

**A STUDY
TO DETERMINE THE ROLE BETWEEN
STUDENT ACADEMIC OUTCOME AND
PARENTAL SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS**

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study is to review and analyze research findings on how the various environments in which students live affect the development of their ability to learn to read and to continue with school success. Within these environments, a measurable characteristic would be the family's socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic

differences are conventionally indexed by such demographic variables as household income and parents' education and occupation, alone or in some combination.

This researcher will distinguish the predictor (low SES) of academic achievement of students from the causes of explanations of reading difficulties. The SES of a family is an easily accessible measure.

This researcher will also identify the risk factors that low – SES children might face so parents, teachers and administrators of the Berlin School District may devise and implement effective interventions for these students. A proposal will be made of identifying these children as well as posing that these children should be receiving services to prevent academic difficulties in the future.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Kindergarten is a critical period in children's early careers. It sets children on a path that influences their subsequent learning and school achievement. For most children, kindergarten represents the first step in a journey through the world of formal schooling. However, children entering kindergarten in the United States in the 1990s are different from those who entered kindergarten in prior decades. They come from increasingly diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, social, economic, social and language backgrounds. Many kindergartners now come from single-parent families, step-parent families and homes with very different social and economic backgrounds.

These trends present new opportunities and pose challenges to our nation's schools. Schools are expected to meet the educational needs of each child regardless of their background and experience. Teachers are faced with classrooms of children with increasingly diverse needs. In addition, growing pressure to raise academic standards and to assess all students' progress toward meeting those standards places even more burdens on schools and teachers (Kagan 1990).

Since the late 1960s, a variety of federal, state and local programs has been designed and implemented in an effort to offset the profound difficulties children from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds encounter when they enter public schools. Many of these programs prepare preschool children of low socioeconomic status (SES) for the challenges they face as they begin their education. Other programs seek to improve the achievement levels of low- SES students who are already struggling in schools that lack the resources to provide them with the special attention they need for

success. The idea, of course, is to educate these students beyond their poverty, that is, to give them the intellectual tools and social skills necessary to become productive, working adults.

Families with high socioeconomic status often have more success in preparing their young children for school because they typically have access to a wide range of resources to promote and support young children's development. They are able to provide their young children with high-quality child- care, books, and toys to encourage children in various learning activities at home. Also, they have easy access to information regarding their children's health, as well as social, emotional, and cognitive development. In addition, families with high socioeconomic status often seek out information to help them better prepare their young children for school.

Across all socioeconomic groups, parents face major challenges when it comes to providing optimal care and education for their children. For families in poverty, these challenges can be formidable. Sometimes, when basic necessities are lacking, parents must place top priority on housing, food, clothing and health care. Educational toys, games, and books may appear to be luxuries, and parents may not have the time, energy or knowledge to find innovative and less-expensive ways to foster young children's development. Families with low socioeconomic status often lack the financial, social, and educational supports that characterize families with higher socioeconomic status. Poor families also may have inadequate or limited access to community resources that promote and support children's development and school readiness. Parents may have inadequate skills for such activities as reading to and with their children, and they may lack information about childhood immunizations and nutrition. Having inadequate

resources and limited access to available resources can negatively affect families' decisions regarding their young children's development and learning. As a result, children from families with low socioeconomic status are at a greater risk of entering kindergarten unprepared than their peers from families with median or high socioeconomic status.

Childhood poverty has both immediate and lasting negative effects. Children in low-income families fare less well than children in more affluent families in areas of economic security, health and education. One recent study revealed strong links between family income levels and children's I.Q.s. Studying a sample of 900 children born with low birth weight, it was found that those who lived in "persistent poverty" during their first five years had I.Q.s averaging 9.1 points lower than the I.Q.s of the children who were not impoverished. This study concluded that "there is little doubt that child poverty is scarring the development of our nation's children" (Cohen). Children living in families who are poor are more likely than children living in other families to have difficulty in school, to become teen parents, and, as adults, to earn less and be unemployed more frequently. The child poverty rate provides important information about the percentage of U.S. children whose current life circumstances are hard and whose futures are potentially limited as a result of their family's low income.

