

Parental Influences on Academic Performance in African-American Students

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We investigated the relationship between parental influences and academic outcomes for African-American students. Secondary data analysis was conducted on the National Survey of Family and Household data set. Multiple regression analysis showed that parenting style (nurture and control) and parental involvement significantly predicted academic outcomes. Research has traditionally focused on the reasons for the failure of African-American students to succeed in school. This study focused on factors that determine success. The problem of negative school outcomes may be alleviated by studying what works to promote school success rather than what does not work for African-American students.

KEY WORDS: African-American children; academic performance; parenting styles.

Education has been the traditional way to attain self-sufficiency in this country. As the gap in society between skilled professionals and the working class continues to grow, the need for educational attainment is apparent. For those with poor academic skills, the chances of being a competitive member of the job market are severely restricted. Without meaningful employment, self-sufficiency is elusive. Traditional studies have shown African-American students to be at risk for problematic outcomes in academic settings. The academic performance of many African-American children lags behind that of other groups. This lower academic performance has

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been subject to research for decades. Research has produced bountiful information to document the various factors that contribute to poor academic performance for African-American children, but a dearth of research exists on the factors that contribute to positive academic experiences for them. To truly benefit African-American children and society as a whole, the factors that contribute to positive academic experiences must be isolated and studied.

While many influences contribute to the academic performance of students at risk, the role of the parent has consistently been shown to be a factor of great importance. The historic work of Baumrind (1973) linked parenting styles to cognitive competence. According to Baumrind, parenting style may be classified into three categories: authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. Parents who utilize an authoritarian style attempt to control their child using absolute standards. Authoritarian parents are characterized by high demandingness and low responsiveness to their child. For these parents, control is key and verbal interaction is discouraged (Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987).

In contrast to the authoritarian approach to parenting, Baumrind (1973, 1989, 1991) describes permissive parenting as being characterized by tolerance and acceptance of a child's impulses, little punishment, and few demands for mature behavior in the child. This overly nurturing style of parenting allows for self-regulation by the child. Both authoritarian and permissive parenting styles have been found to produce children with decreased academic competence (Baumrind, 1973, 1989, 1991). Excessive control and excessive nurturance produce children with lower cognitive competence.

The authoritative parenting style has been associated with children with high cognitive competence. Authoritative parents expect mature behavior from the child, firmly enforce rules and standards, encourage the child's independence, and encourage communication with the child. Verbal interaction between parent and child is fostered. These parents recognize their rights as well as the rights of the child (Dornbusch et al., 1987).

Using Baumrind's (1973) classifications of parenting styles, Dornbusch et al. (1987) compared the school performance of students based on parenting style. Their findings showed that students whose parents utilized an authoritative parenting style performed better in school than students whose parents utilized other parenting styles. Authoritarian and permissive parenting styles were negatively associated with grades. This was consistent across ethnic groups.

Steinberg, Elmen, and Mounts (1989) elaborated on the Dornbusch et al. (1987) study, demonstrating that authoritative parenting has a positive impact on grades because the psychosocial maturity of the student is facili-

tated by an authoritative parenting style. This leads to increased psychosocial autonomy. They found that the more psychosocially autonomous the student, the better was the student's performance in school. Findings from these studies illustrate the impact of parenting style on school performance.

Another important aspect of parenting that is relevant to academic outcomes in students is parental involvement. Parental involvement is a broad concept that encompasses a variety of activities. It may range from reading to spending quality time with the student to being involved in school organizations. Researchers describe parental involvement in many ways, but generally parental involvement is associated with positive academic outcomes in students.

Snodgrass (1991) studied the impact of parental involvement on the academic outcomes of primary and secondary school students. It was concluded that a positive home environment and a strong parent-child relationship are critical determinants of student's educational success. In a study of low SES minority students, Reynolds (1989) found that parental involvement had significant effects on the educational attainment of first-grade students. The more involved with the child the parents were, the better were the child's grades.

Parental involvement was also shown to be an important contributor to academic outcomes in a study by Dye (1989). The benefits of a short school program designed to increase parental involvement and to promote learning in students ages 4-5 were evaluated by comparing the test scores of students who had participated in the program to a control group of non-participating students. No significant differences in test scores were found between the groups before the program. However, the test scores of the participating students improved significantly as compared to the control group following participation in the program. Not only did the students gain academically, but a positive relationship between the teachers, parents and students was fostered as well. Again, parental involvement was found to be an important influence in school outcomes for students.

In addition to parenting style and parental involvement, parental expectations of academic performance has also been a variable of importance in determining the school performance. It seems likely that students whose parents have high expectations of academic performance will have better school outcomes than students whose parents do not expect them to do well. Terry and Harackiewicz (1986) studied Chinese 6th graders and found that students performed better on tests if they perceived their parents as having high expectations of them. Conversely, the performance of the students was lower if they perceived lower parental expectations.

