

# THE HOME ENVIRONMENT AND SCHOOL LEARNING

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It has long been recognized that the character of children's home circumstances influence their intellectual development and school learning. A great deal of research on the relationship between home background and scholastic behavior has been carried out since the beginning of this century.

The studies indicate that children who do well in school come from families that provide a supportive and enriched environment for learning in the home. Conversely, children who do less well in school often come from families in which support for school learning is limited or in which there are serious differences and discontinuities between what is taught at home, and how it is taught, and what is expected at school.

These studies have addressed this relationship between home background and school learning in four areas: (i) studies of socioeconomic variables; (ii) studies of family configuration; (iii) studies of parental characteristics; (iv) studies of home-process variables.

- **Studies of socioeconomic variables** - The socioeconomic level of a home need not determine how well a child does at school. Parents with different levels of education, income, or occupational status can provide very stimulating home environments which support and encourage the learning of their children.
- **Studies of family configuration** - These studies examine the relationships between structural aspects of families (family size, sibling sex and spacing, and birth position) and scholastic ability and achievement. The findings were correlational, not causal, e.g. measures of verbal ability decreased as size of family increased; a child's birth position in the family is related to the child's scholastic performance.
- **Studies of parental characteristics** - Parental characteristics such as their attitudes toward education, their interest in their children's education, and their belief in the value of schooling account for more of the variation in children's school achievement than either the parents' material circumstances or various school circumstances. The relative

importance of the parental attitudes increases as the children grow older.<sup>44</sup>

- **Studies of home process variables** - The identification of various *environmental press variables*<sup>45</sup> to represent the educational environment of the home confirms that what parents **do** is more important than what they **are**.

As far as scholastic ability and achievement are concerned, measures of process variables in the home predict scholastic ability and achievement better than do measures of family configuration, social class, or parental characteristics, including attitudes.

This is true among different socioeconomic and ethnic groupings, in rural as well as in urban areas, and outside the United States (in both developed and developing countries) as well as in the United States.

### The Home and Scholastic Success

Although sometimes modified, the home process variables used to represent the educational environment of the home are:

- **Achievement press** (parents' aspirations for the child, their interest in the child's academic achievement, and the pressure put on the child to achieve);
- **Language models** (the quality of the language usage of the parents and opportunities for language development);
- **Academic guidance** (availability and quality of help provided by the home on school work);
- **Activeness of the family** (both indoor and outdoor, including use of libraries and TV);
- **Intellectuality in the home** (the nature and quality of toys, games, and hobbies made available to the child and opportunities for thinking and imagination in daily activities);
- **Work habits in the family** (degree of structure and routine in home management and preference for educational activities over other pleasurable things).

Studies that measure the home in terms of its environmental-process variables and its effect on the non-cognitive characteristics of children are of particular interest if one accepts that a major function of the family is to nurture children's conceptions of self, attitudes, values, and habits.

The role of the home in this area is of particular importance for at least two reasons. First, it is in the home, to a degree that is not possible in school, that



the child experiences attention, personal interest, intimacy, intensity of involvement, and persistence and continuity over time, all of which contribute to the child's non-cognitive development. And second, such development forms the basis of the more cognitively oriented work of the school. In its absence, schools are not likely to be very successful in helping students master the scholastic tasks they will face.<sup>46</sup>

Despite its high predictive value, the environmental-process model does not provide an entirely comprehensive analysis of the complex dynamics of family relationships. For example, children can influence their parents as well as parents their children. There is no doubt that parents are influenced by the characteristics and behavior of their child in applying child-rearing strategies.<sup>47</sup>

### Learning and Teaching in the Home

The kind of formal learning that characterizes schooling does not begin in infancy, but learning of some kind does begin at a very early age. By the time children start school, they will have built up a store of knowledge and skills that they will use in their schooling. Although psychologists variously describe this early learning,<sup>48</sup> the description we use here pictures the child as "constructing" a range of sensori-motor, perceptual, and cognitive structures through his/her interactions with the environment.

