

Children and their Relationships:
A study of Sibship, Schooling, and Maternal Employment
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Observing the relationships of micro- to- macro-level systems, in the last few weeks we have studied the effects of individuals and families as they relate to larger constructs in education such as health and social capital. We now begin to examine how the macro-level systems affect a micro-level of education; larger constructs such as maternal employment and their effects on children. In this paper we will review three distinct but related topics: Sibship and Children's Education, Family-School Relationships: Social Capital, and Maternal Employment and Children's Education. I will provide a summary and review of a few articles relating to each of these topics and incorporate my thoughts throughout each of the sections.

Examining the relationship between number of siblings and educational attainment, Shavit and Pierce (1991) studied three groups in Israel: Ashkenazi Jews, Oriental Jews, and Moslem Arabs. They suggested that when the nuclear family is able to use the extended family for support, the size of the family has less of an effect on the educational attainment of the children. They used a qualitative approach interviewing Israeli Jews and Moslems living in Israel (whose social organization is based on an extended family system called *hamula*) about various aspects of their background such as their educational and occupational histories as well as their family and social dynamics. They found that for both Jewish groups, the number of siblings had a negative effect on educational attainment, but it was the opposite for the Moslems. I found this argument to be quite convincing as I have seen first-hand similarities between an extended family system and the Catholic Church. A large support base (whether familial or not) has the potential to alleviate many stressors as the ability to share resources, and in turn provide more resources, increases.

In Downey's article (1995) "When Bigger is Not Better: Family Size, Parental Resources, and Children's Educational Performance" he acknowledges that there is an established

relationship between the number of siblings and the children's educational attainment. Downey examines the dilution model more critically, testing its implications; although this established relationship exists, the explanation for the relationship between number of siblings and children's educational performance is still underdeveloped. He determines, with information from the 1988 NELS, that the resource model is supported by three implications: parental resources decrease as the number of siblings increase, parental resources can account for most or all of the inverse relationships between sibship size and educational outcomes, and children benefit less from certain parental resources when they have to share with other siblings.

These articles present two distinct views. Shavit and Pierce acknowledge that in some family structures, more siblings can equate to less educational opportunity. Simultaneously however, when focusing on a population that emphasizes a support system, they observe no adverse effects. Downey on the other hand does not acknowledge or address the benefits of increased sibling size, such as positive role modeling and additional attention, or the resources available to the family aside from direct parental contribution, such as familial supervision (baby-sitting), communal living opportunities, or shared financial resources. I believe all three assertions in the resource dilution model to be valid; the points can't be contested but an acknowledgement of benefits must also be presented.

Examining Family-School relationships and the forms of capital, Bourdieu (1986) explores and defines the differences in three forms of capital: social, cultural, and economic. He believes that it is not possible to function in our social world without considering capital in each of these forms. In his paper Bourdieu describes the implications each form has in relation to advancing in the school system. Portes (2000) discusses the concepts of social capital and its attribution to the quality of individuals versus a characteristic of groups. He questions the validity of asserting that

social capital can be attributed to either of those two levels. Ultimately, Portes presents evidence stating that much of the alleged benefits may be spurious after controlling for other factors. I believe social capital cannot be so easily separated and both aspects, individual and collective, have an integral part in developing one's social capital.

And finally, taking a look at factors that contribute to education *before* entering primary school, Desai and Waldfogel conducted research exploring the effects of early maternal employment on children's intellectual success. Desai (1989) sought to determine the impact, if any, maternal employment had on children's intellectual ability. Their guiding question, which seeks to determine the influence of early resumption of maternal employment on children's intellectual ability assumes that there is an influence at all, which is found to be true only for a subset of a population. The researchers believed that maternal employment would have a stronger impact on children from high SES families than from low SES families and they also examined differences in the timing of the mother's return to work. They utilized the 1986 NLS/Y children and determined their intellectual capacity as based on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. Desai ultimately concluded that maternal employment had an adverse effect on intellectual ability only for boys from higher-income families.

Waldfogel (2002) contributed to the 1989 article by Desai by investigating the effects of maternal employment on children's cognitive outcomes, conducted a longitudinal study following the children to age 8 or 9. Waldfogel et al list a few arguments that they explore further such as: women who return to work earlier may provide a less nurturing or stimulating home environment and mothers who return to work earlier are less likely to breast feed. Similar to the Desai piece, this article utilizes the information from the 1986 NLS/Y's children and found that for non-Hispanic white children, resumption of maternal employment during the first year of

life had an association with poorer scores on all outcomes of the PVVT. On the other hand, they found that for African American children there were no significant effects of first year maternal employment and weak effects for subsequent years and somewhat similar results for Hispanic children.

I believe the separation by race circumvents the actual underlying issue which is a difference in socioeconomic status. The ability to provide certain resources for your child has nothing to do with race (although there is a correlation) but rather the economic bracket a family belongs to. Both these articles show there are adverse effects for those in higher socioeconomic status groups because the quality of the childcare they would receive in place of their mother would be below par of what she can provide. The key element here is finding a suitable substitute for the children when the mother is unavailable due to employment.

Overall these three topics provide research on achievement in cognitive development and educational attainment of children. The researchers have found correlations between sibship size, social capital, and maternal employment and intellectual success. Research provides a general framework of patterns based on an average in the information they find, however each individual family differs. Depending on the structure (sibship) of a family or cultural values a family may or may not prove to have adverse affects in some of these areas. Ultimately we all want our children to be successful and we can look towards the research available to assist us in that goal.

References

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