

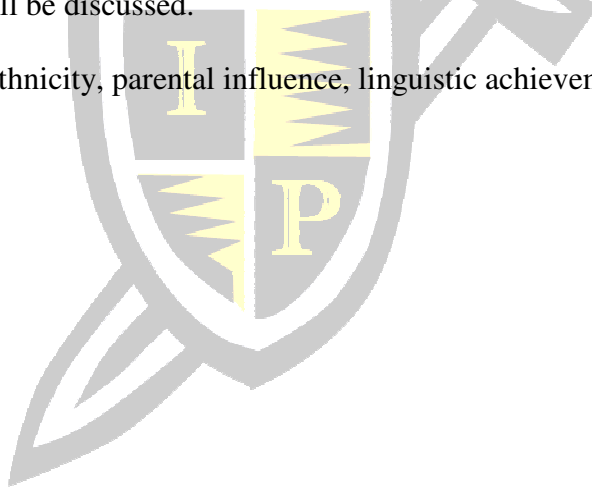
Socioeconomic status, ethnicity and the context of achievement in minority education

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ABSTRACT

Teachers have a unique position and opportunity by virtue of their profession to be able to present and guide students along a path of discovery. Educators, mentors, parents, communities are all responsible for accomplishing milestones when considering closing the achievement gap for students of various cultural, social, and economic backgrounds in their quest for knowledge. The achievement gap, in spite of multiple longitudinal efforts and struggles for educational system reform continues to persist in school's diverse population. The outcomes of the educational process for the minority student population, especially for African Americans and Hispanics are always at the center of performance analysis and deemed to be greatly improved. We aim to understand achievement gaps in terms of the particular educational and socio-cultural context of family background (mothers' influence). In addition, educational strategies that teachers of culturally diverse learners or of a minority background design for reducing literacy gap will be discussed.

Socioeconomic status, ethnicity, parental influence, linguistic achievement, pre-K.



Introduction

Teachers have a unique position and opportunity by virtue of their profession to be able to present and guide students along a path of discovery. Educators, mentors, parents, communities are all responsible for accomplishing milestones when considering closing the achievement gap for students of various cultural, social, and economic backgrounds in their quest for knowledge. The achievement gap, in spite of multiple longitudinal efforts and struggles of educational reform system continues to persist in school's diverse population. Either it is a reflection of the contextual effects of the social segregation existent in our society (Bankston & Caldas, 1998; Entwisle & Alexander, 1992) or the direct effect of the quality and resources of schools serving disadvantaged groups of students (Biddle & Berliner, 2003), the achievement gap is still a prevalent educational issue. Another explanation for the poor educational performance of minority disadvantaged students is related to the existent differences in culture and family structure prevalent in the pockets of poor neighborhood nationwide districts (Murray, 1994 as cited in Finch, Faberman, Neus, Adams and Price-Baker, 2002). The outcomes of the educational process for the minority student population, especially for African Americans, and Hispanics are always at the center of performance analysis and deemed to be greatly improved.

The goal for the paper is to understand achievement gaps in terms of the particular educational and socio-cultural context of family background (mothers' influence). In addition, educational strategies that teachers of culturally diverse learners or of a minority background design for reducing literacy gap will be discussed.

Socio-cultural, Socioeconomic, Race and Parenting Effects on Language Development in Early Childhood

The most important aspects of reading, writing, comprehension of the English language are always associated with later academic achievement (Craig, Connor, & Washington, 2003; Magnuson and Duncan, 2006; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Early Child Care Research Network, 2005; Stevenson and Newman, 1986, Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). The understanding of the factors that are related to young children's language development has important implications because we can intervene as teachers and educators with early childhood literacy programs that address childhood readiness for entering the school systems.

The present achievement gap existent between African American, Hispanics and European American children in the United States is further leading to disparities in academic success and missed opportunities in various professional careers. Interestingly, enough, the longitudinal studies have documented the negative impacts of low family socioeconomic status (SES) and ethnic minority status on children's linguistic development (Dearing, McCartney & Taylor, 2001; Elardo, Bradley, & Caldwell, 1977, Johnson, 2001, Siegel, 1982; Walker, Greenwood, Hart, & Carta, 1994).

