

FAMILY-SCHOOL LINKS

How Do They Affect Educational Outcomes?

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Schools, Children At Risk, and Successful Interventions

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In their usual thorough and rigorous way, Professors Alexander and Entwisle make two critical points in their chapter (chap. 5, this volume). These provide the starting point for my own comments. Ultimately I would like to address questions of intervention for children at risk—what are we intervening for and how successful can we be?

INEQUALITY, IN AND OUT OF SCHOOL

First, Alexander and Entwisle demonstrate that it is during nonschool time—before they start and during the summer months—that low SES children fall academically behind their higher SES peers and get progressively further behind. During the school months (at least through elementary school), the rate of progress is virtually identical for high and low SES children. If anything, it seems slightly greater for low SES children.¹ Regression effects might exaggerate low SES students' school-year gains while minimizing those of high SES students. But this wouldn't explain the strikingly different patterns during the winter and summer months. At least with respect to measured achievement, schools seem to contribute to, not work against, educational equity. Schools hold the line during the year; there would be more inequity in cognitive outcomes in the absence of

¹I must note the puzzling finding that Alexander and Entwisle mention only in passing—the mid-level SES group registered the greatest academic growth during the winter months, almost .5 SD when added over the 5 years. I'm curious as to their interpretation of this.

schooling. Alexander and Entwisle put it this way: "Despite surface indications that seem to suggest the opposite, the public schools in places like Baltimore are a more powerful, positive force in children's lives than is generally realized" (p. 69). This is certain to be a controversial point, yet it is the clearest demonstration of it I have seen.

Second, given that the inequalities in cognitive outcomes are a result of out-of-school contexts—family and community—Alexander and Entwisle warn against unrealistic expectations about the extent to which schools can offset the "outside forces" that create, sustain, and aggravate achievement differences between high and low SES students. Although they clearly take the position that we must continue to work to make schools even more effective than they presently are, they are just as clearly sober in their appraisal of how far and how fast we can expect to go: "In our view, lasting improvements are most likely to come from planned changes that are anchored in deep intuitions and firm evidence about the nature of human beings and their social institutions. And even then, progress will be slow and come in small steps" (p. 84).

It seems to me these conclusions, given Alexander and Entwisle's data and the data of many others, are unassailable: *Schools do contribute to academic development, but by themselves they cannot make up for the lack of resources (material and otherwise) many students experience outside of school.* It is simply a fact that there is enormous variability in the access children have outside of school to opportunities and experiences that influence their academic development and performance *in* school.

These conclusions have a number of implications, of course. One is that all the bad things critics accuse the schools of doing to poor children—putting them in low groups, having low expectations, being insensitive to their cultures and learning styles, or the one I usually nominate, just plain failing to teach—might be grossly overstated, if not outright fantasies. To the contrary, these data seem to show that when in school, and at least with respect to what standardized tests measure, these children progress as do their more advantaged peers. So if our concern is with equity of educational outcomes, schools seem to be doing their share. Achievement gains during the school year are indeed independent of SES. This conclusion too is likely to be very controversial because, as Cook (chap. 6, this volume) reminds us, it flies in the face of mountains of evidence that low SES children are at a disadvantage while they are in school, due to a wide range of SES-related processes. These include, but are certainly not limited to, academic grouping (low SES children tend to be in lower ones), teacher expectations (lower for low SES children), and parent involvement (also lower for low SES children). In addition, as Cook also pointed out, replications and other more rigorous analyses of the data would be well-advised. Nonetheless, assuming Alexander and Entwisle's conclusions hold up, this is a major finding of enormous significance.

WHAT ARE WE INTERVENING FOR?

But what, exactly, is its significance? And what do these conclusions mean for intervention efforts aimed at helping at risk children to be more successful? It depends, it seems to me, largely on what we mean by success and what we are trying to accomplish in our interventions. If our definition of success is having low SES children's performance become comparable to that of high SES children—what Gamoran (chap. 7, this volume) calls the issue of "distribution"—then Alexander and Entwisle's conclusions present a very grim scenario. At a minimum, this definition of success says that without a comprehensive, highly intensive effort to marshal and deploy resources at home, school, and in the community, schools are wasting their time. And even with such colossal efforts, we might be disappointed. Let us not delude ourselves about the enormity of the task. This is what Lisbeth Schorr and others who have argued for integration of programs, policies, and services—the school being but one of many agencies implicated—have maintained: "Everyone agrees that it takes a village to raise a child. But in the inner city, the village has disintegrated. That is why we need bold and comprehensive strategies. Incrementalism will not do it. There are chasms you cannot cross one small step at a time" (Schorr, 1994, p. 237).

