills of students from different social-status groups by about the same amount, whereas the impact on reading is greatest for students from lower social-status families. It is proposed that summer school programs might best be directed at mathematics learning if they are targeted for all students, or at reading if the purpose is to reduce social inequalities in academic outcomes.

The longitudinal nature of the Baltimore study has allowed analyses of relationships between early school experiences and later school outcomes. Using logistic regression models, Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey (1997) examine the effects of children's perceptions of school satisfaction, their locus of control and teachers' assessment of children's engagement with school in the first grade on dropout behavior by the end of secondary school. The results show that the first graders' engagement with schooling and perceptions of early school experiences, along with parents' expectations and practices were all related to the odds of dropping out of school, independently of family social status. Alexander et al. (1997) suggest that their findings relate to investigations adopting a life-course perspective on development. That is, the study supports the orientation that "To some extent, individuals direct their own development (the idea of personal agency); development occurs in a social matrix and is shaped by experiences in the major institutional settings that individuals pass through over the life course" (p. 98).

Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (2000) develop the life-course perspective further to examine predictors of the Baltimore adolescents' early work histories. In their sample, slightly more than half of the 13 and 14 year olds worked during the school year, while employment rates rose to 70 percent for adolescents over 15 years old. The results indicate that for most adolescents work and school activities reinforced each other. Entwisle et al. (2000) propose that "Students whose school patterns were less than optimal also tended to have work patterns that were less than

optimal, that is, we observed a general alienation or disenchantment from both" (p. 290). In addition, the study suggests that eventual employment opportunities for economically disadvantaged urban youth might be enhanced if they accumulate job experiences during their early years in high school. It is concluded, that the school prospects of poor-performing students are not likely to be improved by policies that reduce adolescents' involvement in employment after school hours. Instead, the results suggest that the major "causal process linking youth work to poor school performance is that poor-performing students lose interest in school and are more willing to spend long hours on the job" (p. 293). Entwisle et al. (2000) claim that rather than reducing work experience, incentives related to employment during school might be adopted to help strengthen students' attachment to school.

Perhaps a general summary of the Baltimore study is provided by Alexander et al. (1997) when they state:

We are not saying that what happened in first grade necessarily seals children's fates, but prospects for "reengagement" later are not good when children are plagued early in their school years by self-doubt, are alienated from things academic, are average for their grades, are relegated to remedial courses, are prone to "problem" behaviors, are labeled troublemakers, and have academic skills that are far lower than the standard at which the curriculum is keyed. Sadly, this "profile" holds for far too many urban youths. (p. 98)

The Baltimore study is a fine example of longitudinal research that examines relationships among family background, family and school capital, and students' outcomes that include first grade achievement, dropping out of school and early employment experiences. In particular, the investigations have provided an ongoing portrayal of the associations between the very beginnings of school and eventual educational attainment. The researchers suggest, however, that many of the intermediate influences on students' achievement and behaviors need to be investigated. They claim that in such analyses more sensitive measures of school experiences should be adopted. In the following section, research is presented that has used refined measures to assess students' perceptions of the educational capital of schools.

PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL EDUCATIONAL CAPITAL

Perceptual Measures of Classrooms and Schools

In this analysis of perceptions of school capital, research is examined that has adopted refined schedules to assess students' and teachers' experiences of schooling. Such measures have been used in many countries to provide an assessment of how students and teachers perceive their classroom and school learning environments. I present the findings of a number of these international investigations to give an indication of the wide-ranging approach of the analyses. If perceptual measures are to be valuable in helping to design more effective learning settings then it is likely

that their most important contribution will come from studies that examine relationships between school educational capital and students' outcomes. A number of such investigations are considered and they tend to show that students' perceptions of their classroom and school experiences have small to medium associations with student outcome measures.

Students' Perceptions of Schools

Fraser (1991) suggests that in relation to direct classroom observation methods the strengths of the perceptual approach include:

First, paper-and-perceptual measures are more economical than classroom observation techniques which involve the expense of trained outside observers. Second, perceptual measures are based on students' experiences over many lessons, while observational data usually are restricted to a very small number of lessons. Third, perceptual measures involve the pooled judgements of all students in a class, whereas observation techniques typically involve only a single observer. Fourth, students' perceptions, because they are the determinants of student behavior more so than the real situation, can be more important than observed behaviors. Fifth, perceptual measures of classroom environment typically have been found to account for considerably more variance in student learning outcomes than have directly observed variables. (p. 64)

In a review of scales designed to assess perceptions of classroom environments, Fraser (1998) observes that there are few areas of educational research that have available such a rich set of robust and validated measures. He demonstrates the use that has been made of measures such as the *Learning Environment Inventory* (Walberg, 1991), *Classroom Environment Scale* (Moos, 1991), *Individualised Classroom Environment Questionnaire* (Fraser, 1990), *My Class Inventory* (Goh, Young, & Fraser, 1995) and the *Constructivist Learning Environment Survey* (Taylor, Fraser, & Fisher, 1997). Fraser (1998) suggests that such scales are continually being revised with changes to items and response formats. In addition, he observes that it is valuable to distinguish between the idiosyncratic or 'private' beta press of each person's classroom environment and the 'consensual' beta press that students or teachers share about a classroom, especially when subgroup differences in learning environments are being examined.

In an analysis of classroom learning environments in 96 US urban schools, for example, Waxman and Huang (1998) modified the *Classroom Environment Scale* and *The Instructional Learning Environment Questionnaire* (Knight & Waxman, 1990), to produce personal or private forms of the scales. Also, the instruments were altered to examine students' perceptions of their interactions with teachers and other students in mathematics and reading classes, rather than obtaining their overall impression of the school. Generally, the study shows that students in middle schools were not as satisfied, were less involved and received less support from teachers, than students in elementary and high schools. In addition, females perceived classrooms to be more positive than did males. Waxman and Huang (1998) suggest that while many students in urban schools are confronted by hostile environments and the likelihood of academic underachievement, teachers and administrators should concentrate on constructing positive classroom learning environments. They

Family and School Capital: Towards a Context Theory of
Students' School Outcomes

Marjoribanks, K.

2002, VII, 207 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0582-4