For example, one of the earliest studies on the topic of association between high-risk demographic factors, such as SES and minority status and language outcomes, found lower SES parents, all of whom were African American, had children with the lowest language skills (Hart & Risley, 1992). Their longitudinal study (1992, 1995) took into consideration 40 African American and European American parents from various socioeconomic backgrounds and discovered that demographic variables were linked to children's 36-month IQ scores and

language ability. Lower SES parents' status of the African American ethnicity, seemingly, was linked to the non- accomplishments of their children who presented the shortest mean length of utterance when compared to the same literacy skills of the European American kids of higher SES (Pungello, Iruka, Dotterer, Mills-Koonce, Reznik, 2009, p.544). The findings were reinforcing Lawrence's (1997) explanations regarding middle-class European American preschool children. These 36-months olds had longer mean lengths utterance on tasks requiring labeling and providing additional information on several pictures when compared to their African American colleagues from working-class families. The 18 to 36-months of age is a time when the adaptive or maladaptive development begins (Shaw, Winslow, Owens, Vondra, Cohn, & Bell, 1998). Therefore, the specialists considered important to analyze the links between SES, race and children's receptive and expressive language for the children of the above-mentioned age. The researchers reduced to a minimum the possibility of utilizing both determinants (race and SES) in their study knowing that in most cases, using diverse samples, African Americans have more likely been of lower SES than other racial groups (McLoyd, 1998; McLoyd & Ceballo, 1998, Skiba et al., 2005). The 2005 U.S. Census Bureau also reported that 33% of African American children under the age of 18 were living in homes considered to be "below poverty lines", whereas only 10 % of the European American children were living in the same conditions (Denavas-Walt, Proctor & Lee, 2006).

Parenting and Language Development

If it is not acknowledged the importance of parental literacy practices it is not thoroughly understood the complex milieu of environmental factors, including SES and race that impact children's language development. It is proved that *sensitive parenting* has been linked with positive child outcomes implying language knowledge and literacy development (Birch & Ladd, 1996, Dodici, Draper & Peterson, 2003, Pianta, 1997; Pianta, Nimetz, & Bennett, 1997; Pianta & Walsh, 1996). The negative intrusiveness and lack of cooperation exhibited by some minority parents may affect the confidence and autonomy of the children's linguistic efforts. The children experience at the same time, due to the parents' intrusiveness, socio-emotional problems and also become less skilled in one-on-one human interactions. Keown, Woodward and Field (2001) found that "both sensitivity and negative intrusiveness behavior accounted for differences in comprehension and expression scores between children of teenage and comparison mothers" (Pungello, Iruka, Dotterer, Mills-Koonce, Reznik, 2009, p.545). The above-mentioned study was developed to understand the separate links of maternal sensitivity and negative intrusive behaviors (controlling, imposition of own agenda, punitive interactions, etc.) with early language development. They found that negative intrusiveness was linked to the growth of European American children. The language development for European American kids can be impaired if the caregiver does not offer enough autonomy and initiative to the child. In contrast, negative intrusiveness did not appear to be related to the growth of expressive language skills for African American children. Ispa et al. (2004) found that African American parents negatively affected the language development of the 25-month olds when they exhibited low levels of warmth in the interactions with their children. Pungello et al. study of 2009 agrees with the findings of past research that has found an important (beneficial) impact of controlling behavior in association with parental warmth that are quintessential for the development of the 18-36 months of age in the African American children (Baldwin, Baldwin, & Cole, 1990; Brody & Flor, 1998, Ispa et al., 2004, McLoyd & Smith, 2002).

Vocabulary and Word Learning in African American Toddlers (low and middle SES)

In a study released by Anderson-Yockel and Haynes (1994) an explanation was given regarding language skills acquisition; cultural differences in the way children are spoken to may affect language skills development. Anderson-Yockel and Haynes found that working-class African American mothers were less likely to ask questions that went beyond the yes/no answers, in addition, their children were not expected to further give information and develop a more-complex system of answering. The European American mothers were definitely more likely to develop questions that elicited answers involving an on-going flux of information regarding an epical depiction of events. The broader cultural differences in parenting style could be a plausible explanation for the language development processes (Pungello et. al, 2009).

An interesting study released in 2007 (Horton-Ikard & Weismer) talked about the preliminary examination of vocabulary and word learning in African American toddlers. The study explained the influence of SES background on African American children's lexical semantic tasks varies with the type of measure used. The study specified that there are now multiple types of assessing children's semantic knowledge; the three lexical semantic measures of vocabulary or word meaning acquisition are: (a) norm- referenced standardized vocabulary tests; (b) lexical diversity measures that are extracted from oral language samples, and (c) word-learning tasks such as fast mapping (Horton-Ikard & Weismer, 2007, p.381). In the study performed results proved a significant difference between the comprehension and production tasks for both low and middle SES. The results are in agreement to the idea that fast mapping outcomes may be susceptible to task conditions. The clinical implications of the study mentioned that the authors would expect African American toddler children with typically developing processing abilities perform like other typically developing children on novel learning tasks. The conclusion is valid regardless whether their low scores on experience-dependent measures were due to low SES or to cultural differences. Children with language impairment would be expected to perform below average on fast mapping tasks (p.390). For a better understanding, authors defined the fast mapping measure. The novel word-learning task which includes fast mapping is considered a useful tool in examining early lexical abilities. The early lexicon is acquired through little or no direct teaching. The process that enables children to rapidly increase their vocabulary knowledge involves the mapping of conceptual information received from everyday experiences to numerous linguistic forms (Chapman, as mentioned in Horton-Ikard & Weismer, 2007, p.383).

