

Family Characteristics Congruent with School Success in Young Urban Children

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The purpose of this study was to determine what characteristics of families and home environments are most likely to enable the successful adaptation of disadvantaged urban youth to a formal school environment. The sample for this study included 33 second-grade students who were identified as being disadvantaged and who were determined to have adapted well or not to have adapted well to school. Results indicate that there are identifiable characteristics of the family and home environment which differentiate well adapted children from poorly adapted children with regard to school behavior. The factors identified as being most likely to aid in the child's ability to adapt to a formal school environment include the parent's ability to develop the social capital of their children, the establishment of high aspirations for academic achievement, parental involvement in school activities, the verbal and emotional responsiveness of parents, and the provision of a playful, supportive, and predictable environment through which children can develop positive self-esteem and social capital.

Although urban children have demonstrated difficulty adapting to a formal school environment, there are many cases in which these children are successful in this endeavor. The success of these children encourages one to ask why this is so and to attempt to identify factors contributing to these children's successful adaptation. The suggestion has been made that families and home environments of urban children may have a significant impact on the child's ability to adapt to a formal school environment. Thus, the purpose of this study was to attempt to determine if the characteristics of a child's family and home environment enable him or her to adapt to a formal school environment.

Review of the Literature

Technological and economic changes over the past two decades have had a significant impact on contemporary society. Perhaps the most significant of these changes have taken place within the family. These changes have been identified by Coleman (1987) and include: a change in the focus of dependency from the family to social welfare

institutions, a reduction in incentives for parental responsibility, an increasing demand for year round institutionalization of children in the form of day-care, and the delegation of an increasing amount of socialization activities to the schools (p. 32). These changes also have removed the central focus of support from the family to less intimate social institutions and have resulted in a decrease in the amount of home and neighborhood activities for children under the supervision of adults. Children who do not have this time to interact with adults have less opportunity to develop the ideals and values once associated with family membership.

Coleman (1987) also states that the preceding factors have rendered the family ill-equipped to provide the setting that schools are designed to complement in preparing the next generation. He argues that formal institutions can provide children with certain inputs into the socialization process. These inputs include opportunities, demands, and rewards. A second class of inputs must be provided by a child's closer, more intimate and more persisting environment. These inputs, attitudes, efforts and conceptions of self

traditionally are provided by the family system. Many parents now lack the time, educational and/or economic resources to provide this second set of inputs. This lack of parental input is believed to render children ill-equipped to function adequately in our society. They are lacking in what Coleman describes as social capital, which can be defined as attitudes, efforts, and conceptions of self that result from relationships with adults through which children learn about the norms and social networks that enable their smooth transition into adulthood.

The problem that Coleman describes is accentuated in an urban milieu where the structure of the social welfare system reduces the incentive for families to utilize informal resources, such as the extended family and reinforces dependence on the social institutions (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988). As a result of these trends, an increased responsibility for the development of social capital is being placed on the school systems. At the same time, schools often are forced to function with a poverty depleted tax base rendering them unable to meet these needs (Coleman, 1987). This problem is accentuated further by the fact that governmental leaders have made little effort to help families and communities keep pace with scientific and technological developments--demonstrated most obviously by the fact that there is no national policy on family and community development (Comer, 1980).

The societal move toward relinquishing the care and education of children to impersonal social institutions may have a grave effect on the growth and development of today's children. Comer (1980) states that, "Tight-knit social networks of approving and disapproving people are more effective determinants of a child's behavior than laws, policemen, security, and surveillance equipment. Eventually the attitudes, values, and behavior of the adult authority figures become a part of a child's character" (p. 10). Similarly, Erikson (1950), Kessler (1966), and Provence, Naylor, & Patterson (1977) contend that from childhood through young adulthood parents and teachers are critical mentors for young children and that without them children would fail to survive and to grow.