Science and mathematics achievement in 7th graders was studied by Reynolds (1991). The results showed that parental expectations of achieve-

ment significantly contributed to the schooling process and served as a focal point for improving school performance in students. Parental expectations have also been shown to contribute to the school performance of African-American students in a study by Thompson, Alexander, and Entwisle (1988). Parental expectations predicted the performance of first graders in reading, particularly when more than one adult was present in the household. These studies clearly reflect the role of parental expectations of academic performance in influencing the school outcomes of students.

In this study, the effects of parenting style, parental involvement, and parental expectations of ability on academic outcomes were studied. It was hypothesized that parents who reward and punish their children appropriately, are actively involved with their children, and have high expectations of the child's school performance, will produce academically successful students. For the African-American students in this sample, it was hoped that the isolation and study of these variables will provide information on ways to encourage and increase positive school performance.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 566 students between the ages of 5 and 18 that were a subsample of the National Survey of Families and Households Data (NSFH, Bumpass & Sweet, 1988). This dataset is a multi-stage probability sample of 13,017 families responding to a randomly selected screening of households from 100 areas in the United States. This sample contained a double sampling of understudied populations. After the initial screening, the respondents were interviewed in several stages. The main interview entailed 671 questions, including a 64-item self-administered questionnaire (see Bumpass & Sweet [1988] for a detailed description of the data).

In this study, only data on African-American families were analyzed. Of the 1,996 African-American families identified in the dataset, only those with at least one child in the target age group (5-18) were selected. The respondent was the mother of the target child.

Variables

Nurturance and control (parenting style), parental involvement, and parental expectations of ability were selected as independent variables.

These variables involved composite scores on relevant items from the 64-item NSFH questionnaire. The dependent variable studied was academic outcome, or the parents' perception of the grades the student received in school. Nurturance and control were examined to determine the parenting style.

Questions regarding the frequency of parents hugging and praising the child formed the variable nurturance, and questions regarding the frequency of spanking and yelling at the child formed the variable control. A high score on the nurturance variable referred to parents that frequently performed these nurturing behaviors, representing a permissive parenting style. A high score on the control variable indicated parents who frequently utilized more punitive measures, representing an authoritarian parenting style. Parents who received high scores for control and nurturance were classified as being authoritative. These parents were firm and had high expectations for obedience, while also being affectionate and allowing for self-regulation in the child.

Questions regarding parental involvement included the amount of time parents played or worked on a project with the child, read to the child, talked with the child, and the amount of time spent in leisure activities away from home, including picnics, movies, sports, and so on. High scores on parental involvement indicated that parents performed these activities frequently with the child.

For parental expectations of ability, the relevant questions from the NSFH dataset included the expectations of parents for the child to perform well in art and to do well in school. High scores on this variable indicated that parents expected the student to do well in these areas. The dependent variable in this study was academic outcome. This was measured according to how well the parent perceived the child was doing in school. A ranking of 1 (student is doing very poorly, mostly F's) to 5 (student is doing very well, mostly A's) was used.

Model Analysis

To determine if data were randomly or systematically missing, a logistic regression was performed. The procedure indicated that the missing data were random.

Composite scores on the relevant questionnaire items were used for nurturance, control, parental involvement and parental expectations of ability. For all variables, confirmatory factor analysis was performed to determine the most appropriate items from the questionnaire. The items that loaded significantly on the factor parental nurturance were "how often re-

spondent hugs the children" and "how often respondent praises them". For parental control, the items that loaded significantly were "how often respondent spansks the children" and "how often the respondent yells at the children." The items that loaded significantly on the factor parental expectations of ability were those assessing expectations of the children "doing well in school" and "creative activities." For the factor parental involvement, the items that loaded significantly were "how often respondent spends time playing or working on projects with the children," "reading or doing homework with the children," "talking privately with the children," and "performing leisure activities or sports away from home with the children." These variables accounted for 63% of the explained variance (Table 1).

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which parental control, parental nurturance, parental involvement, and parental expectations of ability predicted the academic outcome of the student, or grades.

RESULTS

Parental expectations of ability did not significantly predict the academic outcomes of students. However, the analysis did show that parental involvement, parental nurturance and parental control were significant predictors of academic outcomes. The overall equation was significant $F(2,563) = 23.147, p < .001$. Parental involvement (plays, reads, talks, leisure ac-

Table 1. Rotated Factor Solution for Academic Outcomes

Academic Outcomes	Factor Loadings			
	1 Nurture	2 Control	3 Involve	4 Ability
Leisure activities	-	-	.848	
Time playing	-	-	.756	
Time reading	-	-	.651	
Time talking	-	-	.607	
Yells	-	.802		
Spanks	-	.802		
Well in school	-	-	-	.789
Well in art	-	-	-	.765
Praise	.870			
Hugs	.764			

tivities) was found to be a significant predictor of grades, $t = 4.343$, $p < .001$. A significant interaction between parental control and parental nurturance was also found, $t = 3.381$, $p < .001$.