Based on the fast mapping procedure it can be concluded that regardless of their lower scores compared to middle SES peers, toddlers in the low-SES group would not be viewed as atypically developing children.

Working with Dual Language Learners

The previous extensive research explained how the needs of the children in early childhood settings are based on their individual developmental stage. The needs ought to be met in settings where teachers use developmentally appropriate practices (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). A study released in 2009 formulated useful perspectives in understanding working with dual language learners from the possible lucrative endeavors of supervisors, mentors and teachers (Macrina, Hoover, and Becker, 2009). The study emphasized the importance of working and supporting all kinds of learners. The authors designed for the early childhood and pre-K

teachers, strategies to enhance (Hispanic) children's comprehension of the new language. The program was also introduced for the students with Vietnamese cultural heritages. The teachers are required to design carefully formulated lesson plans that will involve both vocabulary development and correct grammatically acquisition of the most encountered short sentences and conversational phrases. Besides lesson plans and support for the Spanish speakers, the authors of the study also talked about the importance of having families of the dual language learners involved in the process of learning. Ideas from Cindy, the teacher in the study, presenting her findings acknowledge the teacher's main responsibility in an early childhood classroom which consists in supporting children's individual growth. This support comes in the form of setting up opportunities for interactions with other children and wit adults (Pence, Justice, & Wiggins, 2008). Cindy Becker, one of the authors, the preschool teacher in the bilingual setting mentions that the most important aspects in supporting all children's language acquisition reside in strategies like scaffolding, modeling language, and repetition (Macrina, Hoover, and Becker, 2009, p.31).

Case Study

The following two linguistic developmental analyses rely on the observation of two Latino, pre-K age students, Anna and Christiana. Both girls were the same ages, the same cultural background and with parents college-trained. For the period encompassed by the four- and five-year age old intervals, girls were in pre-K and K, upper-New York state school systems. The only difference in their upbringing resulted in one of the kids, Christiana, having one more year in the pre-K system when compared to the other. Both students when entered in the pre-K were only speaking their mother tongue (Romanian). After their first year in the pre-school both were able to converse in English approximately at the level of their colleagues. The most important difference, though, that could be accounted for would be in the Christiana's case. When entering the K- level, after being tested for linguistic differences and possible remedial work with her ELL teachers she wasn't referred to any further special educational classes. Anna's case was different. Having only one year training at the pre-K level and thus the inability to fully adjust to the level required for the kindergarten level, Anna was recommended for special classes of DLLs learners for the first year in the K- school educational system. Today both students (in grade two, and three) are perfectly adapted and adjusted to the requirements of the national standardized testing of the elementary school level.

Conclusion

The above-mentioned study described the importance of having the pre-K time as a thoroughly accomplished interval in which students of different cultural, ethnic, SES backgrounds are introduced to the complexity of the English language. The effort is a sustained collaboration between home and school environments in which both parents and highly-qualified teachers cooperate for having the best results in student training. The importance of a high-quality educational environment purported by specialized teachers, trained in dealing with multiple facets of diversity is undeniable. The possibility of collaboration in between parents and school stands as a major resource for initiating and sustaining child's emotional, physical and intellectual development, especially when acknowledging the asset of an educated maternal

figure, or a care-giver for the most important pre-school stages in children's overall developments.

Important strategies of the above-mentioned study explained also the importance of supporting home languages and cultures of the minority students (Hispanic, Latino and Vietnamese) in their classroom. The cultural aspects of home-environment are determining the better outcomes in language acquisition process if the learner's self-esteem is raised. Frequently, cultural aspects of everyday living have a huge impact in understanding life in every aspect and in every country of the world. Therefore home heroes, language, food, customs are better explained and perceived by the pre-school age children when involved in the daily process of learning. By looking at all of the authors' views thoroughly stated and proved by the practicality of everyday learning in working with dual language learners, we understood the importance of having well-trained teachers (bilingualism is always a plus), administrators and mentors that are highly aware of the needs and stages of development of their students. Regardless of their ethnicity, the low-performers in language acquisition can enhance their skills only by having teachers, administrators and mentors who are motivated enough to help them making progress at every level, intellectual, emotional, social, or developmental. The studies summarized help to better grasp the importance of the cultural background, mother's educational status, and the impact of SES when assess the outcomes of any educational endeavors of pre-school age children.

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