The literature supports the contention that a child's environment and family relationships play a significant role in the child's growth and development (Wadsworth, 1971; Elkind, 1987). The choices made by parents on their child's behalf can affect the child's attitude toward learning as well as his/her social adjustment. Also, it has been demonstrated that the amount of family interaction has decreased over the past two centuries and will, in all probability, continue to decrease (Coleman, 1987; Gibbs, 1989; & Sterne, 1989). With these two factors in mind, determining what effect these trends have on the social development of our children and their adaptation to a formal school environment appears to be of paramount importance. Thus, the purpose of this research was to determine what characteristics of family and home environments contribute to the successful adaptation of urban youth to a formal school environment.

Methodology

The variables examined in this study included the family and home environment of second-grade children from four of the low income, inner city schools of the Norfolk Public Schools. The sample for the study was comprised of 33 second-grade students whose parents responded positively to a letter and consent form requesting their involvement in the study. The teachers of these 33 students were asked to complete the Classroom Edition of The Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales (VABS) on their respective students. The VABS is a norm-referenced instrument that measures a student's level of adaptation in the communication, daily living skills, socialization, and motor skills domains. This process resulted in a sample comprised of six students (three males and three females) who were rated as being well-adapted (scoring one or two standard deviations above the mean) and six students (four males and two females) who were rated as being poorly-adapted (scoring one or two standard deviations below the mean).

Data Collection

Data collection was completed by one trained researcher and took place in three separate stages. In Stage One, parents of the subjects were contacted to explain the study and to establish a convenient time during which the home interview could take place. Stage Two involved an in-depth interview with the family at their home and with as many family members present as was possible. This interview was structured around two data collection tools: the HOME Inventory for Families of Elementary Children (Caldwell & Bradley, 1984) and the Family Functioning Styles Scales (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988). The HOME inventory measures (through observation and interview) emotional and verbal responsivity, encouragement of maturity, emotional climate, provision of growth-fostering materials and experiences, provision of active stimulation, family participation in developmentally stimulating experiences, parental involvement, and aspects of the physical environment. The Family Functioning Style Scale measures the family's functioning style in the areas of commitment, appreciation, time, sense of purpose, congruence, communication, role expectations, coping, problem solving, positivism, flexibility, and balance.

Stage Three involved an individual interview with each child at his or her school during regular school hours. To begin this interview the child was asked to complete a kinetic family and school drawing (Knoff & Prout, 1985). These drawings are of the child doing something at home with his or her family and of him or her, his or her teacher, and a peer doing something in the school setting. This technique was utilized to initiate interaction with the child and to attempt to determine how the child viewed her/himself within the family and school context. During this interview each child was also asked a series of questions regarding his or her family and home environments.

Data Analysis

Qualitative and quantitative methods were utilized to analyze the data in this study. The qualitative data collected from the family interviews and the child interviews first were summarized and presented in a case study format. These case studies then were analyzed through the process of inductive analysis.

The data gathered by the HOME Inventory for Families of Elementary Children (HOME) and the Family Functioning Styles Scales (FFSS) are quantifiable, resulting in a summary score from several subsets of data. To determine if there were significant differences between the two study groups on the HOME and FFSS variables, t-tests for independent samples were utilized.

The kinetic family and school drawings were utilized primarily to establish a relationship with the children and to enable them pictorially to depict their feelings. The information acquired during this interview process was compared to parental perceptions of the child to determine if there were any similarities between the way the children and their parents perceive their family situation.

The final stage of data analysis was to corroborate the data through triangulation of the multiple data sources in an attempt to enhance the reliability and validity of the data and to add richness and depth to the analyses.

Limitations to this analysis include the small sample size, the fact that parental consent was required which could result in bias from volunteerism, and the fact the majority of the data were from self-report. These limitations are, however, not uncommon to qualitative research designs and do not limit the researcher in theory development. It is, however, important to note that the findings in this study cannot be generalized.

Conclusions

The qualitative data suggest that there are differences between the well- and poorly-adapted students. These

findings were substantiated only partially through the quantitative analysis. There was a significant difference at the .05 level between the well- and poorly-adapted students on the HOME variables (see Table 1). No significant differences were discovered on the FFSS variables (see Table 2). Differences found through the data analysis will be discussed in the following paragraphs. See Table 3 for a pictorial depiction of this discussion.