For the interaction between parental nurturance and parental control, four outcomes were possible. For "high nurturance, high control," the mean was 3.61. For "high nurturance, low control", the mean was 3.14. "Low nurturance, high control" yielded a mean of 3.06. "Low nurturance, low control" yielded a mean of 2.81. Table 2 provides the mean and standard deviation information for the variables used.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Academic Outcomes and the Independent Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Academic outcome	3.208	1.171
Involvement	17.018	4.506
Abilities	11.959	1.987
Nurturance	7.182	1.088
Control	4.905	1.324
Nurturance*Control	35.390	11.299

Scheffe's post hoc comparison showed that the authoritative parenting style category (high control, high nurturance) was significantly different from the other groups at the .05 level.

DISCUSSION

Parenting Style

Confirming the results found by Baumrind (1973, 1989, 1991), this study supported the idea that students with parents who use an authoritarian (high control, low nurturance) parenting style received lower grades in school than did students whose parents practiced an authoritative style (high control, high nurturance). The grades of students with permissive parents (low control, high nurturance) were also found to be lower than that of students with authoritative parents. Although the original sample used by Baumrind was ethnically homogeneous, the results of this study and oth-

ers (Dornbusch et al., 1987) show Baumrind's findings to be valid across ethnic groups.

While some studies have shown African-American parents to be considerably more authoritarian than other ethnic groups (Baumrind, 1973; Lee, 1985), the results of the present study suggest that this parenting style may not be best for fostering academic achievement in students. The increased authoritarian parenting style of African-American parents has often been characterized as being negative. Peters (1985) noted that the direct, physical disciplinary style has been regarded as "harsh, rigid, and egocentrically motivated."

Although rigid control and high expectations of obedience may seem severe for middle America, such measures may be in the best interest of the child in certain environments, such as in areas of high poverty. Parents may actually protect the child from the various dangers associated with life in the ghetto by using authoritarian measures. Though authoritative parenting may promote academic achievement for students, the authoritarian parenting style used by many lower SES African-American parents may serve to promote the survival of the child. It is difficult, if not impossible, to judge which of these styles may be most appropriate for African-American youth.

Parental Involvement

The importance of spending time with children in promoting positive school outcomes was also confirmed by the results of this study. For younger students, reading with parents enabled learning in school to be facilitated. Reading at home with parents incorporates skills necessary for positive school outcomes with the home environment. As Snodgrass (1991) showed, it is very important for consistency to exist between the home and school environments if students are to be expected to succeed.

For African-American students, particularly those in the inner cities, it is often the case that the home and school environments are not consistent in regards to the skills that are needed for survival. Attempts to integrate the home and the school for African American students have been successful in producing competent, culturally aware students. Research such as the present study, shows the benefit of involving the parents with the school. Other research focuses on incorporating the history, culture, and learning style of the African-American student into the school (Hale-Benson, 1990). Both approaches to improving the academic performance of African-American students are important and warrant further research.

Parental Expectations of Ability

It was hypothesized that parental expectations of ability would significantly predict the academic outcomes of students. The finding that this variable was not significant in this study was unexpected, but may be a function of the limitations of the data set used. Information in addition to the items found in the NSFH data set may be needed to enhance the concept, such as a more detailed description of exactly what parents require their children to do regarding school. For example, requiring a student to make only B grades or better is a more specific expectation that may provide more information about the concept. Although this study did not find significance for the variable parental expectations of ability, the literature shows that this is an important factor in the academic outcomes of students. Perhaps if the data set contained more detailed information relevant to this concept, the results would have been consistent with the literature.

The present study attempted to isolate and analyze variables that contribute to the academic resilience of African-American students. Parenting style and parental involvement were found to significantly predict school grades, while parental expectations of ability were not found to be significant. The limitation presented by the data set used may account for the nonsignificance of this variable. Other factors that contribute to positive school experiences may exist that also determine school outcomes, such as the amount of childhood stress, the psychological state of the child, and peer relationships. The variables selected for analysis in this study are only part of the big picture that describes the influences on the academic performance of students.

For decades, the academic failure of many African-American students has been the subject of study of social scientists. While an abundance of information details factors why African American students fail, scarce information exists on the factors that promote academic achievement. This study has attempted to provide information on elements that contribute to positive school outcomes. For African-American students, it is particularly important to study these factors in order to ensure the self-sufficiency and survival of future generations in a world that is becoming increasingly competitive and technologically advanced.

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