

Article 44

Examining the Educational Expectations of Latino Children and Their Parents as Predictors of Academic Achievement

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There are numerous factors that influence a child's capability to achieve academically, and a shared role of parents, school counselors, and teachers is to maximize each child's unique potential to achieve. In doing so, many variables must be considered in determining how to maximize student performance and achievement. One of the most powerful factors related to school performance is socioeconomic status (SES), which includes the combination of parental income, occupation, and educational level, and has been shown to be a strong predictor of intelligence and academic achievement scores (Gonzalez, 2001). Consistent with these findings, studies have indicated that children from low SES backgrounds tend to experience educational problems, are at risk of long-term academic difficulties, and generally achieve at lower levels compared to children of higher SES backgrounds (Wang, 1993).

Parents' educational expectations of their children have a strong impact on children's academic achievement. Parental expectations of children's academic performance have been shown to positively correlate with children's grades, IQ scores, educational aspirations, and achievement motivation (Beyer, 1995); and children who are expected to graduate from high school and attend college achieve more than children of parents with lower aspirations (Trusty & Pirtle, 1998). In regards to the relationship between SES and parental expectations, researchers have documented that high SES parents tend to have high expectations for their children whereas low SES parents tend to have lower educational expectations and often depend on school personnel to set educational goals for their children (Trusty & Pirtle, 1998).

Academic achievement is additionally influenced by children's perceptions of their parents' educational expectations of them. Children are usually aware whether adults have high or low expectations, which influences academic achievement (Eggen & Kauchak, 2001). When parents expect children to do well on a specific task, children generally gain confidence in their abilities to carry out that task, and are consequently

likely to perform as expected. Children's perceptions of their own academic competence are based on others' expectations, especially of parents and other significant adults, such as teachers. Thus, it is noteworthy that teachers often have low expectations for children of low SES backgrounds. According to Alexander, Entwisle, and Thompson (1987), kindergarten and first-grade teachers were found to have low achievement expectations for low SES students, and the levels of expectations often did not correlate with the students' actual abilities.

In addition to being negatively affected by the low expectations of parents and teachers, children of low SES backgrounds have been shown to underestimate their own abilities to achieve. Children's underestimation of their academic abilities is partly due to negative self-concepts as well as having low educational expectations for themselves (Mink & Kaplan, 1970). As with parental educational expectations, the expectations that children have for themselves have been shown to be a determinant in academic success as these expectations help predict achievement and the likelihood of dropping out of school (Behnke, Piercy, & Diversi, 2004).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.), Latinos have the highest dropout rates of any racial group in the country and fall behind other groups in reading and math scores. Recent Census Bureau data indicate that the percentages of Latinos living in poverty is three times greater than for Whites, and that more than one-quarter of Latinos have less than a ninth-grade education (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2002). Given the demonstrated importance of educational expectations upon student achievement and the tendency for low SES and Latino students to perform academically at lower levels than higher SES students, the present study was conducted to understand the influence of educational expectations specifically among low SES Latino children who have demonstrated high or low levels of academic achievement.

Method

Definitions

For the purposes of this study, *low SES* is defined as children who qualify for free lunch in public schools (Mink & Kaplan, 1970). The term *Latino* refers to individuals reporting their origin as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central American, or South American. The term *low achieving* refers to children who scored below basic or far below basic in mathematics and English on the 2004 California Achievement Test sixth edition (CAT/6). *High achieving* refers to children who scored at the advanced or proficient level in mathematics and English of the CAT/6 test.

Participants

Participants of the study were 44 Latino children in grades 2 through 5, and 44 parents of low SES from an inner-city California public school. Of the children, 33 were high achieving and 11 were low achieving. Of the 44 parents, 32 had high-achieving children and 12 had low-achieving children.

Procedure

All participants were selected through a stratified systematic sampling procedure using children's scores from the 2004 *California Achievement Test 6th Edition* (CAT/6). Race and SES were indicated in the school demographic section of the testing report, and the selected children were confirmed as having both low SES and Latino backgrounds.

Participants answered either a parent or child survey addressing parents' educational expectations for their children or children's expectations of themselves and their perceptions of their parents' expectations of them. Surveys were administered to small groups of five to seven children. Each of the questions and the possible answers were read aloud; questions were repeated and clarifications given when requested. Completion of the surveys took approximately 25 minutes for each group. Parents completed their surveys at home and returned them to their child's teacher.

Data Analysis

All survey responses were recorded into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets according to participants' coded numbers; response frequencies and percentages were then obtained.