Models that children construct of their environments have been described in terms of three major components: concepts, propositions, and schemata.<sup>49</sup>

The *concept*, of which there are many types, is the basic unit of information. Some can be described as "concrete" (e.g., the concept of a table or a ball), others as "abstract" (e.g., freedom, energy). The relationship of two or more concepts, which can take place in a variety of more or less complex ways, leads the child to *propositions*.

As in the case of concepts, propositions can also vary considerably in their degree of abstractness and in their content. Some contain factual information (The dog is very big), others describe procedural knowledge (If you want to turn on the light, you have to flip the switch), while others describe relations in terms of predictability (If I let the glass fall, it will probably break). Just as concepts are interrelated, so are propositions.

The interrelationship of a number of propositions is called a *schema*. The schema serves the function of providing an organizational structure in which relationships between concepts and propositions are represented. The organizational aspect of schemata is very important since it can play an important role in facilitating problem solving and learning.<sup>50</sup>

The precise model (set of concepts, propositions and schemata) that the child builds depends on a number of variables:



- The cultural knowledge and system of symbols (especially language) available to the child.
- The opportunity to learn as a result of actual physical contact with objects in the environment, e.g. whether a block is hard, heavy, easy to break.
- The availability of more mature and knowledgeable people in the child's environment.

Help can come from a variety of people with whom even very young children come into contact — obviously the child's mother, but also often its father, grandparents, brothers, sisters, and family friends.

Learning is "a dynamic social event that depends upon a minimum of two heads, one better informed or more skilled than the other."<sup>51</sup> Some learning will occur in children simply by observing and perhaps imitating the behavior of more mature people in everyday social interaction. Many routine activities, including language, seem to be learned in this informal way.

What is available in the home by way of cognitive "capital" and assistance differs for children in different communities and families. For example, ethnic-group differences between Hispanic and non-Hispanic families have been found in parental teaching behavior and in other educationally relevant aspects of the parent-child relationship.

Parent-child interactions in the average non-Hispanic home more closely resembles the types of interactions found in schools than do parent-child interactions in the average Hispanic family. The Hispanic child then is likely to experience greater discontinuity between the teaching styles of home and school than is the white middle-class child. This discontinuity can be particularly abrupt for children whose parents had little schooling.<sup>52</sup>

In school, children will find teaching that is more formal, deliberate, and conscious than anything they have encountered at home.<sup>53</sup> Schools have the task of transmitting knowledge that has been accumulated in past generations to new generations. Further, they must do it in the artificial and crowded conditions of the classroom.<sup>54</sup> Although parents do not need to adopt the formal teaching methods of the classroom, they can benefit from being aware of certain aspects of school teaching as they provide home-learning experiences for their children:

- Homes, like schools, can help children by providing material that is organized in a way that it can be easily assimilated into the child's cognitive model.
- Homes can help children modify models of their environment that takes into account the accumulated knowledge of the culture in which they live.

- Homes can introduce children to learning that is more systematic than spontaneous. Children will benefit in school if they have begun to learn how to maintain attention to a particular task rather than reacting impulsively to aspects of the environment.

## The Importance of Home Learning

Research has underscored the importance of being prepared for school.<sup>55</sup> Growth or change at some stages of development is much more rapid than at other stages. For example, for some characteristics, there is as much quantitative growth in a single year as there is in eight to ten years at other points in development. General intelligence, for example, appears to develop almost as much from conception to age four as it does during the following fourteen years.

The implications for schooling becomes clear when we realize that much development is sequential in nature. That is, developments at one period build on developments during an earlier period and in turn influence the nature of later developments.<sup>56</sup> Early learning is important because the acquisition of simple elements is a necessary prerequisite for the construction of more complex capacities.<sup>57</sup>

Due to both the sequential nature and the varying rates of development, the presence or absence of certain experiences at particular times in the life cycle can influence later development and learning.

