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# Childhood social capital and postsecondary educational attainment

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## 1. Introduction

Despite increases in U.S. college enrollment over the past few decades, children from families with low socioeconomic status (SES) and those from historically underrepresented minority groups continue to demonstrate lower rates of college degree completion (NCES, 2014). The SES attainment gap is particularly wide, with 68 percentage points separating the 2013 bachelor's degree attainment rates of young adults from the top (77%) and bottom (9%) income quartiles (Cahalan and Perna, 2015). Consequently, children from high- and low-income families experience divergent economic trajectories and social class mobility in the U.S. remains stagnant (Mitnik and Grusky, 2015).

Evidence suggests achievement gaps arise early in children's schooling (Aikens and Barbarin, 2008; Alexander et al., 1997; Downey et al., 2004), thus many researchers of high school dropouts have focused their analyses of contributing factors on children's pre-teenage years (Alexander and Cook, 1982; Balfanz et al., 2007; Bowers and Sprott, 2012; Finn, 1989). Conversely, researchers studying postsecondary degree completion have almost exclusively focused on the high school time period (e.g., Adelman, 1999, 2004, 2006; Allensworth et al., 2009; Astin and Oseguera, 2005; Carroll, 1989; Geiser and Santelices, 2007), with few examining factors from the elementary and middle school years (e.g., Dyk and Wilson, 1999), though childhood reflects the period when students develop their college-going aspirations and the pre-requisite skills for a college preparatory curriculum (Terenzini et al., 2001; Walston and McCarroll, 2010).

Recognizing the early manifestation of achievement gaps, growing numbers of high-poverty elementary and middle schools have adopted full-service community school models to address students' non-academic needs and build social capital among children, families, and communities (Bireda, 2009; Blank, 2005). As substantial resources flow into these initiatives (Blank et al., 2010), their long-term effectiveness depends on schools' capacity to focus on the risks that most threaten children's development. Unfortunately, the literature's lack of attention to associating postsecondary outcomes with factors from the pre-high school years leaves practitioners and policy-makers with incomplete information to guide their decisions.

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Given the importance of this topic, the current study investigated the relationships between social risk factors in childhood and postsecondary educational outcomes. We approach this work from a sociological perspective, asserting differences in college completion rates can be partially attributed to differences in social capital at the family level (Perna and Titus, 2005). Our analyses drew upon data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) to determine the extent intra-familial characteristics and extra-familial networks from the Kindergarten to eighth grade (K to 8) years contributed to postsecondary degree completion. The results revealed associations between social factors in childhood and long-term educational outcomes, which presents implications for educators, researchers, and policy-makers.

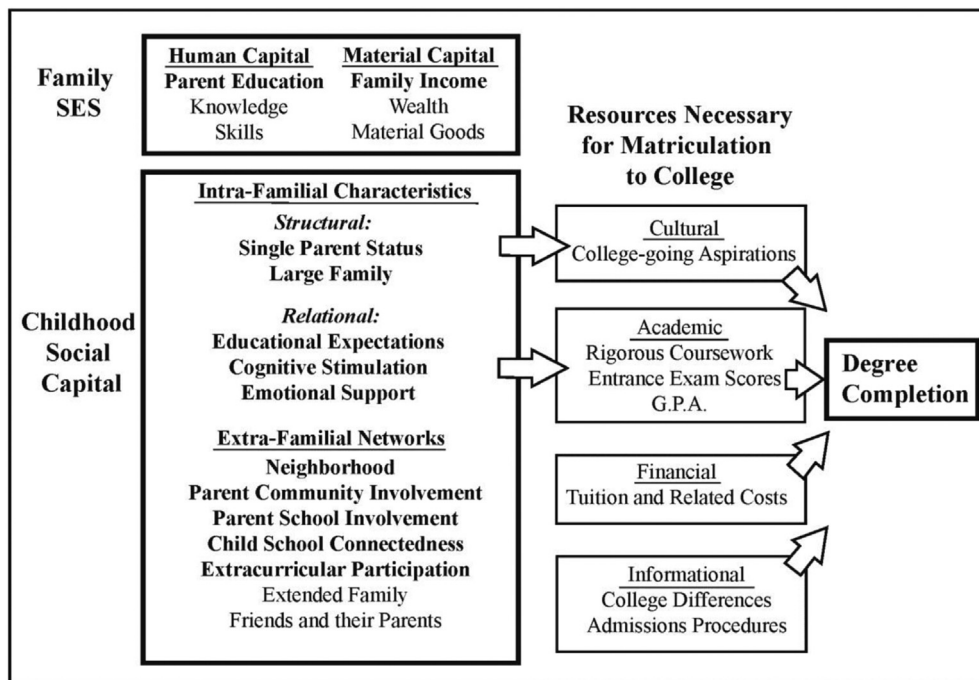
## 2. Theoretical framework: social capital and cumulative risk exposure

Our theoretical framework illustrates the relationships between social risk factors and educational attainment levels by integrating Portes' (1998) and Coleman's (1988) theories of social capital with Rutter's (1985) theory of cumulative risk. In this model, social capital represents a private good derived from individual access to resources embedded in social relationships and structures (Portes, 1998). The framework is grounded by the basic premise that individuals with fewer social resources face greater risk of experiencing poor long-term academic outcomes.

Considering the complexity of human relationships, researchers have understandably approached social capital from multiple directions (Dika and Singh, 2002). The two major branches of social capital research emerged from the works of James Coleman (1988) and Pierre Bourdieu (e.g., Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). A rich discussion of their differences remains beyond the scope of the current review, but when Dika and Singh (2002) synthesized the literature on social capital, they characterized Coleman's work as functionalist and Bourdieu's work as rooted in social reproduction. In Coleman's view, families may "adopt certain norms to advance children's life chances, whereas Bourdieu's work emphasizes structural constraints and unequal access" (Dika and Singh, 2002, p. 34). The current study aligns with Coleman's (1988) functional perspective of material (income, wealth), human (educational credentials, skills), and social capital as exchangeable resources and echoes Coleman's primary assertion that social capital is instrumental in the development of human capital.

We also follow Coleman (1988) in forgoing the conceptualization of cultural capital as a form of currency associated with the markers of the dominant class (e.g., arts participation, clothing, speech patterns). Instead, our work employs a broader view of culture, considering it a factor that shapes individual choices and social interactions in ways that influence academic outcomes (Kingston, 2001). Consequently, cultural resources represent only a minor element in the theoretical model (Fig. 1).

As Fig. 1 indicates, students must activate or accumulate numerous resources for successful matriculation to college and persistence to degree completion. Although students may acquire some of these resources (e.g., finances, information) in the years just prior to college entry, strong academic records typically demand foundational skills and attitudes developed well before high school entry. We theorize that various childhood social capital factors within and external to the family facilitate



**Fig. 1.** Theoretical framework depicting the relationships between childhood capital and postsecondary degree completion. Bold text indicates variables included in the current study. Arrows indicate the most relevant theorized causal pathways. SES = Socio-Economic Status. G.P.A. = Grade Point Average.

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