



Perspectives of Jamaican parents and their secondary school children on the value of education: Effects of selected variables on parents' perspectives



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ABSTRACT

Education in the Caribbean is perceived as the route to social mobility, but research suggests that a low value is attached to education in Jamaica. This research is designed to ascertain the value that parents and their children attending secondary school in Jamaica attach to education. Multivariate statistical analysis was used. The findings revealed that both parents and their children value education for instrumental purposes and, while age and employment status made no difference to the parents' value of education, there was a statistically significant difference in value of education between parents with children attending different school types.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Theoretical framework

According to the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1981) human development takes place in several settings, the family being the principal one. The settings identified are: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, chronosystem and macrosystem. The microsystem is the setting closest to the child and includes structures such as the family and the school. The processes operating in the different settings are not independent of each other and Bronfenbrenner (1986) cites events at home that affect the child's progress in school and vice versa as an illustration of this. He uses the term *mesosystem* to characterize influences operating in both directions between the principal settings in which human development occurs. *Exosystems* are environments external to the developing person which impact on their development; for example the parent's world of work. In Jamaica, it is a common practice for children from poor families in the rural areas to assist their parents to take their produce to the market to sell on Fridays and this has given rise to the phenomenon of 'Friday

absenteeism' (Cook and Ezenne, 2010). The *macrosystem* is the outermost setting in the child's environment, namely the community and wider society and is comprised of social and cultural values, customs and laws, etc. which can affect operations in the other settings. The *chronosystem* is the setting that encompasses the dimension of time in relation to the child's development. A child reacts differently to the environment as he/she grows and matures and some major event in the child's life could impact his/her motivation and progress. A major milestone in the life of students in this study is the exit examination at the end of the primary school success in which is essential to gain entry into prestigious secondary schools that open the gateway to tertiary education and good employment prospects for the select few. For the others the future brings many hardships.

This study is located primarily in the microsystem where the family/parent/child and school interface and an important role of the parent is to inculcate in the child the importance of going to school to benefit from a good education. Parents sharing the value of education with their children becomes significant. While the location of the study is in the microsystem, it does not exclude the other settings given, as pointed out earlier, the settings do not operate independently of each other. Given its emphasis on parents, of particular relevance to this study are two points made by Bronfenbrenner (1986). The first relates to the importance of parental employment, in order to avoid risks to the child's health and education that can result from unemployment. The

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importance of this is underscored by [Dubow et al. \(2009\)](#) who cite research which shows that parents who experience difficult economic times have children who are more pessimistic about their educational and vocational futures. Secondly, Bronfenbrenner emphasizes the *particular* significance of parents' education in an ecological systems model of development because for one thing "it appears to be an important source of parents' conceptions of the nature and capacities both of the child and of the parent at successive stages of the child's life" ([Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 736](#)). [Dubow et al. \(2009\)](#) found that parental education affects children's aspirations for their own education as well as their actual educational achievement through adolescence while according to [Jeynes \(2007\)](#) the socioeconomic and education levels of parents can affect attitude and beliefs about education.

1.2. Parental influence on children's values and education

A principal question that this study asks is – what influence do parents' value of education have on their children? 'Value' here is understood as something positive, following [Reid \(1973, 42\)](#) who refers to 'values' as "meaning things or states of affairs which are thought valuable". He also makes the point that 'valuable' is normally used in a positive sense, implying things that are 'good' or 'right'. Reid also draws attention to the distinction between things or state of affairs which are considered valuable as a means to other values (i.e. Instrumental value) as opposed to those matters and states of affair which are valuable in themselves (i.e. of intrinsic value). This point becomes significant in the analysis of data for this study.

Parent involvement, as [Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler \(1995, 319\)](#) argue 'is a powerful enabling and enhancing variable in children's educational success'. [Jeynes \(2007\)](#) found that parental involvement is a better predictor for academic achievement at the elementary level than at the secondary level and surmised that phenomenon could be explained by the tendency for children to be more easily influenced by their parent's values about education at an early age.

