Is There a Positive Correlation between Socioeconomic Status and Academic Achievement?

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Abstract

In this literature review, family environments of low socioeconomic status (SES) students were examined and a comparison made in learning styles between low and high achievers. Socioeconomic factors such as family income, education, and occupation play a major role in the academic achievement of all students. There is a positive correlation between SES and academic achievement. The conclusions of this review have implications for all educators as well as the entire future of American society.
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Is There a Positive Correlation between Socioeconomic Status and Academic Achievement?

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2003), 28.7 million children are living in poverty across the United States. In 1995, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that about 15.3 million children lived with families that were stricken with poverty (Malecki & Demaray, 2006; Milne & Plourde, 2006). This is higher than ever before. Socioeconomic status (SES) is the single best predictor of academic achievement (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996; Sirin, 2005). Low SES is highly correlated with low achievement (Malecki & Demaray, 2006; Milne & Plourde, 2006). Children in families with incomes less than one-half of the poverty line were found to score between 6 and 13 points lower on various standardized tests (Milne & Plourde, 2006). “African Americans, on standardized tests score significantly lower than their white counterparts, and a typical minority student (Black, Hispanic, Native American) scores below 75% (often 85%) of American Whites on most standardized tests” (Wilhelm, 2005). A survey done in 2000 by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and reported by U.S. Department of Education concluded that on average, minority students lagged behind their White peers in terms of academic achievement (Sirin, 2005). The rising of poverty rates has steadily increased, and so has the debate on SES. Many children coming from low-SES homes are faced with more trials and negative circumstances than those of their middle and high SES counterparts (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Milne & Plourde, 2006; Wilhelm, 2005). The relation between SES and academic achievement is stronger for children in suburban schools than for children in rural or urban schools (Sirin, 2005).

It is important to clarify how SES is determined. The majority of research has shown that the best way to measure SES is by income, education, and occupation (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Caldwell & Ginther, 1996; Malecki & Demaray, 2006; Milne & Plourde, 2006; Sirin,
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Socioeconomic status describes an individual’s or a family’s ranking according to access of valued commodities such as wealth and social status (Sirin, 2005). Parental income as an indicator of SES reflects the potential for social and economic resources that are available to the student. Parental education is considered one of the most stable components of SES because it is established at an early age. Furthermore, parental education is an indicator of parent’s income; income and education are highly correlated (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Sirin, 2005). Occupation is based on the basis of the education and income required to have a particular occupation (Sirin, 2005). Furthermore, the most recent study shows a correlation between economic position and economic social status (Milne & Plourde, 2006.) A new way of thinking about SES would be to look at SES as resources and assets. Changes in family structure should be considered when measuring SES (Milne & Plourde, 2006). Divorce or separation can lead to a severe drop in family income and standard of living, and this often will lead families to move into poor neighborhoods (Milne & Plourde, 2006). Literature has provided evidence that students’ poverty status is often measured by receipt of free or reduced-cost lunch programs and is related to their academic performance in school (Malecki & Demaray, 2006; Sirin, 2005).

Students were classified as lower-SES if they received the free or reduced cost lunches or higher-SES if they did not receive free or reduced cost lunches (Malecki & Demaray, 2006; Sirin, 2005). Children from families with incomes at or below 130% of the poverty line are eligible for free meals. Children from families with incomes between 130% and 185% of the poverty line are eligible for reduced cost lunches (Sirin, 2005).

Socioeconomic status does affect students’ abilities (Milne & Plourde, 2006). There is a correlation between family income and children’s ability and achievement (Bracey, 1999; Caldwell & Ginther, 1996; Milne & Plourde, 2006). Higher family income is associated with
higher educational attainment. On the other hand, students from low-SES backgrounds are the largest population of individuals to be at-risk of not graduating high school (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996; Sirin, 2005). For high school dropouts, the number living below the poverty line is between 45% and 50% (Bracey, 1999). If dropout rates are going to be lowered, strategies to improve academic achievement of at-risk students must be formulated (Milne & Plourde, 2006).