In the field of education, we are interested in knowing the causes of educational outcomes, such as what causes our increases in student achievement, so that we can use this information to improve our educational practices. And while it is possible to alter or change some variables that affect students' learning, it is *not* possible to change others. For example, it is possible to change the extent to which parents become involved in their

children's education, but changing a parent's educational background or income level are beyond the realm of a school's influence.

Statement of the Problem

A review of the literature indicates that low socioeconomic status undeniably poses numerous threats to children's educational prospects. Children in families with lower incomes are at greater risk for poorer outcomes on a broad range of variables, including school failure, learning disabilities, behavior problems, mental retardation, developmental delay, and health impairments.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, to describe the relationship of lack of school success and socioeconomic status of students. Second, to critique the literature on the subject and draw implications related to children raised in lower socioeconomic environments and school programming in Berlin.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

Poor Families, Poor Outcomes

In any given year from 1987 – 1996, about one in five of all American children – some twelve to fourteen million - lived in families in which total income failed to exceed even the grim thresholds used to define poverty. That so many of the youngest citizens of the wealthiest nation in the world are living poor is cause for concern.

Identifying when poverty poses a significant risk to children's development has important implications for the economic policies concerning the well being of children. If poverty has its main effect in the first two or three years of life, economic support of some kind could be limited to pregnant women and mothers of infants from impoverished populations, as opposed to costly provisions to all poor families. Low income can create a particularly stressful context for caregiving, one in which positive interactions with children are threatened and punitive or otherwise negative relationships may result. Central to these concerns is the reported high prevalence of such disorders as maternal depression, attachment difficulties, and post-traumatic stress. The stresses experienced by mothers living in poverty can serve to undermine their development of empathy, sensitivity, and responsiveness to their children, which in turn can lead to diminished learning opportunities and poorer developmental outcomes. Alternatively, if poverty can have long term negative consequences at any point during a child's development, then all poor adults living with children should receive some form of economic help. These alternatives obviously have different consequences for the formation of social welfare policies. Peterson (1997) suggests that low parental literacy and low amounts of reading

negatively influence children's reading achievement in school. Parents of lower socioeconomic status were more likely to affect their children's reading behavior in this way. Writing was also less developed among children of lower SES, and Peterson also believes this to be due in part to lack of parental involvement. Interventions to overcome this are often school based and are directly aimed at all children within the educational institutions at which it is implemented.

The elementary school years appear to be a period of development when economic circumstances are critical for later adjustment. Longitudinal studies from middle childhood to adolescence and adulthood have shown that behavior problems and poor academic achievement during elementary school predict failure to complete high school, serious delinquency problems, early parenthood, unemployment, and physical and mental health problems (Cairns, Cairns, and Neckerman 1989).

Stipek, Ryan, Rosaleen (1997) looked at the aspirations of kindergartners over a two year period of time. Although those children of lower socioeconomic groups did illustrate poorer cognitive skills, motivation differences were not yet present. This may lead one to believe that dealing with the impact of being of lower socioeconomic status reduces a child's aspirations as they age. Walpole (1997) suggested that nine years after entering college, students of lower socioeconomic groups had lower levels of income, educational attainment, educational aspirations, and graduate school attendance than those of higher socioeconomic status.

In the book, Consequences of Growing Up Poor, Duncan and Brooks examined the data of various studies of children living in persistent poverty and continuous poverty. As mentioned earlier, one in five of all children in the United States reside in the poverty

threshold. In 1993, this figure was a little under \$12,000 for a family of three people. Poverty thresholds take household size into account and are adjusted each year for cost of living using the consumer price index. Families whose incomes are above the threshold are considered not poor and families below the threshold are classified as poor for any given year.