[Taylor et al. \(2004\)](#) contend that parents influence their children through the process of academic socialization which begins in the early years of the child's life when parents use their past experiences, social and cultural characteristics and their behaviours to shape the early academic experiences of the child. Academic socialization in fact is a form of parental involvement in their children's education in the home whereby parents communicate to their children their expectations for education and its value or utility. It also involves fostering educational and occupational aspirations, and making preparations and plans for the future. Once these things are done consistently over time, they contribute to academic achievement. [Taylor et al. \(2004\)](#) cite research which shows that parents use recollections of their own childhood experiences to interpret and shape their children's experiences. They contend that 'parents' own experiences in school may determine their beliefs, attitudes, and values related to school and academic achievement ([Taylor et al., 2004, 173](#)).

[Francis and Archer \(2005\)](#) sought to investigate the extent to which high performing British-Chinese pupils and their parents view education as important and the reasons they gave for their views. They also wanted to find out any differences in belief between the parents and the students. They found that the students underscored the instrumental value of education. Seventy eight per cent of them thought that education was important in order to get a good job and to 'have a good future' ([Francis and Archer, 2005, 94](#)). In contrast, their parents saw education more in terms of its intrinsic value in that it prepared their children to go into society and acquire moral values. The high value attached to education by British-Chinese pupils and their parents, argue

Francis and Archer, was consistent, regardless of societal division, gender or ability.

[Meir \(1970\)](#) studied how students attending colleges and universities in the United States perceived their own value orientation toward higher education as compared to their parents' value orientation. Paternal/maternal differences by social class as well as gender and social class differences among students were contrasted. Meir's results showed that parents generally placed considerable emphasis on the importance of higher education as a route to socio-economic mobility and prosperity. However, parents from the lower social class placed emphasis on higher education for its instrumental value, whereas parents from the middle and upper social classes placed more emphasis on the humanizing, intellectual and socializing effect that the experience had on their children. Meir also found that the lower social class students were more disposed toward an instrumental orientation to the value of education than those from the middle class, but they noted that "the overall status effects on student orientations are weaker and less uniform than is the case for parental orientations" ([Meir, 1970, 77](#)). Meir's overall conclusion in this regard is that college students, irrespective of sex or social class, tend to value higher education for its intrinsic worth and humanizing effect on them. Other findings reported by Meir include that: parents tend to stress the instrumental value of education, the lower their social class: there is a strong possibility that a student's value orientation for education will reflect that of one or both of his/her parent. Meir however, cites research which shows that divergence in student-parent value orientation for education is present before the student enters college. This is consistent with what was said earlier in relation to the chronosystem setting in the ecological systems theory and is particularly important given the focus of the present study at the secondary level of education.

Other studies give insights on the value that parents from different social classes attach to education. A review of the literature by [Lott \(2001\)](#) reveals a stereotyped perception of low income parents as apathetic and placing a low value on education as compared to the more affluent middle class parents who are perceived as intelligent and placing a high value on education. While there is evidence that children from poorer families are more likely to underachieve than those from middle and upper income families ([Hardaway and McLoyd, 2009](#); [Houston et al., 1994](#); [Hilborne, 2007](#)), at the same time there is also evidence that poorer families put much effort in ensuring that their children achieve an education and gain high grades in school ([Gutman and McLoyd, 2000](#)). Contrary to the view that poor parents don't care about their children's education, [Lott \(2001\)](#) cites a number of studies which show that poor and minority parents have a high regard for their children's education and see it as a means for improving the children's futures.

[DeCastro-Ambrosetti and Cho \(2005\)](#) focused on teachers being prepared to teach at the secondary level of education. They examined the teachers' perceptions of parents and their involvement in their children's education. They found that the majority of secondary pre-service and in-service teachers blamed the home environment and the parents' lack of value for education for the low academic achievement of children from culturally and linguistically diverse environments. These are largely children from minority groups in the United States whose first language was not English and who resided in under-resourced communities.

[Jacob and Lefgren \(2005\)](#) reported evidence from a review of the literature that parents exercise preferences for schools in a particular location which offer challenging curricula and more disciplined environments. Their own study in a mid-size district in the western United States showed that low income parents prefer teachers who can raise the level of their children's achievement in math and reading scores as compared with high income parents

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