Level of Aspirations

Perhaps the most remarkable difference between the well-adapted and poorly-adapted children is in the level of aspirations held by the parents and children in the well adapted group. Parents of these children see them completing a college education and becoming involved in the professional world. Their discussions with their children related to education focus not only on getting an education, but also on the importance of doing the best that they can do and on getting the most out of their learning experiences. These parents not only talk about the importance of a good education, but also provide their children with books and other learning materials. They spend time with the children on learning activities such as reading and homework assignments. Most of the family members interviewed took pride in their children's academic achievements and would celebrate them by throwing special parties, celebrating holidays longer, or buying the child something special.

The well-adapted children also had higher aspirations for themselves. One wanted to be a lawyer and one a singer and a lawyer. Two wanted to become teachers, and one boy thought he might like to be a scientist. One boy wanted to be a football player but was concerned, as was his mother, about how he would be able to do that and still get an education.

Families of the poorly-adapted children also wanted their children to get a good education. But their aspirations were limited. They did not think beyond high school. They just knew that you need to get through high school if you want to get a job. The messages that they gave to their children placed the responsibility for education on the

Table 1
T-test for Independent Samples: HOME Variables

Item	Group A	Group B
Sample Size	5	4
Mean	44.00	35.25
Standard Deviation	4.30	9.18
t-Value (df = 7)		-1.9092
Probability One-Tailed		0.0489

Table 2
T-test for Independent Samples: FFSS Variables

Item	Group A	Group B
Sample Size	5	4
Mean	86.20	87.00
Standard Deviation	11.84	3.65
<i>t</i> -Value (df = 7)		0.1287
Probability One-Tailed		0.4506

children's shoulders. They made comments like, "You have to get an education. You aren't staying with me." Some of these parents helped their children with their homework, but did not encourage additional reading or educational activity. One parent depended on the YMCA to make sure her son's homework was done. The poorly-adapted children did not talk much about what they wanted to be when they grew up. They were more oriented to the present moment or just passing their grade. They generally liked school and felt it was important, but were not able to verbalize why.

Regular Routine

The families of the well-adapted children seemed to have a regular routine that included an established homework and bed time, eating meals together, opportunities for play and television viewing. The mothers of these children did not work or worked only part time while grandmother took care of the child. These mothers appeared invested in their children, liked to be around them, and showed a genuine interest in the them. They spoke positively about their children even though they admitted to having some discipline problems with them.

The family routines of the poorly-adapted children were not as well established. Mothers of these children worked and had to depend on older children, social institutions such as the YMCA, or friends to care for their children while they were at work. They did not appear to be as involved with their children and in some cases seemed overwhelmed or irritated by them. They seemed to prefer sending the children away so that they would not be bothered. They described their children as being wild and unruly. Meals were rarely eaten together.

Rules and consequences for unacceptable behavior were well established in the homes of the well-adapted children. Parents seemed to be in control of their children and were able to set limits effectively. Some parents felt that all they had to do was raise their voice at their children to get their attention. Others utilized room restrictions or taking

away an activity that the child liked to enforce the family rules. Parents indicated that they would spank their child if they felt it was necessary.

There was a lack of clarity regarding rules in most of the homes of the poorly-adapted children. Consequences for negative behaviors seemed to be erratic and more severe, or at least the language used to describe it was more severe. Some parents and children reported beatings.

Verbal Skills

There was a notable difference between verbal skills of the well- and poorly-adapted children and their parents. Parents of the well-adapted children spoke in complete sentences and engaged in a give-and-take conversation with the interviewer. They were able to express themselves quite well. The parents of the poorly-adapted children ranged in verbal ability from answering the questions in short statements to having much difficulty in forming their ideas and expressing them. They did not initiate conversation.

A child with good communication skills will be more likely to adapt well to a formal school environment. This finding is supported through the qualitative data in which the well adapted children were able to express themselves more appropriately and through the data from the Vineland Adaptive Behaviors Scale Classroom Edition, upon which the well-adapted children had much higher scores on the communication portion of the test. Standard scores on the VABS communication domain can range from zero to 126. The well-adapted children had standard scores that ranged between 108 and 119, while the poorly-adapted children had standard scores that ranged between 32 and 83. High level verbal skills can enable children to feel more proficient in what they are doing. They are understood much easier by the teachers and can express their thoughts and concerns much better. This verbal proficiency could give these children a sense of control in their lives. Those who know how to express their needs effectively will have a better chance of having their needs met.

