



When children affect parents: Children's academic performance and parental investment



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ABSTRACT

Sociologists have extensively documented the ways that parent resources predict children's achievement. However, less is known about whether and how children's academic performance shapes parental investment behaviors. I use data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) and longitudinal fixed effects models to examine how changes in teacher assessments are related to changes in the conferral of various parent resources. Overall, I find that the relationship between achievement and investment varies based on the *directionality* in children's achievement and the *type* of resource at hand. Children whose performance improves receive a broad range of enrichment resources, while declines in performance are met with corrective educational resources. Results are largely consistent whether language or math assessments are used to predict investment, and also among children whose achievement does not change over time. I discuss these patterns, along with implications for the use of parent resources in education and family research.

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1. Introduction

Parental investment is a ubiquitous family process. Parents teach their children how to read and write, how to interact with their peers, and the basics of caring for themselves and others. Many parents also take their role a step further, paying for at least a portion of their children's college education in an effort to get their lives off on the right foot (Hamilton, 2013). Despite the near-universality of these practices, it is also understood that parental investment—including the types of investment offered, the frequency of investment, and the benefits children derive from investment—is inherently unequal in families.¹ These inequalities may have profound effects on children's school performance and educational attainment (Lareau, 2003; Smith et al., 1997; Teachman, 1987).

Previous research has highlighted the many ways that parental investment varies across populations. Social class is a major determinant of parental investment, both in terms of how parents guide their children's development (Lareau, 2003) and whether children are taught to use certain tools to their own advantage (Calarco, 2011). Parents have also been found to vary their investment according to their child's adoptive status (Hamilton et al., 2007), gender (Carter and Wojkiewicz, 2000), physical attractiveness (Langlois et al., 1995), and other attributes. Surprisingly, sociologists have paid less attention to the way a child's academic performance may affect parental investment behaviors. This omission is

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¹ Other scholars have used the term "parent resources" to describe parental investment, and these terms are used interchangeably throughout this paper. "Investment" may imply a more agentic approach on behalf of parents.

surprising given the premium many parents place on achievement (Lareau, 2003; Nelson, 2010) and the school's role in shaping children's life chances.

In this paper, I examine how academic performance shapes the investments parents make in their children, broadly defined. I use data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) and longitudinal fixed effects models to assess how parents respond to trends in their children's achievement across elementary school. First, I evaluate how changes in children's academic performance are related to changes in parental investment. I incorporate multiple parent resources (economic, educational, interactional, social capital, and expectations), achievement in two school subjects (language and math), and data from several grade levels to yield a comprehensive summary of the relationship between achievement and investment. Then, I consider how parental investment may change over time for children whose achievement is constant throughout elementary school. These cases are inherently excluded from fixed effects models that rely on changes in the independent variable, but even these children appear to experience changes in parental investment in accordance with their achievement level.

One of the most persistent insights in the sociology of education is that parents influence their children's achievement and eventual attainment (Lareau, 2003; Lareau and Horvat, 1999; Mullen et al., 2003; Roksa and Potter, 2013). Yet the reverse mechanism—from children to parents—is of interest for three main reasons. First, assuming that parental investment has a meaningful effect on attainment, it is important to understand the different factors that shape the distribution of resources. Past research has examined many such factors, some of which are family- or parent-centric (Domina and Roksa, 2011; Powell et al., 2006; Teachman, 1987) and some of which are child-centric (Cheng and Powell, 2007; Hamilton et al., 2007), but children's achievement remains understudied. Second, this research challenges top-down models of the family in which decisions and information flow exclusively from parents to children. Sociologists of childhood have long suggested that children play an active role in family processes (Corsaro, 1997), but this perspective has less often been applied to matters of parent resource distribution. Third, this study may be useful for teachers, school administrators, and policymakers who must work with families to educate children. If children's achievement shapes parental investment, other parties can use this information to more effectively supplement the resources that children are receiving at home.

2. Background

Several theoretical perspectives inform the research surrounding children's academic performance and parental investment behaviors. As discussed below, I suggest that there are three main ways that this relationship could operate. First, parents could act as *reinforcements* for their children's achievement, providing more resources when their children's academic performance improves or is consistently high. Second, parents could try to *compensate* for their children's achievement, extending more resources when their children temporarily or consistently struggle in school. Finally, it could be that children's achievement has *null effects* on parental investment because parents simply provide maximum resources based on their socioeconomic status (SES) and other characteristics.²

2.1. Parents as reinforcements

Some scholars have argued that parents prefer to invest in children who excel in school, essentially *reinforcing* their strong academic performance. Human capital theory, for example, poses that parents prefer to invest in children who show signs of promise. Such investments may be more likely to pay off in the future, either with personal success for the child or support for the parents later in life (Becker, 1964, 1967, 1981; Becker and Tomes, 1976). This rationale has also been presented in rational choice terms. That is, children with strong records of achievement, or those who are making gains in their academic performance, may look like sensible investment opportunities to their parents (Steelman and Powell, 1991). Status attainment models offer a similar perspective, in which parents and significant others have higher expectations for high achievers, giving these children extra motivation to succeed (Sewell et al., 1970, 1969; Steelman and Powell, 1991).

Empirical work in this area has highlighted the many advantages that parents impart on promising children. Development scholars have shown that parents use early measures of academic ability and economic potential to make key decisions, including which children should receive formal schooling (Akresh et al., 2012; Ayalew, 2005; Rosenzweig and Schultz, 1982). Others have tied parental investment to even earlier indicators of potential, such as birth weight (Datar et al., 2010; Hsin, 2012; Lynch and Brooks, 2013) and handedness (Frijters et al., 2013). A common assumption in many of these studies is that the earliest possible measures of genetic endowment are needed to understand how parents make investment decisions independent of their prior investments. In other words, parental investment is an endogenous process, and we cannot look at parents' current decisions without considering what came before. Although this strategy is often appropriate for gauging parents' latent investment preferences, I argue that children's genetic endowments are not fully recognized until they have been verified by an outside institution such as a school. That is, parents can acknowledge their children's birth weight and even draw conclusions vis-à-vis their children's abilities, but those conclusions are mostly unsubstantiated until children enter the school environment and are compared to their peers. In this sense, feedback from

² Scholars in this area have used both between- and within-family approaches. I focus on between-family comparisons due to data availability, but reference within-family theory and research where appropriate because many of these ideas can be applied to the between-family context.

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