Never mind that we might think we know how to accomplish the goal of closing high–low SES gaps. Maybe we do, and I suspect most everyone would be in favor of doing so. I know I would. But in reality, closing the gap and following through with what Schorr talked about will require local, regional, and national political acts of will towards which we must continually work, but that at the moment remain dreamy visions.

But what if we have another definition of success? What if we define success in terms of helping *all*, or almost all, children achieve at least at some reasonable level, for example "on grade level" according to tests or textbooks, or at the "proficient" level according to National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) standards or according to any one of many possible criteria? This would then turn the problem into, as Gamoran and others (e.g., Walberg, 1984) have called it, a "productivity" issue. What if we define success as fundamentally improving educational productivity for low SES (and other) children, instead of defining success in terms of narrowing the SES achievement gap? If this is how we operationalize success, then Alexander and Entwisle's conclusions carry less weight. They are no less important or useful to know. They just don't matter as much for the business at hand. Because now what we are interested in is a very different sort of problem—helping all children achieve at least at satisfactory levels in school, that is, helping them learn to read, write, think, compute, speak, and be knowledgeable about the world so that they might function productively in school and (we hope) beyond. Of less interest is whether, as a group, they do any of this better or worse than children from more advantaged backgrounds.

Now you might say this a distinction without a difference, because one would necessarily lead to the other, or stated somewhat differently, that this is an evasion because the one can't be done without the other. Worse yet, I might be accused of being disingenuous or at best naive, trying to induce a Lake Woebegone effect, where all children will be above average. But I do not think any of these is a valid criticism. Under the assumption that a rising tide lifts everything that floats (and virtually all children float), no cap needs to be placed on what more advantaged students can accomplish. The entire student population could certainly benefit from substantial bump up academically, witness the consistent NAEP findings that large majorities—from two thirds to three fourths of students—have at most only basic reading proficiency skills (Mullis, Campbell, & Farstrup, 1993). Our goals simply become to help all students achieve at some reasonable academic level (and I recognize that defining such a level is not without its complexities), regardless of how far those at the top go and regardless of what we define as "average."

In any case, whether focusing on satisfactory achievement levels *for all* necessarily implies a narrowing of the achievement gap, I think the strategic difference is important. The issue is no longer the SES "cleavage," as Alexander and Entwisle call it. The issue becomes helping children attain levels of achievement that promote functional, productive, and satisfying lives, which is what all the parents who have either participated in my studies or had children in my classroom seem to me to want more than anything else.

INTERVENING FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS

I think if we define success in this second way—as a matter of improving educational productivity—the problem is less overwhelming. It's still a challenge, let us be very clear about that. But there is every indication that it's a manageable challenge. We need not—indeed, must not—give up on the other definition of success, that of eliminating or at least minimizing the SES cleavage. But I think that is a fundamentally different challenge, one that is going to require very hard and protracted work in the political arena. Ultimately this challenge refers to a more equitable distribution of resources in our society, and there are clearly limits to what schools can do. I think Jencks was right more than 20 years ago when he said (I am paraphrasing) that if you want to redistribute resources, do it through monetary and fiscal policy, not through educational policy (Jencks et al., 1972).

We really are talking about two different (although obviously not unrelated) views of what the problem is and therefore what would constitute success—closing the gap or having all students succeed in school. In case there is still doubt about this difference in perspectives, let me engage in a bit of textual exegesis, drawing on Alexander and Entwisle's chapter and a piece by their colleagues at Johns Hopkins University, Slavin, Madden, Karweit, Dolan, and Wasik (1994).

Alexander and Entwisle's chapter makes frequent references to "differences across SES lines" and "gaps," "cleavages," "distinctions," and "stratification." Consider this excerpt: "Unless something happens to improve low SES children's prospects, the expectation probably would be for them to lose more ground over time, whereas to shrink the gap implies moving against the pull of out-of-school resources" (p. 72). In fact, the bulk of their analysis revolves around SES differences and the countervailing forces of the school and the society. Tensions, fissures, and cracks run throughout their paper. Maybe I am particularly sensitive to these images coming from California, and in particular Los Angeles, where both the social and geological faults run hard and deep. But the images are clearly there; I do not think I am making it up. And when Alexander and Entwisle talk about intervention, they mean intervention to reduce the gap: "As presently constituted [schools] do not make enough of a difference to offset educational disparities that originate in out-of-school circumstances" . . . "In this section we point to several areas that seem promising" (p. 78)—promising, that is, for reducing the gap between high and low SES students.