Table 3
Characteristics of Family and Home Environments Analysis

Key: X = Demonstrates Beh. XX = Beh. Encouraged
 P = Poor L = Limited Invol.
 ? = Insufficient Information
 Blank = Behavior not observed

Behavior Charact.	Well-adapted Case Number						Poorly-adapted Case Number					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Pos. Attit. Education	X	X	X	X	X	X		L	L	L		?
Reg. Routine	X	X	X	X	X	?	X		X	L	?	?
Fam. Rules	X	L	X	X	X	?		L	L	X	?	?
Limit Set.	X	X	X	X	?	L		L	X	?	?	
Male Role Model X	?	X	X		X		X	X	X	X	?	
Learning Materials	X	L	X	L	X	?		L	L	L	?	
Encourage Reading	XX	X	X	X	X	?	L		L		?	L
Parental Invol. Sch.	XX			XX	L			L	L	L	?	
Home Based Recreation	L	X	X	X	X	X	L	L	L	L	?	L
Recreation Outings	X	X	XX	X	X	X		L	L	X	?	
Scheduling of TV/VCR	X	L				?					?	
Help with Homework	X	X	X	X	X	X		L	X	L	X	L
Support Net	X	X	X	X	X	X	L		X	X	?	?
Verbal Skills	XX	XX	XX	XX	XX	?X	LP	PP	XL	LP	?P	?P
Aspirations	XX	X	X	X	X	?	L	L	L	L	?	?
Values Orientation	X	X	X	X	X	?	L	L	X	L	?	?

Involvement in Family Recreation Activities

The families of the well-adapted children reported spending more time together doing activities such as playing games, watching television, going shopping, traveling, going to the park and zoo, and going out to dinner together. They also were involved in clubs and organizations. They provided their children with stimulating toys and games and were willing to play those games with them. They reported

participating in activities both at home and in the community.

The families of the poorly-adapted children reported less recreation and leisure involvement. The activities in which they took part usually happened within the home and included watching television and the VCR.

Social Capital

Coleman (1987) states that families can help children

develop the attitudes, efforts, and conceptions of self that help them to adapt to a formal school environment. This study provides strong support for this argument. The well-adapted children came from homes in which education was valued highly. The parents of these children took personal responsibility for their children's education. They took the time to instill within their children the importance of a good education. They also established a routine around the house that reinforced educational skills.

The well-adapted children came from home environments that had higher levels of emotional and verbal responsiveness, encouragement of maturity, a positive emotional climate, access to growth-fostering materials and experiences, provision for active stimulation, and family participation in developmentally stimulating experiences. The supportive environments in which these children are being reared enable them to develop positive self-esteem. They have learned through structured experiences and parental guidance that with effort they can learn the things that they need to know in order to do well in school. They also have been taught that if they put out enough effort they can grow up to be what they want to be--a lawyer, a teacher, or a singer.

The well-adapted children in this study had more opportunity to interact with supportive adults with good verbal skills. These interactions helped them to define themselves and to define acceptable behavior. The skills that were taught in the homes of the well-adapted children enable them to take advantage of the opportunities, demands, and rewards that are provided by the school system. The social capital that the parents of these children helped to develop appears to have helped them adapt successfully to a formal school environment.

Results of both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies indicate that there are identifiable characteristics of the family and home environment which differentiate well-adapted children from poorly-adapted children with regard to school behavior. The data analysis also demonstrated that these characteristics go beyond the demographic factors that are typically cited in the literature, including pervasive poverty. The families of the well-adapted and poorly-adapted children were similar in socio-economic status, amount of parent education, religious orientation, and home environment. This study focused on second-grade children and demonstrated that the families and home environments of these children do make a difference. Clark's (1983) study of high- and low-achieving high school students and their families had similar results. The congruence between these two research projects supports the contention that families and home environments can make a difference throughout a child's education. These findings are significant because they lend hope to the possibility of providing interventions that will enable the poor to adapt well to the education milieu and benefit more from the educational process.

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