Learning must be provided in a meaningful context so that these at-risk students can immediately apply what they have learned and connect it to their own lives and individual experiences. Inquiry or integrated curriculum that is organized around student concerns provides such a context (Wilhelm, 2005). Many of these dropouts are not only from low-SES backgrounds, but have mismatched learning styles with the way the information is presented (Gustafson, 2002).

Socioeconomic status affects children’s academic achievement. The earliest years of development seem to be the most crucial (Milne & Plourde, 2006). Children are hardest hit by family economic conditions during their early years. Why does SES affect students’ achievement in reading, math, writing, and science (Ensminger & Fothergill, 2003; Malecki & Demaray, 2006). Unlike children from high income families, children who come from poor families have little access to materials and resources (Sirin, 2005). They have few opportunities to visit local libraries, museums, educational centers, or theatrical events (Milne & Plourde, 2006). Evidence exists that confirms that poor children, living at or near the federal poverty line, have little, if any, access to reading materials, especially when compared to middle-class or affluent children (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Constantino, 2005; Ensminger & Fothergill, 2003; Sirin, 2005). Children from poor neighborhoods would have to aggressively seek out reading materials to supplement their academics because the school library, public library, and bookstores are not located within a reasonable distance to their home or school (Milne & Plourde, 2006).
Economically disadvantaged students are much less likely to read for pleasure let alone for academics. The mean number of books in the home for low-SES is 6.08 and 414.00 for high-SES (Constantino, 2006). Children in poor communities are denied not only the opportunity to become literate, but also the opportunity to love reading, a fact that is more important for educational achievement than any test score or reading assessment result (Constantino, 2006; Milne & Plourde, 2006).

Children from low-SES homes also tend to live in environments that are over-crowded, with many siblings and many overall needs that must be met by their parents (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Caldwell & Ginther, 1996; Milne & Plourde, 2006; Sirin, 2005). These parents have less quality time to work with their children to teach the basics needed for attending school (Milne & Plourde, 2006). If enough support is given to low-SES parents, in order that they may have the resources (time, educational materials, and knowledge) than other higher SES homes have, their financial situation will not impact their child’s academic achievement (Malecki & Demaray, 2006; Milne & Plourde, 2006). There is a huge need to educate parents who are in low-SES households (Malecki & Demaray, 2006; Milne & Plourde, 2006). It is beneficial to determine what type of home environment children come from, so that educators will know how to best support them in school. It is certainly valid that all children are entitled to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), but it is also true that success may only come once enough support has been given to their families (Ensminger & Fothergill, 2003; Milne & Plourde, 2006).

Students from lower SES backgrounds also exhibited lowered expectancy for success and lower intrinsic motivation (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996). Socioeconomic advantage and achievement motivation are important mediators of academic performance (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996). Low motivation is a critical factor in student achievement, especially for the low
socioeconomic student. Enhancing motivation requires that students become active participants in their own learning while teachers assume a less controlling role (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996). This motivation factor also plays a role in learning style differences (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996). Does the learning style of the low SES high achiever differ from the learning style of the low SES low achiever? According to Caldwell & Ginther (1996), there are differences in learning style of these two student groups. Some of the environmental factors that play a role are lighting, mobility, design, learning with others, and tactile/kinesthetic preferences vs. auditory/visual preferences (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996). Learning environments must be structured to achieve the highest level of internal motivation from all students. Giving the students’ a high level of control over his/her immediate learning environment would lead the students to value effort and would increase the individual’s commitment to effort based strategies (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996). It could be argued that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds may have an increased risk for exhibiting performance-oriented behavior (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996). Students from a low SES environment exhibited lowered expectancy for success and lower intrinsic motivation (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996). Many learning style variables (motivation, persistence, responsibility, kinesthetic and teacher motivation) play an important role in the academic achievement of low SES students (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996). The motivation to learn can be explained in terms of achievement goals (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996). Achievement goals are split into two different groups. The first group is based on performance goals (performance-oriented) behavior and the second group is based on mastery goals (mastery-oriented) behavior (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996). Low SES students show performance-oriented behavior and demonstrate it in three ways: they view difficulties as failures and any future attempt would be futile; they exhibit negative self-worth when they are faced with obstacles; and they go after
performance based goals, which are based on positive feedback (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996). Children who display qualities of performance-oriented behavior contribute their success to factors such as, “I was lucky” or “the teacher likes me.” In this case, failure is recognized as a lack of ability (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996). This leads to low motivation because the child thinks that he/she has no control over the conclusion (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996). In contrast, mastery-oriented children see themselves as having high levels of control (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996).