The statistics on children who live in poverty portray a picture of a nation struggling to keep up with the problem and perhaps not fully committed to solving it. The United States has a much higher incidence of child poverty than do other Western nations, and the percentage of impoverished children in the population has continued to increase during the past two decades (Cohen, 1993).

Duration of poverty has very negative effects on children's I.Q., verbal ability, and achievement scores. Duncan (1993) administered the Stanford Binet I.Q. Test to two through eight year olds and found that children who lived in families that experienced persistent poverty had scores of 6 – 9 points lower than those who never lived in poverty.

The price these children pay for being poor is enormous. Carta (1991) cites several sources indicating that low-SES children living in innercities are much more likely to have educationally damaging circumstances as part of their life experiences than are higher SES children. The dangers they face include prenatal exposure to drugs and AIDS, low birth weight, poor nutrition, lead exposure, and personal injuries and accidents.

The long term negative effects of poor achievement and behavior problems have well been documented in both prospective and retrospective longitudinal research. Using

data from the birth cohort of the 1958 British National Child Development Study, Power, Manor and Fox (1991), observed and behavior problems (followed by failure to finish high school) at age sixteen were the best predictors of poor physical and mental health in men and women at age twenty- four.

In most of the research studied, family socioeconomic status was inversely associated with behavior problems and school failure in children. Although it has been established that SES generally is a crude indicator of financial hardships (Huston, 1994), one plausible interpretation of these findings is that the poverty leads to behavior problems and inferior school performances.

The Price We Pay

In 1975, a herd of prime beef cattle was destroyed by accident in Chicago. A feedlot worker could not read the labels on the bags that he found piled in the warehouse and fed poison to the cattle by mistake. He thought that he was adding a nutrition supplement to their feed basins.....

-story reported in the New York Times

According to the National Adult Literacy Survey, 42 million adult Americans can't read; 50 million can recognize so few printed words they are limited to a 4th or 5th grade reading level; out of every four teenagers drops out of high school , and of those who graduate, one out of every four has the equivalent or less of an eighth grade education.

According to current estimates, the number of functionally illiterate adults is increasing by approximately two and one quarter million persons each year. This number includes nearly 1 million young people who drop out of school before graduation,

400,000 legal immigrants, 100,000 refugees, 800,000 illegal immigrants, and 20% of all high school graduates. Eighty-four percent of the 23,000 people who took an exam for entry level jobs at New York Telephone in 1988, failed. More than half of Fortune 500 companies have become educators of last resort, with the cost of remedial employee training in the three R's reaching more than 300 million dollars a year. One estimate places the yearly cost in welfare programs and unemployment compensation due to illiteracy at six billion dollars. An additional 237 billion dollars a year in unrealized earnings is forfeited by persons who lack basic reading skills, according to Literacy Volunteers of America. Six billion dollars yearly go to child welfare costs and unemployment compensation caused directly by the number of illiterate adults unable to perform at standards necessary for available employment. The federal government alone has more than seventy-nine literacy-related programs administered by fourteen federal agencies. The total amount of money being spent on illiteracy by the federal government can only be guessed at, because there has never been a complete assessment prepared. A conservative estimate would place the amount at more than ten billion dollars each year, and growing steadily. \$6.6 billion yearly (estimate of 1983) is the minimal cost of prison maintenance for an estimated 260,000 inmates – out of total state and federal prison population of about 440,000– whose imprisonment has been directly linked to functional illiteracy. The prison population represents the single highest concentration of adult illiterates. While criminal conviction of illiterate men and women cannot be identified exclusively with the inability to read and write, the fact that 60 percent of prison inmates cannot read above the sixth grade level surely provides some indication on one major reason for their criminal activity. Swollen court costs, law-enforcement

budgets in those urban areas in which two fifths of all adults are unemployable for lack of literacy skills, cannot be guessed but must be many times the price of prison maintenance. While there is no way to prove direct causation in all cases, and while substantial unemployment would exist in any case among some sectors of the population – whether people were illiterate or not – it is reasonable to believe based only on a projected update, we would now incur a minimal annual loss of \$20 billion in direct industrial tax expenditures.