In contrast, consider an earlier publication by Slavin, Madden, Karweit, Livermon, and Dolan (1990) describing their widely cited program to improve disadvantaged children's achievement, "Success for All" (SFA). Slavin et al. began their report like this: "Every child can learn." Call me a misty-eyed romantic, but I love that line. I wish every American Educational Research Association (AERA) publication could scale those rhetorical heights. Throughout the article, the focus is on indicators of satisfactory and less-than-satisfactory achievement, not in relation to how more advantaged children achieve (although normative standards are implicit), but in relation to levels of achievement that indicate mastery of basic academic skills and successful adaptation to school—being on grade level and avoiding retention, special education placement, truancy, and so on. SFA, the authors noted, is "designed to bring every child in an inner-city elementary school to the third grade with adequate reading, mathematics, and language skills. . . . [It] attempt[s] to guarantee every child a level of basic skills sufficient to serve as a basis for success in the later grades" (Slavin et al., 1990, p. 257). In subsequent reports, the focus on success as being "grade level performance" is even more explicit. Most recently, in a review of SFA implementations and evaluations involving nearly two dozen cohorts, seven of which had completed third grade, Slavin et al. (1994) asked the bottom-line question: "Will Success for All ultimately bring all children to grade level in reading?" (p. 190). Note the absence of any comparison with the achievement of more advantaged children. In this view of success, narrowing the gap or minimizing the cleavage is not the issue, at least not in any explicit way. Improving the school performance of at risk children so that they might be successful and productive in their school careers is.

The latter view of the issue is, I believe, the more productive one for people working in schools. We should certainly attend to the other, far more difficult

issue—narrowing the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged—but we should do so in our roles as citizens and political activists committed to a just and free society.

INTERVENTIONS TO HELP DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN: HOW SUCCESSFUL CAN WE BE?

Having spent so much time pondering what we are intervening for and what constitutes success in interventions, what do we know and what can we say about intervening to help promote success among disadvantaged children? In the simplest terms we can say we know this: It can be done. We know of many ways to increase average achievement levels and increase the probability that disadvantaged children will be more successful, that is, achieve at what we might call grade level norms or standards (e.g., Bliss, Firestone, & Richards, 1991; Comer, 1980; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991; Slavin et al., 1994; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Certainly the home-school link offers one set of important ways (Epstein, chapter 14, this volume; Goldenberg, 1993).

But there are two catches at the moment. The first is no surprise to anyone: It usually—but not always—takes additional resources. Some of the work by Slavin and colleagues suggests that rearranging how currently available moneys² are used can make a substantial difference; but still, additional resources produce stronger effects, particularly for the very lowest achieving students (Slavin et al., 1994). Evidence reviewed by Alexander and Entwisle and others suggests that some nonmaterial resources—for example, sense of community, shared purpose and commitment—are also extremely important. But as a general rule, we can probably conclude that material resources help, assuming of course they are used well.

The other catch is that we are still short of finding ways to help *all*, or virtually all, students succeed. Even Success for All, a comprehensive, rigorously research-based effort that its developers described as a “relentless approach to prevention and early intervention,” falls short of this goal. Across various sites in Baltimore, only 46% of third grade children in SFA schools were on or above grade level in reading according to the latest data I have seen. This was in contrast to 26% of children in control schools (Slavin et al., 1994). Although clearly a significant and meaningful effect, it is still far short of success for *all*, if we define success as attainment on grade level.

Let me turn last to a somewhat different sort of effort in which I have been involved over the past 4 years to improve the academic achievement of children in a largely Latino immigrant school district in Southern California (Goldenberg

²Chapter 1 and other forms of assistance can be considered currently available moneys, but they can also be seen as extra resources already provided.

& Sullivan, 1994). I've been working in this district for about 10 years, first as a doctoral student, then as a teacher, and most recently as a researcher-collaborator with teachers and administrators. The children who attend school in the district are typically seen as at risk for underachievement. Parents were born either in Mexico or Central America; about three fourths of the children were born in the United States, mostly Southern California. Most children and parents speak Spanish as their first language. Parents average about 7 years of formal schooling. About 90% of the children qualify for free meals; most of the rest qualify for reduced-price meals.

Language and immigration add several dimensions to these children's at-risk status. But in many ways the issues surrounding these children's poor school performance are very similar to those surrounding the poor school performance of other low-income, minority children. This in itself could be the topic for an extended treatment. In any case, in 1990, the principal and I embarked on a project to improve academic achievement across the board at the school. There is far too little time to go into any detail here about what we did, but let me try to summarize very briefly.