Socioeconomic status is a significant factor in students’ cognitive development and academic achievement (Ensminger & Fothergill, 2003; Milne & Plourde, 2006). Research indicates that the perception of control appears to be a considerable aspect affecting student’s task involvement and the quality of their learning (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996). However, literature is lacking in the discussion of students who come from low-SES homes that tend to have high academic achievement (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996; Milne & Plourde, 2006). More research is necessary to understand why these particular students do succeed in school when so many of their peers do not. Such research should identify any common factors within the homes of the academically successful low SES students (Milne & Plourde, 2006).

Schools are only one factor in academic achievement of low SES students (Caldwell & Ginther, 1996; Gustafson, 2002). There is one other primary influence: home (Gustafson, 2002). Children and youth of higher socioeconomic status learn many cultural basics from their educated parents, enriching their home environment, and their peer group (Gustafson, 2002). Middle to higher SES parents understand that their children will not fulfill all of their needs in a formal educational context. Their children will learn about geography while traveling; they will learn about political office by informal conversations with parents and peers. Their children will also learn about movies and books from personal experiences shared with others (Gustafson,
2002). A lack of this supplemental knowledge separates those who understand these other cultural basics from those who do not (Gustafson, 2002). Reading is one approach to enrich the lives and experiential base of students by providing a vicarious experience through the world of books. For low-SES backgrounds, reading opens the world up to them, but the challenge is how to get them to read (Gustafson, 2002). Teachers need to enrich the school and community life for children with of low socioeconomic status through the exposure of music, plays, art, and historical societies (Gustafson, 2002). Performances are another way in which to get students involved in building a knowledge base. Field trips, an integrated curriculum and relating material to what the students already know are connections for success (Gustafson, 2002).

Socioeconomic structure has a strong impact on children's academic achievement (Ensminger & Fothergill, 2003; Sirin, 2005). Family SES sets the stage for academic performance by providing resources at home and the monetary funds to do so (Sirin, 2005). There is a positive correlation between SES and academic performance. Socioeconomic status and academic performance reflects the lack of resources at home, but also reflects the effect of social capital on academic achievement (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Sirin, 2005). The magnitude of the symbiotic relationship between SES and academic performance is contingent upon the several factors of income, education, and occupation. How SES is measured should be used by considering these factors as well as the school location and student characteristics (Sirin, 2005). The gap between low and high-SES students is most likely to remain the same, if not widen (Sirin, 2005).

As of 2005, one in five children in the United States lived in poverty, which puts many of these students at high risk for poor academic performance or out right failure (Sirin, 2005.) As the overall findings suggest, from the literature reviewed, researchers must continue to assess
student’s SES as part of their understanding of families SES on academic achievement. Since school success is greatly influenced by family SES, it appears as if American society may be failing in one of its greatest commitments: the responsibility to provide educational opportunities for every student and citizen regardless of social and economic background. Many poor students come to school without the social and economic benefits available to most middle and high SES students. Our focus should be on adequacy— that is, sufficient resources for optimal academic achievement regardless of socioeconomic status. Without this support, our current educational system is likely to produce an intergenerational cycle of school failures and short change an entire future American society because of family SES.

