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TANF status, ethnicity, and early school success

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a secondary analysis of longitudinal data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K), conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The ECLS-K data are from a national sample of children who began kindergarten during 1998/9. The article reviews literature about the relationships among poverty, ethnicity, and early success in school, analyses three-year longitudinal data by student ethnicity and TANF status, and provides a discussion of policy implications. The findings suggest that, although many children from non-English-speaking backgrounds catch up with peers during the first three years of school, TANF status remains a good predictor of overall achievement in the third grade.

1. Introduction

Demographic trends in immigration and poverty provide important context for any discussion of public education. Both sets of trends were in flux during the period covered by this study of the effects of ethnicity and receipt of public welfare on children's success in their early school years. Repercussions of major changes in U.S. public welfare and immigration policy were evident by the year 2000. After statutory changes transformed Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) into Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), welfare rolls fell by 59% between 1996 and 2001, though not because most former recipients were better off (Besharov & Germanis, 2003). The number of children living in extreme poverty, defined as family income less than 50% of poverty level, increased by 400,000 in the final year of that period (Fremstad, 2003). African-American children living in extreme poverty reached an all-time high in 2001 (Children's Defense Fund, 2003).

During the same period, new residents reached the U.S. in record numbers. Due in part to the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, immigration rose a dramatic 40% during the 1980s and another 60% during the 1990s. The poverty rate for un-naturalized, foreign-born individuals reached twice the national average in 1999 (Danziger & Gottschalk, 2005). When more children begin school with the disadvantages of extreme poverty or recent immigration, schools struggle to help them into the economic and cultural mainstream.

This article presents secondary analyses of longitudinal data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K), conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The ECLS-K is a multi-site study of a national sample of children who began kindergarten during 1998/9. The sample of 17,362 children was about 57% White (non-Hispanic), 14% Black, 17% Hispanic, 6% Asian, and 4% of other ethnicities. The ECLS-K study assessed performance in reading, math, and general knowledge five times during the pupils' kindergarten, first grade, and third grade years. Data collected in 1999, 2000, and 2002 derived from parents' interviews, teachers' questionnaires, and cognitive assessments of children. This article presents results of ANOVA tests to analyze how school achievement varies by racial or ethnic group and TANF status. In addition, the authors present latent growth curve models (LGCs) for tracking the trajectories of children's reading, math skills, and general knowledge across five points in time. Analyses by TANF status and race or ethnicity show marked differences in patterns of school success that have implications for educational and social services in the U.S.

2. Literature review

The literature concerning early school achievement has expanded rapidly since about 1990, and this growing body of research derives from several disciplines, including education, child development, psychology, psychiatry, and social work. Social work researchers and social policy advocates require familiarity with a broad range of inter-professional literature in order to participate in the study of school success and to advance policy and practice that promote achievement for children from diverse backgrounds. For this review of the literature, the authors searched Social Work Abstracts, ERIC/First Search, and Academic Search Premier using the following keywords: school, preschool or kindergarten, combined with success, achievement, or preparation. The search yielded 199 articles from Social Work Abstracts, 73 from Academic Search Premier, and several hundred from the educational database Eric/First Search. For the Eric search,

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the authors added race or TANF to the search terms, reducing the yield of abstracts to 265. Studies cited here appeared in refereed, abstracted professional journals between 1990 and 2006.

In the professional literature, failure to achieve early school success has been linked to other poor educational outcomes (Gutman, Sameroff, & Cole, 2003), including failure to complete high school (Slavin, Karweit, & Waseik, 1993), rejection by peers, teachers, and parents (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992), later behavioral problems (Martens & Witt, 2004; Nafpaktitis & Perlmutter, 1998), and later substance use (Nafpaktitis & Perlmutter, 1998). Therefore, it is important for social workers and other professionals to focus attention on factors that influence achievement in school. This presentation of the literature review focuses on how ethnicity and economic factors are related to school success.

In the past decade, numerous studies have considered the economic predictors of school success in children. Overall, the evidence suggests that poverty and financial strain are detrimental for children's cognitive development and school functioning, but findings on the effects of welfare receipt are inconclusive and contradictory (Duncan & Hoffman, 1990; McLoyd, 1998).