First, we developed a model of school change, based on our experience and our reading of the literature, that we thought would help guide our efforts. This model posits four “change elements” that can be manipulated to bring about productive change in schools. At least three of these elements sound familiar: *goals* that are set and shared; *indicators* that measure success; *assistance* by capable others; and *leadership* that supports and pressures (Goldenberg & Sullivan, 1994). Our model is designed to help us do what Alexander and Entwisle quite rightly said is the challenge faced by schools who want to embrace student achievement: foster a sense of community, and maintain high standards, high expectations, and an infrastructure that supports everyone's learning (including, I would add, teachers' learning).

Then, informed and guided by this model, we embarked on a several years' project that has produced some gratifying results. Without going into any of the operational details, let me just give a flavor of some of the processes involved. We developed a set of academic expectations or goals, grade level by grade level. This was a 2-year operation. When interviewed in mid 1993–1994 about the role of these expectations at the school, teachers reported that they had made a difference for them. The expectations were specific guidelines teachers could use to focus their teaching, and despite the additional work involved in developing them, they were seen as critical:

Q: Do you hold higher expectations now?

A: I think so. . . . I've always held high expectations, but I think even higher [now]. No, they're maybe not . . . they're more specific.

.....

Q: Over the last couple of years has your workload increased?

A: Yeah, but that's what happens if you want to be involved with something, then that's what happens . . . we have a lot of autonomy at this school. . . . here we had that opportunity to develop [goals and expectations] ourselves.

.....

A: I've always felt the problem of getting it all in. . . . Now, because of the goals and expectations, it is more cut and clear what goes in the back burner. . . . because of the goals and expectations I'd say I'm more focused. (Goldenberg & Sullivan, 1994, pp. 12-13)

Teachers work together in workgroups, developing instruction and materials in areas they choose. They have opportunities to share and compare what they and others are doing. We've developed a school-wide set of authentic assessments, administered by project staff and aides at the school. We also have in-services from time to time on selected topics. For example, we've had some on parent involvement and the use of homework to enhance learning. There is quite a solid research basis showing the beneficial effects of homework on student achievement (e.g., Cooper, 1989; Paschal, Weinstein, & Walberg, 1984). Homework positively influences achievement because it affects the proximal learning environment at home, one of the most important influences on student achievement (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993).

Here is what some of the teachers said about homework and the homework in-service:

Where I notice the difference is in how their reading improves when they read at home. I can tell the difference with the new students I received. One teacher didn't have her students read at home and the other did. The students who read at home do much better in my class than those from the teacher who never had them read at home.

...

The upper grade teachers now give more [homework], and they give it more consistently. Less of it is busywork. . . . I think the students respond positively. They're more serious and responsible about schoolwork when they have homework regularly. The homework in-service reminded teachers how homework fits into classroom lessons, how valuable homework is for the kids. (Goldenberg & Sullivan, 1994, p. 15)

We've had a fair amount of success with our model-based school change project. When the project began in 1989-1990, average achievement at the school was below state, national, and district norms. Within 3 years, achievement at the school had surpassed the rest of the district (which is demographically comparable), and in some respects matched or surpassed state and national norms. Spanish literacy scores in the primary grades have improved considerably. In the

1990 first grade Spanish cohort, only 30% of students were on grade level according to national norms. By the time this cohort reached third grade, students at the school outperformed other Spanish-speaking third graders in the district who had attended their respective schools since first grade; 60% were reading at or above grade level, in contrast to less than 50% on grade level around the district. The following year the succeeding cohort did even better: 69% of the school's Spanish-speaking third graders were on grade level in reading, according to national norms. Fourth graders tested in English reading (California Learning Assessment System, CLAS) in 1993 were more likely to score at the highest levels (4 and up) than were fourth graders throughout the district—28% versus 17% (comparable state figure, 30%; Goldenberg & Sullivan, 1994).

So again we see some evidence of progress. Nearly 70% of our third graders are on grade level in reading in Spanish; 28%—just 2% fewer than the state average—of our fourth graders are at the proficient and above level in English. Still, not all our students are where they need to be. The data show this, and we and the teachers know it. "We're working very slowly," one fifth grade teacher said last year. "But there's more to do. There's much more to do."

These are surely sentiments Alexander and Entwisle would endorse. But are we making progress, or are we running into a ceiling that Alexander and Entwisle seemed to foreshadow? Maybe both. Most important, is this the best we can do? I don't think so, or rather I hope not. But we must acknowledge, whether we're talking about success as narrowing the cleavage or success as getting all children "on grade level," there are no simple or easy answers. To this extent, Alexander and Entwisle's cautious conclusions should serve as reminders of the work and the challenges that lie ahead.

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