Health expenditures necessitated by the inability of the illiterate adult to use preventive health care measures were not documented. They could not guess the vast expense required for obstetric and abortion services to women whose unwanted pregnancies are often linked to lack of information caused by the inability to read. So, too, with the cost of mental health care and of rehabilitation programs for drug users and for alcoholics. Emotional stress and frequently uninterrupted desperation are familiar patterns in the life of an illiterate adult. If there is no way to calculate these costs, we can believe that they run into the billions.

Remedial Reading Instruction Lowers the Price

“The majority of reading problems faced by today’s adolescent and adults could have been avoided or resolved in the early years of childhood,” according to a report released March 18, 1998 by the National Research Council (NRC). Effective teaching and extra resources make it possible for many ‘at-risk’ children to become successful leaders.

New Zealand educator and psychologist, Dr. Marie M. Clay, is the acknowledged founder of Reading Recovery. During the 1960's, Dr. Clay conducted observational research, which laid the foundation for techniques in detecting early reading and writing difficulties in children. During the 1970's, Dr. Clay worked with a team of experienced teachers in New Zealand to develop the program procedures and conduct field trials. Based on test results of the pilot studies, in 1979, New Zealand adopted the RR Program nation-wide. In 1984, Reading Recovery was introduced in the United States.

Reading Recovery offers daily half-hour one on one tutorial sessions for students who are having trouble learning to read after one formal year of instruction. The program is supplementary and short-term, with most students needing from 12 to 16 weeks of instruction (Pollack, 1994) before they are successfully discontinued from the program. A combination of teacher judgement and systematic evaluation procedures identify those lowest-achieving children for whom Reading Recovery was designed. The program's goal is to bring students up to the level of their peers and to give students the assistance they need to develop independent reading strategies. Once students are reading at a level equivalent to that of their peers, they are discontinued from the program.

Reading Recovery is designed to provide the social interaction that supports the students' ability to work in their "zone of proximal development" – just beyond their level of actual development-with a supportive adult who helps them solve problems and to perform. Clay's theory of learning to read is based on the idea that children construct cognitive systems to understand the world and language. These cognitive systems develop as self-extending systems that generate further learning through the use of multiple sources of information (Clay, 1985; Pinnell, 1994).

An essential component of the Reading Recovery program is the training of the teachers who provide the tutorial instruction. Reading Recovery teachers learn to observe, analyze and interpret the reading and writing behaviors of individual students and to design and implement an individual program to meet each student's needs. Just as the Reading Recovery children engage in social interaction with the teacher, Reading Recovery teachers engage in the social interaction with their colleagues and mentors to construct a view of learning and teaching that supports literacy learning (Gaffney, 1993).

Reading Recovery costs include those associated with the establishment of a site and the ongoing costs of site maintenance. Start-up (one time) costs include the salary of the teacher leader in training, tuition (estimated at \$1,200), books and materials (\$2000), living expenses for the teacher leader in training while at the University Training Center, and the cost of building a one way glass and sound system (estimated at \$2,500) at the new site for teacher training. Following the teacher leader training, costs include professional development for the teacher leader, site support staff, tuition for teacher training, and training materials. Teacher costs include materials, supplies and tuition. The initial high cost is offset by the money saved through (1) not having to retain low achieving students in the first grade; (2) not having to place students in special education or Title 1 programs and (3) not mislabeling a child as "learning disabled" when in fact the child needed only the brief, supplementary intervention provided by Reading Recovery (Dyer, 1992). Dyer concludes that Reading Recovery is an educationally sound and cost effective early intervention program for helping children who are at risk of early reading failure. Children who do well early in reading from the beginning rarely stumble later on. Those who have difficulty in the primary grades tend to remain behind their classmates as

the years go by. This fact, reconfirmed again and again, is a painful testimony to the importance of addressing reading difficulties as early as possible in a child's life. As important as it is to hold out hope for every struggling reader in our middle and high schools, there is no substitute for an all-out effort to ensure that all of our children start out right, so that they never have to experience the consequences of failure and frustration that are so prevalent in our schools.