Methodology

I handed out a survey in a rural school to teachers and special area teachers. Altogether I handed out a total of 31 surveys and received 13 back. That is a 42% return rate. The school is located in Wayne County and is Pre-k through second grade enrollment. The survey had a total of ten questions. I put the survey in teacher mailboxes. A few teachers approached me in the hallway and tried to hand me back the survey and I told them that it was a confidential survey and that they needed to put it in my mailbox. I collected the information via surveys and asking the teachers opinions about socioeconomic status, academic achievement and standardized testing. Once I received the surveys back I analyzed each question, one by one.
Data Analysis

When I analyzed the data I noticed the following: one teacher did not say what grade they taught or how long they have been teaching. I have two surveys back from pre-k with a combined experience level of 13 years, I received two surveys back from kindergarten with a combined experience level of 23 years, three surveys back from k-2, k-1-2, and k-12, with a total of 33 years of teaching experience, two surveys back from first grade with a combined 6 years of teaching experience, two surveys back from second grade with 42 years of teaching experience and one survey back from a self contained special education class in kindergarten with 13 years of experience. The first two questions that I asked on the survey were what grade do you teach and how long have you been teaching.

The next question that I asked on the survey was what factors affect a student’s academic achievement. Of all the 13 surveys there was a consensus about what factors they thought affected a student’s achievement. Some of the following answers are as follows: health/nutrition, level of IQ, motivation or lack of motivation of teacher, amount of parental support, class size, quality of instruction/teaching resources, supports available in school and at home, student disabilities, language, importance of education in the culture, style of learning and exposure to that style, gender, peer influence, natural ability, attendance, family loss of tragic event, pregnancy full term or preemie, expectations, and teacher/student relationship. Of all of these answers given, the most popular one that affect’s student academic achievement was environment. Every teacher felt that environment was an important factor when considering academic achievement. When looking at the surveys I got back for question number four, I noticed that some of the same answers for factors affecting students’ academic achievement are the same for some predictors of student achievement. Some of the answers overlap. Only one
teacher didn’t answer question number four. Here are some of the responses to predictors of student achievement: attitude, self confidence, need to please, desire to do better, the love of learning, acceptance, economics in the home, stability of family, siblings, age of parent or parents, age of student maturity, family involvement and importance placed on learning, cognitive level, family history, neighborhood, modeling of good work and ethics, pride and the choices they make, resources available, parental achievement, whether or not students attend pre-k, are read to at home, whether or not they get early intervention, good nutrition/health, high IQ, oral language development, self care skills, family life, dynamics of the class, and personality and mood on any given day tells a particular teacher what they can or can not do on that given day. On this particular survey question I found two predictors that teachers wrote over and over again. The first one was parental involvement and self esteem, respectively. So basically what the teachers are saying is that the more a child’s parents are involved in and outside the classroom the more likely they are to succeed. Also, self esteem is important. Self esteem indicates whether or not they believe in themselves to do the work. If they do, the more successful they will be in their endeavors.

Question number five asked the teachers if there is a relationship between reading performance and socioeconomic status (SES). Of the 13 surveys returned, 12 firmly believe that there is a relationship and moreover, they believe it is a positive one. That meaning there is a correlation. One teacher said they weren’t sure if there was a relationship. Here are the results of questions number five: if the child comes from a strong family, he/she will be fine, it’s all about attitude, everything builds on the basics on up, self-confidence builds from achievement, everything grows from the ability to read, reading material available, time with parent of parents, importance of performance, if the SES is low because of recent job loss or parent disability, then
there might not be a negative influence on reading performance, if the SES is low because of longstanding family problems (parents have mental illness or addictions), then the reading performance of the child might be affected, there is research that suggests that there is a relationship truly due to SES or other factors such as time spent on academic activities with a child or level of knowledge/skills a parent has. Families with lower SES are less likely to reinforce at home the things taught and emphasized at school, and poverty level families place less value on future schooling and more value on earning power today. They live day to day. It does matter if the child comes from a low SES home or a high SES home. The teachers strongly feel that if the child comes from a high SES family, that the parents have the resources and materials available to educate their child. They also have more time to spend. As for the child that comes from a low SES household, the resources and materials are not readily available or there is no time to be spent with the child.

