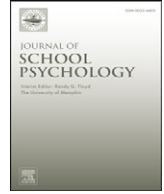




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Commentary

Data and development: Revisit the framework[☆]

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1. Introduction

The featured study by [Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Rouse, and Chen \(2012\)](#) contributes to our understanding of the achievement gap and what we can do about it. The conclusion is not new; the more risk children are exposed to, the more trouble they will have in school and in life. What is useful is applying data from a number of sources to an ecological model of development that includes family, community, and school. This paper demonstrates how access to data sources such as the Kids Integrated Data System can provide insight into school achievement trends in a community. It shows that a range of systems impinge on the lives of poor African American children – health, housing, education, and welfare – all of which contribute to their poorer school achievement. The model exemplifies how schools, by combining data sources with other institutions, can illuminate aspects of educational achievement not generally considered. By beginning with developmental theory, it forces consideration of the relationship of internal and external factors that affect children's development and learning. As the authors note, it also provides a reality check on what some may believe are critical risks as opposed to the actual risks to which particular children are exposed. Threats can be confirmed or discarded by collecting relevant data from a variety of sources and

[☆] Commentary on [Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Rouse, and Chen \(2012\)](#).

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interventions initiated that are responsive to unique community configurations. This model can also provide a baseline for monitoring changes that communities may make in their basic services.

This study reemphasizes the interrelatedness of poverty, housing, health, and educational achievement. Schools serious about the achievement gap must question the availability of prenatal and postnatal health care and nutritional supplementation and the rates of usage, the quality of the housing stock and environmental surround, as well as the availability of social services. If these systems are not working, the achievement gap is inevitable.

Various aspects of this research are also worthy of attention. In particular, I have expanded briefly on other factors the author has highlighted—engagement, absenteeism, and the potential for synergy between health and education. My major concern, however, is with the developmental framework and the confounding of developmental and cultural factors in accounting for school achievement. I conclude with a plea for more information about costs/benefits in making planning decisions.

2. Task engagement

The role of task engagement as a positive factor in school achievement is well known and it was a corollary in this study. During the preschool years, task engagement is highly influenced by both family/community values and by the alignment of the curricula with children's prior learning. This suggests two tactics for schools. One is, before kindergarten, to reach out to parents and early care and education programs to explain their role in stimulating the interest of young children in literacy, science, and math activities. The groundwork for motivation begins in the preschool years as children understand the value placed on these activities by the important people in their lives.

The other strategy is to help teachers use culturally relevant teaching styles and pacing so that children's interest is engaged. Many teachers are unaware of the cultural differences among children and what these differences might mean in terms of their prior social experiences, interests, cognitive style, and physicality. Teachers need to connect new knowledge to children's prior learning and to embed school content in their daily lives. Yet, too often teachers are unaware of what children already know or the way they live, which is essential information for effective teaching.

3. Absenteeism

In low-income communities, children are more frequently absent from school than in more affluent areas, and the incidence is higher in preschool and kindergarten than in the later elementary grades (Chang & Romero, 2008). Little is known about why. Certainly, young children are more susceptible to upper respiratory and other viral infections, which may account for some of the difference in attendance between preschool and the later primary years. However, the attendance pattern in childcare shows more regularity than that in Head Start or state prekindergarten programs, which makes illness seem less likely the only or deciding factor. As preschool absence correlates with poorer achievement (Chang & Romero, 2008), more studies need to be done delineating the events and circumstances that discourage regular school attendance in the early years.

4. Health and education

The authors called attention to several health risks that are not prominent in the K-12 educational literature but that seem to require attention from educators. The correlation of prenatal care, short gestational age, and possibly disease (high absenteeism) with educational achievement makes a powerful case for the inadequacy of the current health system in engaging and treating African American families. It points to the need for health departments and private physicians to be more diligent in addressing prenatal care for African American mothers if we expect to raise children's academic achievement. It is clear that schools have a vested interest in the quality of health care in their communities and need to work with health and nutrition agencies to engage families and ensure services.

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