

Does capital at home matter more than capital at school? Social capital effects on academic achievement

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Abstract

A relatively neglected problem is how individuals derive social capital from more than one context and the extent to which they benefit from the capital in each. We examine whether social capital created at home and at school has differing effects on child academic achievement. We hypothesize that children derive social capital from both their families and their schools and that capital from each context promotes achievement. Using data from the National Longitudinal Education Study and structural equation modeling, we show that capital from each context is helpful, with social capital in the family more influential than social capital at school. We discuss the implications of these findings for research on child achievement and for studies of inequality generally.

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1. Introduction

It is well known that there is variation across adolescents in tested levels of achievement (Farkas, 2003; Fischer et al., 1996; Parcel & Menaghan, 1994) and that differences in achievement are associated with variations in school success (Jencks et al., 1972; Sewell & Hauser, 1972). School success, in turn, is a critical predictor of occupational and earnings attainment (Farkas, 1996), an important component of life in meritocratic society, and consequential to the transmission of inequality across generations.

It is also well known that resources from multiple social contexts influence academic attainment among adolescents. After classic studies of occupational status attainment demonstrated the importance of family background and the intervening effects of education on adult attainment (Blau & Duncan, 1967), scholars developed increasingly sophisticated models of why and how education was so consequential (Breen & Jonsson, 2005; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993). Others studied why various aspects of families, such as family structure (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994) and family process (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010) were influential. Theorists such as Coleman (1988, 1990) pointed to social capital as an underlying construct influential in both families and schools that influenced attainment, as well as to the generality of the social capital concept in explaining other social outcomes. Despite these accomplishments, additional questions remain.

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Specifically, relatively little research explicitly addresses how family and school contexts affect the accumulation and use of social capital as it is transmitted to educational outcomes. For example, does social capital pay off regardless of where it is generated? Or is the benefit of social capital dependent on the context in which the investment is made? In addition, can social capital reflect resources in more than one context?

In this paper we address these issues with a study of family and school social capital effects on adolescent academic achievement. We hypothesize that children derive social capital from their families and from their schools and that capital from each context is influential in promoting academic achievement. We demonstrate that social capital at home and social capital at school are distinct constructs. We also show that capital from each context is helpful in promoting child academic achievement. Our empirical strategies differ from previous work in allowing us to evaluate the extent to which specific measures of capital actually reflect more than one context simultaneously, as well as the overall effectiveness of capital from each context.

We first review literature on social capital that identifies which aspects of families and schools may be important to study. We then review literature pointing to limitations in prior studies of social capital effects on academic achievement, followed by details of our empirical strategy and findings. We conclude by discussing how our strategies can inform questions in the study of inequality more generally by identifying how resources in other contexts, such as neighborhoods and workplaces, also differentially affect stratification outcomes.

2. Background

2.1. *Social capital as a concept and a construct*

By social capital we refer to resources that inhere in the relationships among actors and that facilitate a range of social outcomes (Coleman, 1990). Social capital is contained in relationships among individuals as well as among corporate actors; it reflects the presence of objective ties, as well as subjective relationships contingent upon trust, reciprocity, or other positive emotions (Paxton, 1999). In describing social capital, Coleman (1988) focuses specifically on the information, obligations, and norms that are transmitted through social ties, resources that help children acquire knowledge from adults. Social capital can be used in the production of individual-level goods, such as when a worker recommends a friend for a job (Kirschenman & Neckerman,

1991). Social capital can also be used in the production of group-level goods, as when immigrant groups use within-group ties to promote entire communities (Portes, 1998). We focus on individual-level creation of and returns to social capital, with investments from the family and the school serving as key contexts from which children may draw social resources.

Social capital theory implies purposeful investment on the part of the actors. Considering children's academic development, Coleman (1988) argued that the mere presence of parental stores of knowledge is insufficient to ensure transmission of that knowledge to children. Instead, parents must make specific choices to invest in their children's development and engage in interactions with a specific child to create the bonds along which information can pass. Families who invest expect to see higher levels of academic achievement in their children; they undertake these investments with the expectation that strong academic achievement during childhood will translate into higher levels of education and occupational attainment in later years, thus promoting upward mobility in our stratification system. For this reason, family social capital investment has intergenerational consequences.

The creation of social capital is not limited to the family. Social capital associated with schools refers to investments between students and schools that can facilitate educational outcomes. These bonds can reflect community ties, but typically refer to the relationships that parents and children form with school teachers and personnel. For example, arguments regarding the superiority of Catholic schools are based on the notion that the religious ties that link many attendees, their families, and their teachers promote common norms useful in supporting academic achievement (Coleman, 1988, 1990; Morgan, Sorensen, & Todd, 2009). In addition, attending Catholic schools may promote the formation of social capital through social closure; parents are more likely to have relationships with other parents whose children also attend the school. Adults in non-family settings, such as coaches and church leaders, also incur costs of investing in children as they transmit knowledge and norms that support academic achievement.

In addition, Putnam (2000) distinguished between bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding capital includes the intra-family connections we have described above, connections that we argue facilitate academic achievement for children and adolescents. In addition, there is considerable evidence that children benefit from the social connections that parents have with others such as neighbors, school personnel, and work colleagues (Crosnoe, 2004; Dufur, Parcel, & McKune,

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