Of the 13 surveys returned for question number six, I saw that four teachers said that they weren’t sure, and one didn’t put anything down for the question. Question number six asked do schools with more homogenous students have better school performance as measured by standardized testing. Five teachers said yes, one teacher said it all depended and two teachers said no. For the teacher who said that it depended this was the reasoning: It depends on who your homogenous students are. For example, some private schools charge higher tuition and are very selective. They get to choose their population. Students in these schools tend to do well because they come from higher SES homes where education is valued and supported. On the other hand, many urban schools evolve into lower SES schools. Parents of students from higher SES don’t want their children attending such schools due to poor neighborhoods and violence. Students who attend these urban schools are less likely to have good role models among their peers and
may not be as driven to succeed. For the two teachers that said no, this is their reasoning. They feel that it depends on the materials used, the teachers desire to teach and the preparation the children receive, and because not all good students are good test takers. Every person is unique and is a unique learner so why will one test be able to show that. The five teachers that said yes stated their justification: they would hope that schools with more homogenous students have better school performance as measured by standardized testing, but it is no guarantee of success. Too many other factors play a role as well. Money doesn’t always mean parental support and solid family base; another teacher commented that they would expect more consistent performance not necessarily better. They also said that it depended on the level of students. Two of the teachers said that if students are at the same level it is easier to prepare them for testing and if all of the students were from a higher SES their guess would be that the students would have better students’ performance on standardized testing because of access to resources. The responses for this question were split. I could tell that there were some teachers that felt very strongly about this. I could tell by the words that they underlined and by their writing in all capital letters.

Question number seven asked the teachers if school resources and classroom practice differ in their effects in rural and urban schools. Of the 13 surveys, only one teacher said that they would not differ. All of the teachers also admitted that they have never worked in an urban setting, so that makes a difference too. They have all worked in a rural setting. One teacher said that they did not know and another did not answer the question. Most came to the consensus that it varies from state to state and city to city and rural community to rural community. It also depends on the expectations and money resources of each school district and who is running the school (school administrators and boards of education.) A lot of the teachers also commented on
the more resources more affluent students achieve and that you can't learn without resources. Some were very adamant saying that yes, smaller rural schools have a lot less resources which affects how they can help their students. Some commented on the dynamics of the staff as to whether or not they were ambitious, enthusiastic teachers. They said that these kinds of teachers can make a positive impact on students no matter what other resources are available. In the end it is what the teacher makes of the lesson and how they relate the material to their own lives. One teacher in particular commented on the fact that urban schools have a larger tax base and are closer to cultural things, such as, museums, arts, and concerts. Funding and priorities are different between rural and urban schools. One relates just like lifestyles. Lifestyles differ from rural and urban areas as well as one area of the country to another. The last two surveys that I looked at the teachers said almost the same thing. They agree that you teach using materials to meet the needs of your students. If you don't have those materials, you cannot meet the needs of your students. Every district is different and students needs differ. As a result, what and how you teach differs.

When looking at question number eight, I was shocked at the number of teachers who did not respond or who left the question blank. Four of the teachers said that they didn’t know, with one saying that they thought so, and four of the surveys that were handed in were blank with nothing written on them. Question eight asks do school systems with less socioeconomic segregation have better performance and fewer inequalities based on standardized testing. Three of the teachers said that the more a child is exposed to at school and home the better chance a child has of becoming more successful. Many of the teachers, because this is a pre-k – two school, a lot of them are against standardized testing stating that it does not always tell the true story and to stop making excuses “Expect better and expectations can make the difference.”
Again a lot of the teachers are banking on the resources to make the scores of the standardized testing go up. It all depends on the resources available. Most commented on the fact that most schools have similar SES throughout the school. If this is the case, then it would be easier to prepare the students for the test and therefore performance will increase. Another teacher commented and said that school systems that have a mix of all socioeconomic classes probably, on the whole, have better standardized test results compared to a school of mostly low SES students, such as, in an inner city school. Yet, such school systems test results would generally be lower than schools with mostly high SES students (private schools and suburban schools). Students in heterogeneously mixed SES schools do better than students in low SES schools because lower SES students have more role models among their peers. Fewer students require extra teacher support. Therefore, these students that do need support receive more 1:1 help. I only had one teacher say no. Their reasoning behind this was because the mix sets up its own segregation by type of clothes, cool book bags, nice shoes, etc. Children from poverty stricken homes generally have less stable lives, more reasons to distract them from their school work, hunger, fatigue, and a lack of consistent home lives. All of the other surveys somewhat said the same thing, but this teacher took a different approach to answering this question. I was really impressed because everything he/she said was right on. School systems do it to themselves.