Chapter III

Critique, Conclusions and Recommendations

Critique and Conclusions

Research has clearly shown that children who grow up in poverty are disadvantaged as adults. Economically poor children are less likely than others to learn to read well, and those without strong literacy skills are unlikely to graduate. They are also less likely to be productive workers and much more likely to commit crimes and fill spaces in prisons. The costs to society for not investing in poor children are very high. Like any other investment strategy, investments in poor children can be thought of as a short-term investment. The short-term investment should be in education and health care for poor children. Wise investments in poor children can reduce public expenditures in the future.

Research suggests that effective teaching is essential for children to get underway with literacy learning. **All** children must have the opportunity in their first year of school to learn at their own pace in a good reading/writing program with sensitive, well-trained teachers.

While most children move easily into classroom reading and writing programs, some find the transition difficult and become confused. If these children are left to flounder with their confusions and narrow range of strategies for making sense of print, they get out of step with the class program, and fall further and further behind their rapidly progressing classmates. More importantly, if they continue to use their inappropriate strategies daily, these become habitual and very resistant to change. The most prominent finding from this research on childhood poverty is that poor children

need literacy intervention early and continually. A program such as Reading Recovery should be available to all children who need it. The literature shows that Reading Recovery is a preventive measure designed to identify and assist these children before they experience consistent difficulties and failure.

This research shows that Reading Recovery has been shown to be effective in preventing reading and writing failure. Its system-wide implementation will significantly reduce the number of children progressing through primary and secondary schools with reading and writing difficulties. Research also suggests that Reading Recovery has far reaching positive effects on the lives of individual children assisted. As they gain control of their own learning in reading and writing through the program, the children become active, constructive learners in the classroom, continuing to progress without the need for extra support. The experience of success and of being in step with their peers often has important positive effects on children's self esteem and their social interactions with other children, parents and teachers, facilitating further progress in learning. With appropriate intervention, almost all can learn to read, provided instruction is intensive and begins early.

Recommendations

Several recommendations are necessary for the Berlin School District in order for them to improve the school readiness and literacy skills of their students. One recommendation from this research would be for the Berlin School District to seek agreement from the system's superintendent, the Title I teachers and the Reading Specialist to have job descriptions for all new teachers in these positions to require both training and work as Reading Recovery teachers. The Berlin School District has

approximately 1200 students within their four schools and only one Reading Specialist. A school district of this size must reexamine their needs for more than one specialist and provide the functional equivalent of such well-trained staff members. Reading specialists and other specialist roles need to be defined so that there is two-way communication between specialists and classroom teachers about the needs of all children at risk of experiencing reading difficulties. Coordination is required at the instructional level, so children are taught with methodologies that are not fragmented. It is also recommended that the Berlin School District provide the time and money for their reading specialist and special educators to coordinate these roles. The Berlin Schools need to ensure that all the specialists engaged in child study or individualized educational program (IEP) meetings for special education placement, early intervention, out of classroom intervention, and classroom support are well informed about research in reading development and the prevention of reading difficulties. Berlin School District administrators should take the following steps to provide more opportunities for children's literacy acquisition. They could work with community groups and the public libraries within the area to provide informational programs for parents regarding the development of literacy skills in young children. They could ensure that appropriate screenings are used to determine intervention programs for children who are experiencing reading problems and children who are at risk of developing reading problems.

The prevention of reading failure must be considered the responsibility of the whole school. Teaching children to read is the most important objective educators have to accomplish. Reading is a prerequisite for everything else, not only in school, but in life itself.

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