



Parents' educational beliefs and children's early academics: Examining the role of SES[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
School readiness
Parent beliefs
SES
Achievement
Expectations

ABSTRACT

In this study, associations between parents' educational beliefs and growth in their children's kindergarten achievement were examined to determine whether relations differed across levels of socioeconomic status (SES) among contemporary kindergarten students, with a particular focus on whether this moderation effect was mediated by parental enrichment practices. Participants included 13,399 children drawn from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 2010–11 (ECLS-K:2011) and their parents. Educational beliefs included parents' beliefs about the skills necessary for a child entering kindergarten and parents' expectations for their children's eventual educational attainment. SES was operationalized as both income status and parental educational attainment, and enrichment was measured as educationally-related practices in the home and extracurricular activities. Educational beliefs were significantly and positively related to achievement, such that children whose parents rated early skills as important and held higher expectations for their children showed higher math and reading scores at the end of kindergarten. In addition, both school readiness beliefs and expectations were positively related to enrichment practices, and a significant interaction between school readiness beliefs and education was detected, such that school readiness beliefs were more strongly predictive of enrichment among parents with lower levels of education. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

1. Introduction

Substantial variability in children's reading and math skills is evident at kindergarten entry (Bassok & Latham, 2014; Zill & West, 2001). To understand the nature and sources of these early individual differences, accumulating research has focused on parental actions and behaviors (e.g., Lagacé-Séguin & Case, 2010; Taylor, Clayton, & Rowley, 2004). However, less work has examined whether parents' beliefs about children's early learning and their educational expectations may also relate to achievement in early childhood, despite theoretical evidence that these educational beliefs guide parents' practices and thus directly or indirectly influence children's achievement.

Some empirical evidence suggests that parents with higher expectations for their children's achievement and stronger beliefs about the importance of early academic skills have children who are more academically prepared for the start of school (Puccioni, 2015; Sy & Schulenberg, 2005). Much of this existing research is based on samples of children collected prior to 2000, and yet the nature of kindergarten has changed drastically over the past decade. In comparing two nationally representative samples of kindergarteners from 1998 to 2010,

Bassok, Latham, and Rorem (2016) found that kindergarten has become increasingly academic: teachers have become more focused on academic goals, more instruction time is now devoted to math and reading skills, and the amount of time working with textbooks and worksheets has increased. As the skills that children need to succeed in school have likely changed over the past decade, it is necessary to investigate whether associations between beliefs and achievement continue to exist using more recent data.

Although there is limited research examining links between parental beliefs and children's early achievement, decades of research have highlighted the significant influence of socioeconomic status (SES), particularly family income and maternal education, on individual differences in children's early learning. Children raised in homes with low income or low levels of parental education are at an increased risk of struggling academically in school (e.g., Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Magnuson, 2007). Differences in how parental educational beliefs relate to achievement may help to explain these achievement gaps. Specifically, there is theoretical and empirical evidence to suggest that economically disadvantaged parents may have difficulty translating their beliefs into practices, which in turn may put

[☆] We thank Elizabeth Votruba-Drzal and Ming-Te Wang for the feedback on early drafts of this manuscript.

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children at an academic disadvantage. However, the question of whether the associations between parental educational beliefs and their educational enrichment practices, as well as associations between these beliefs and children's achievement, differ across SES has not been directly addressed in past research. The current study explored these issues by examining associations between educational beliefs, enrichment practices, and children's academic achievement in a contemporary, nationally representative sample of families. Specifically, this study assessed whether SES moderated the association between educational beliefs and children's achievement and whether parental enrichment practices mediated these associations.

1.1. Theoretical frameworks

Given the importance of early academic skills for later school success (Duncan et al., 2007), understanding the factors that promote these early skills is critical. Although past research has focused primarily on what parents do with their children to support their learning, academic socialization models propose that enriching parenting practices stem from parents' beliefs and expectations (Taylor et al., 2004). According to this view, beliefs and values may directly influence children's academic development. Additionally, parents' language to their children, the types of learning environments that they provide, and their involvement in their children's schooling can foster academic growth. These practices are largely driven by parents' education-related experiences, cultural perceptions, and beliefs (Taylor et al., 2004).

There is also reason to believe that the connections between educational beliefs and enrichment practices may depend on context. According to the theory of reasoned action, beliefs and multiple other influences, such as community norms and more general contextual factors, determine an individual's intention to act in a certain way (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Holden & Edwards, 1989). For behaviors such as enrichment practices, a parent's intention to act in accordance with their educational beliefs may be influenced by broader contextual factors or constraints. Specifically, beliefs may differentially relate to parenting across levels of SES because socioeconomic disadvantage may limit low SES parents' abilities to engage in these practices with their children (Conger & Dogan, 2007).