Question number nine asked the survey participants to state whether or not they felt if there was a relationship between student achievement and socioeconomic status and if so, is it weaker at higher levels of SES. Three teachers did not answer the question and one said that they didn’t know. Of the remaining surveys that I analyzed, five teachers said yes. Some of their responses are as follows: if students lack support through families and relationships, which could effect their overall achievement at school and in life. The relationship would be just as strong.
The more resources available the higher student achievement would be overall. The disparity between involvement/non-involvement and education levels is less at the higher end of SES or compared to lower end (poverty) and middle class. All of the teachers that said yes have in common that when SES is higher student achievement seems to also be higher. Another teacher said that what you expect is what you will receive. Less materials means harder to properly teach what is needed to succeed. Two teachers said that the relationship between student achievement and socioeconomic status is not weaker at higher levels of SES. They feel just the opposite; stronger. In communities of higher levels of SES, expectations for achievement are higher. The expectations are to prepare students for college education focuses on when they go to college, not if they go to college. The other teacher that said no to this question was because she said that we all know about spoiled over indulged kids- what is their motivation? Most cases though there is more parental involvement because of the time needed to be sure there is enough food.

Of the 13 participants, only one teacher did not answer question number ten. Question ten asked teachers to think about the whether the level of a students SES is reflected in their behavior and/or self-esteem when performing on standardized tests. Most of the teachers responded yes to this question. One of the teachers said that it is hard for them to say either way because he/she had never observed students while they were taking a standardized test. A lot of the teachers contributed this question to the home environment. If the child grows up in, desires, exposure to new situations and the level of positive support the child receives. One of the teachers consistently throughout this survey has said expectation. What is expected is reflected in behavior and self-esteem. A good test taker will do well on standardized tests. A bad test taker will do badly. Knowledge, intelligence has little to do with it. Usually more parental support and value placed on the SES- the more they should mean to the student being tested. Many low SES
students believe they will do poorly and therefore they do. Expectations are higher, bad behavior not tolerated. They are better prepared, more confident. Another teacher just commented that it is not necessarily reflected in their behavior. All students are different and so is each testing situation. Another comment was that yes the students SES is reflected in their self-esteem when performing on a standardized test, if they are not used to the expectations of a standardized test. Students from higher SES homes are more apt to be brought up to value education. Since there is a lot of support from home they tend to have higher self-esteem when it comes to taking a test. Therefore, they are more likely to do better on the tests. The level of SES has an impact on behavior and self-esteem in any social function, including all school involvement pieces in standardized tests. If the family has raised the child with high expectations regarding success in school and the child has experienced success, then the SES might not be reflected in their attitude toward tests. Conversely, anxiety might be increased with high expectations. It is more likely that students with higher SES will anticipate performing well while those in the lower class may anticipate failure. Self-esteem only appears to be affected by SES. This is an internal concept that is not completely influenced by SES.

Discussion

What the literature and surveys suggest is that there is a positive correlation between socioeconomic status and academic achievement. Although current literature is not available for these particular students in low SES homes that tend to have high academic achievement. There are gaps in the literature about this group of children. Income, education, and occupation are responsible for low academic achievement in many low SES families.

Socioeconomic status causes less time with children and is usually a result of lower education levels of a parent, students from families of higher economic status tend to have
parents who read to and with them, parents are more apt to talk to them about the world around them and to offer them more cultural experiences, many of the students that struggle with reading come from low SES homes and often have parents that struggle with reading, if a family does not have a good educational background or materials to use to work with their child, then the child may suffer as a result, children are products of their environment, if education is not valued in the home, students will not value education, there is more expected for higher education in higher classes.
References


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