The assumption that change in behavior could take place at any age or stage of development has been largely dispelled<sup>58</sup> and there is currently more widespread appreciation of the crucial role of a child's early development in future school learning.

These conclusions have important implications when considering the possibility of intervening to change the pattern or pace of a child's development.

- The optimal period for intervention in a child's development is during a period of rapid growth.<sup>59</sup>
- Intervention during the early stages of a child's life is likely to have greater impact on the development of a number of important characteristics than intervention at a much later stage.
- Events subsequent to a "sensitive" developmental period may modify or even nullify characteristics that have been established.<sup>60</sup>

It is important to remember that not all developmental change has occurred by the time the child comes to school. Consider, for example, language development. Although much language development has taken place



by the age of five or six, considerable further development takes place between the ages of six and ten. <sup>61</sup>

### Success in School

Today, children's lives develop through a continuous and dynamic exchange between school and family. In this exchange, teachers and parents are widely thought of as the most important agents of children's learning success, however, their work is not always complementary.

In their relationship to schools, families can be classified three ways:

- **Educative:** those which provide a favorable environment for learning by monitoring the child's progress in school, helping with homework, and supporting the child in overcoming learning difficulties.
- **Non-educative:** those which assign all responsibilities for learning to the school.
- **Anti-educative:** those families which interfere with the child's learning. <sup>62</sup>

The influence of the child's family and social environment on school progress and performance and on adult success has been the subject of universal interest. There is a wide range of factors that affect both the child's initial adjustment to school and his/her progress throughout the educational system.

- Success is greatly determined by the child's physique and ability to learn and integrate with other children. <sup>63</sup>
- Nutrition and health play a part in a child's success in school. <sup>64</sup>
- Other factors include the learning skills and attitudes inculcated by parents; the social and economic circumstances of the family; and the family's internal dynamics.

The role of the family is decisive for school success, given the fact that research has identified that family characteristics are determining factors of primary school enrollment, progress, and performance. <sup>65</sup> There are a number of reasons to promote parental involvement in children's education:

- To build and reinforce the family's responsibility for contributing to the existing social infrastructure;
- Add continuity and support to the existing services of the school;
- Sustain improvements over the long term;

- Promote an integrated approach to child care and development. <sup>66</sup>
- The “investment” made by parents in establishing frequent contacts with the school results in better school performance by their children. <sup>67</sup>

The repertoire of skills and capabilities that children possess when they enroll in primary school and the learning support that they receive during their first years of formal education interact with school resources to assist or impede further learning. Both the school and the family environment have roles to play if children are to achieve desirable learning outcomes.

The role of the home in the child’s development becomes clearer when we appreciate that formal institutions other than the family cannot provide the motivation for intellectual achievement, and the continuous and close interaction among individual people that are important for full human development.

### Progress at School

The findings of longitudinal studies of scholastic achievement are similar to studies of other human characteristics (such as general ability).<sup>68</sup> The curve for the development of performance on measures of general scholastic achievement exhibited relatively rapid development during the early years in school up to the age of nine, which was followed by a slower rate of growth from age nine to eighteen.

There is considerable evidence that the mean level of scholastic achievement of children from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds falls below that of children from more advantaged backgrounds on entering school. There are also research findings that indicate that the achievement gap between children from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds widens as children progress through school.<sup>69</sup>

- For students in the non-metropolitan south and south-western regions of the United States, the average difference between black and white students in reading comprehension increased between grades six and twelve.<sup>70</sup>
- In a study in England and Wales, approximately one standard deviation separated high from low socioeconomic background children on achievement tests at age eight; by age eleven, the average scores for the groups differed even more.<sup>71</sup>

These findings again point to the significance of the home in the development of school learning. They indicate that children’s level of achievement on entering school is related to their home background and that the child’s progress through school continues to relate to home-background factors.