1.2. Relations between parental beliefs and young children's academic achievement

In the present study, we focus on two domains of educational beliefs that are particularly relevant during early childhood: school readiness beliefs and educational expectations (e.g. Halle, Kurtz-Costes, & Mahoney, 1997; Sy & Schulenberg, 2005). School readiness beliefs refer to parent perceptions of the importance of their child attaining specific school readiness skills before entering kindergarten, including a range of cognitive and socio-emotional skills such as early literacy, attention, and emotion regulation (see Morgan & DiPerna, 2007). Educational expectations, on the other hand, refer to parent expectations for the highest educational degree that their child will attain. Although parents' expectations predict children's academic success across development, school readiness beliefs refer to a particular educational period: the start of formal schooling. Given that the transition to kindergarten is a critical developmental juncture for young children, identifying the factors that support positive development during this period is critical (McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro, & Wildenger, 2007; Pianta & Cox, 1999).

Research with older children and adolescents suggests that parents with higher expectations tend to have children with higher levels of academic achievement (Davis-Kean, 2005; Davis-Kean & Sexton, 2009; Halle et al., 1997; Rutchick, Smyth, Lopoo, & Dusek, 2009; Stevenson, Chen, & Uttal, 1990; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). In fact, several meta-analyses have suggested that parents' expectations for their children have the largest effect sizes in predicting achievement across

elementary school compared to other parental factors such as parental school involvement and home literacy practices (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2005). In comparison, less is known about how these educational beliefs relate to earlier achievement. Among a subsample of White and Asian American families drawn from an earlier cohort of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K), Sy and Schulenberg (2005) found that parents' expectations and beliefs about the importance of school readiness skills for kindergarteners were related to both initial academic skills as well as growth over kindergarten and first grade. Puccioni (2015) recently replicated these findings with the full ECLS-K 1998 cohort and detected a similar pattern of results. Importantly, however, these patterns of associations between beliefs and achievement have not been replicated in more recent samples of children such as the more contemporary ECLS-K cohort of children who entered kindergarten in 2010, despite major shifts in the nature of kindergarten (Bassok et al., 2016). Further, educational beliefs may not predict achievement consistently among different cultural or socioeconomic groups, as a recent meta-analysis illustrated that racial/ethnic minority children may not benefit from parental expectations to the same degree as their White peers (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010).

1.3. Parental enrichment as a mediating mechanism

Despite strong theoretical arguments that parental beliefs guide parents' provision of learning opportunities (Taylor et al., 2004), such that strong beliefs about the importance of academics or high academic expectations may lead parents to prioritize enriching activities, empirical work demonstrating these indirect associations has yielded mixed results. This is particularly true in research that methodologically accounts for the heterogeneity of parents (e.g., multi-group analyses or examinations of disadvantaged samples). In Sy and Schulenberg's (2005) subsample of White and Asian families in the ECLS-K, for example, parents' expectations were significant predictors of their practices (i.e., home literacy practices, having rules about television, and enrichment outside the home), but beliefs about the importance of school readiness skills only predicted parental enrichment among White families and not among Asian families. Puccioni's (2015) analysis of the full ECLS-K sample revealed small but significant associations between parental beliefs and enrichment practices in the home: the combination of SES, race, and school readiness beliefs together accounted for only 7% of the variance in parental enrichment. Among older children, parents' educational expectations in late elementary school positively relate to home enrichment, which in turn is positively associated with achievement (Davis-Kean, 2005). Subsequent longitudinal work has replicated these findings, but associations appear to be weaker among racial/ethnic minority families, particularly Hispanic families (Davis-Kean & Sexton, 2009).

In contrast, several studies reported null associations between beliefs and practices (e.g., Diamond, Reagan, & Bandyk, 2000; Halle et al., 1997). Among a nationally representative sample of parents of preschoolers, parents who reported more concern for their child's lack of readiness for kindergarten were not significantly more likely to read with their child or show their child educational television programs (Diamond et al., 2000). Additionally, among a sample of low-income third and fourth graders, parents' beliefs about their children's current abilities or future educational attainment did not predict their behaviors (Halle et al., 1997). The authors suggested that in this high-risk sample of families, parents' practices were constrained by external factors other than beliefs. Thus, although most studies demonstrate that educational beliefs predict parents' enrichment practices, these inconsistent findings indicate that the way in which beliefs are translated into behaviors may differ across individuals (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002).

Nonetheless, abundant evidence indicates that parents' provision of enriching activities can benefit children's academic achievement (Foster, Lambert, Abbott-Shim, McCarty, & Franze, 2005; Lagacé-Séguin & Case, 2010; McDonald Connor, Son, Hindman, & Morrison,

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