To examine parents' and children's educational expectations, the following questions were respectively used in the data analysis: "How far do you want your child to go in school?" "What do you want (your child) to be when he or she grows up?" "How happy are you with your (child's) 2004 test scores for mathematics?"

"How happy are you with your (child's) 2004 test scores for English?" "Please complete this sentence: When I received my (child's) 2004 test scores for Mathematics, my (child's) scores were____." "Please complete this sentence: When I received my (child's) 2004 test scores for English, my (child's) scores were____." "Do you believe that you (your child) will finish high school?" and "Do you believe that you (your child) will finish college?" Children's and parents' responses were paired, and the consistency of children's perceptions with their parents' actual educational expectations was analyzed.

Results and Discussion

The findings revealed that the low SES Latino parents in this study had high educational expectations for their children; however, parents of high-achieving children had higher educational expectations for their children compared to parents of low-achieving children. While research has indicated SES to be a prominent factor in predicting academic achievement, many of the children in this study demonstrated high academic achievement despite the educational barriers that typically accompany low SES. Likewise, the majority of the parents of both high- and low-achieving children had high educational expectations, with most believing that their children will complete high school or college. Consistent with previous research, parental educational expectations were associated with their children's academic achievement. Interestingly, a high percentage of parents of low-achieving children were happy with their children's test scores, even when the children had performed poorly, which may indicate that these children were performing at the level their parents expected of them.

Among the educational expectations that children had for themselves, high-achieving children had higher educational expectations than the low-achieving children as both groups indicated that their test scores for math and English were exactly what they expected to receive. Although the parents of low-achieving children had lower educational expectations of them, many of their children perceived that their parents had higher educational aspirations for them, and these children felt that they could accomplish the levels of education their parents expected. Children's expectations of themselves were associated with academic achievement for both high and low achievers, suggesting that achievement is not only influenced by parental expectations, but also by the educational expectations children have of themselves.

Additionally, a large number of children indicated that their test scores were better than they expected,

which may indicate that both high- and low-achieving children were underestimating their ability to perform academically. It is possible that some of the children in this study had internalized the low expectations commonly held by parents and teachers of low SES students, as well as possibly having a poor self-concept of their ability to achieve in school.

The findings indicated that high-achieving children's perceptions of their parents' educational expectations for them were largely consistent with their parents' actual expectations, whereas the low-achieving children perceived that their parents had higher expectations for them than what their parents reported in the parent surveys. Although low-achieving children perceived that their parents had high educational expectations for them, they performed poorly on the state standardized test. One implication of this inconsistency is that academic achievement may be influenced by children's discrepant beliefs in not accurately understanding what their parents expect from them, as well as indicating a lack of communication between parents and children regarding academic expectations. In this case, the low-achieving children inaccurately perceived their parents to expect more from them than the parents actually did, and such a discrepancy may cause distress and negatively affect children's abilities to achieve.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

The results suggest that the educational expectations that children have for themselves and that parents have of them are prominent factors in the academic achievement of low SES Latino children. Thus it is critical to expect children to achieve at the very best of their abilities. Parents, teachers, counselors, and other significant caregivers in children's lives need to be aware that academic achievement is influenced by their expectations; consequently, high educational expectations and goals should be established for all children regardless of socioeconomic status or ethnicity.

Another implication regards the occurrence of both high- and low-achieving children to underestimate their academic abilities. The basis for these children to underestimate themselves may be in part due to low expectations for them to achieve, which has been shown to commonly occur among low SES students, and that the children may possess poor self-concepts and low expectations for themselves to succeed. Therefore, in addition to the expectations of parents and school staff, it is also important for children to hold high expectations of themselves for academic success; however, this may prove difficult for children who do not have confidence in their abilities to achieve. Thus, a clear implication

for school counselors and mental health professionals working with children is to attend to a child's academic self-concept by assisting both children and parents to improve expectations of academic achievement and perceptions of children's capabilities.

Further, the comparisons made between the high- and low-achieving children imply that holding accurate perceptions of parents' expectations is one factor associated with high achievement. In order for children to feel competent and perform well academically, children need to have their parents or caregivers convey such expectations to them. Therefore, it is crucial for parents to genuinely expect high achievement from their children, to communicate these expectations to them, and be involved in their education so that children understand that their parents believe in their abilities.

The results of this study reflect the importance of educational expectations in the academic achievement of low SES Latino children. Although Latino children have been shown to historically perform at low academic levels, this study demonstrated that many of the low SES Latino parents and children held high educational expectations, which was associated with children's academic achievement. It is critical that parents, teachers, and counselors maintain high educational expectations of all children, particularly for low SES and Latino children who are often stereotyped as less academically capable than children of higher SES.

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