2.1. Poverty and school outcomes

A growing body of literature outlines the deleterious effects of poverty on child development, including academic achievement and school behavior (see Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Huston et al., 2001; McLoyd, 1998). Children from low-income homes are at much greater risk for school failure and for dropping out of school (Hill & Sandfort, 1995), and they often begin kindergarten with poor scholastic skills (Clements, Reynolds, & Hickey, 2004; Howse, Lange, Farran, & Boyles, 2003). Eligibility for free or reduced-price school lunch is a common proxy measure of poverty, and Hughes (2003) reports a significant relationship between eligibility and lower achievement in school. In Hughes' view, the environments of children who live in poverty often lack predictability, which can interrupt the learning process. For example, frequent school mobility is linked in this review to school achievement, and patterns of school transfer also vary along socioeconomic and racial or ethnic lines (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1996). Children from low-income backgrounds have the highest rates of school mobility, which in turn has an adverse effect on academic performance (Mantzicopoulos & Knutson, 2001). Children who move frequently have lower achievement test scores and are rated by their teachers as less academically competent (Mantzicopoulos & Knutson, 2001). In addition, children who experience poverty during their preschool and early school years are more likely to drop out of high school than children who experience poverty only in later school years (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997).

Children from low-income families frequently present at school with barriers to learning, including untreated needs concerning health (Dryfoos, 1993; Parker & Logan, 2000; Poole, 1997), mental health (Dryfoos, 1993; Lynn, McKay, & Atkins, 2003; Mifsud & Rapee, 2005; Poole, 1997; Weist, Abrose, & Lewis, 2006), and nutrition (Hughes, 2003; Parker & Logan, 2000). Children living in poverty have more complex health needs and frequently lack access to health care, which compromises their ability to develop and learn (Parker & Logan, 2000). In their study of low-income children, Parker and Logan (2000) found that they reported more complaints of headaches, stomachaches or cramps, and earaches. Teachers reported that children living in poverty had untreated infections, head lice, hunger, and visual and dental problems. Thompson and Massat (2005) studied predominantly low-income, minority children from birth to age seven and found that two-thirds of them had been reported as maltreated and needed social services as they matured. However, only a few received those services, especially when they presented internalizing symptoms (e.g. depression) and symptoms associated with life stress. Moreover, girls and African-American children had reduced likelihood of receiving services, particularly for externalizing problems (e.g. aggression). Poor children also generally attend lower-quality schools and have access to fewer enriching after-school and summer activities (Entwisle & Alexander, 1992). All of these issues leave poor children less prepared and less competitive for on-going school success (Hughes, 2003).

2.2. Welfare and school outcomes

Little research has explored how welfare receipt affects young children's school outcomes, although some studies have focused on older youth from TANF households (Besharov & Germanis, 2000; Mead, 1992). Kalil and Eccles (1998) reported that welfare receipt predicted better school performance or higher grade completion, especially for African-American youth, after controlling for other demographic characteristics. Although no clear explanations have been provided for this finding, stability of income could play a role. Other studies, however, have found negative effects of welfare on white youths' school performances. McLanahan (1985) and Peters and Natalie (1997) found that for adolescents in white families, welfare receipt to predicted lower adult educational attainment. One longitudinal analysis demonstrated that poverty in early childhood (when the child is 0–5 years of age) was more strongly associated with failure to complete schooling in adolescence than was poverty from ages 6 to 15 (Duncan et al., 1988). Conflicting findings concerning welfare receipt and school success call for further research, particularly with younger children of all ethnic groups.

2.3. Race/Ethnicity and school outcomes

Research suggests that race and socioeconomic status are interrelated in their collective influence on academic achievement (Hughes, 2003). Among higher socioeconomic status families, there are fewer differences in school achievement among racial or ethnic groups. For example, Asian, Black, and Hispanic children who come from affluent backgrounds perform at the same level as affluent Caucasian children (Hughes, 2003; Payne, 2001). However, when lower socioeconomic status is combined with racial minority status, school achievement may be compromised. In their study of performance in mathematics, Borman and Overman (2004) found that among a racially heterogeneous group of children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, children of color were exposed to more risk factors than Caucasian children, had lower academic self-efficacy, and were exposed to school environments that hindered academic resiliency. The researchers referred to this phenomenon as the double jeopardy of being poor and from a minority group. In another study, Zambrana and Zoppi (2002) found that Latina students began as early as kindergarten to lag behind and that they had the highest high school dropout rate among all ethnic groups. These academic disparities also were associated with lower socioeconomic status.

2.4. Literature summary and research questions

The studies reviewed in this section identify economic predictors of school achievement, including poverty, race or ethnicity, and welfare receipt. However, most studies employ cross-sectional designs that preclude tracking changes in children's school performance over time. In addition, many studies have limitations related to relatively small or homogeneous samples.

The following analysis of the randomly selected, national sample in the ELCS-K study expands on prior research by testing latent growth curve models of the trajectories of children's school achievement over five time points. Based on our review of the literature and on familiarity with the ECLS-K data, the authors pose the following research questions for this analysis: (1) What individual variations