CENTER ON EDUCATION POLICY CEP

4. What Roles Do Parent Involvement, Family Background, and Culture Play in Student Motivation?

> *This is the fourth in a series of six papers from the Center on Education Policy exploring issues related to students' motivation to learn. The first paper provides the general context for the topic and background information on theories and dimensions of motivation. The major findings from all six papers are summarized in the CEP report* Student Motivation—An Overlooked Piece of School Reform.

Research has long documented a strong relationship between family background factors, such as income and parents' educational levels, and student achievement. Studies have also shown that parents can play an important role in supporting their children's academic achievement. But to what extent do family background and parent involvement affect student motivation, a critical underpinning of academic achievement and success in school?

This paper examines findings from research about the impact of various family background and cultural factors on student motivation, as well as the role of parental beliefs, attitudes, and actions in fostering children's motivation. The paper does not attempt to be a comprehensive review of the broad literature on family background and achievement, but rather is a sampling of some current findings from the field that appear to impinge on motivation.

Parent Involvement and Motivation

Research has shown a clear link between parent involvement and children's success in school. Further, studies have also demonstrated a correlation between parent involvement and children's educational development and subsequent intrinsic academic motivation (Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 1994).

Even if parents are unable to assist their children with a specific subject area or skill, they can still play a vital role by encouraging students' feelings of competence and control and positive attitudes towards academics, according to (. a review of the research literature on families and school motivation by Grolnick, Friendly, and Bellas (2009). This review found that families can have a strong influence on a variety of school outcomes, including the development and maintenance of positive motivation. "[W]hen parents believe in

children's competence and have high expectations for them, provide the resources that children need to feel connected to others, and facilitate a sense of autonomy by supporting children's initiations and problem-solving, children's motivation is most likely to thrive," the authors conclude (p. 295). The researchers note that parents' expectations about how well their children can achieve and their attitudes about the value of the task their children are working on can strongly influence children's motivation.

Ronald Ferguson's "research-based tips for high-achievement parenting" suggest that parents promote reading at home, discuss reading materials with their children in ways that encourage children to enjoy learning, and seek opportunities at home to discuss and apply what children are learning in school, among other activities. Ferguson further recommends that parents set clear and firm rules about homework, television watching, and other daily activities, and that they actively seek out-of-school opportunities and extracurricular activities that reinforce school lessons, encourage exploration and creativity, and develop children's special talents (Ferguson, 2007a).

In other words, parents who are actively involved in their children's education and provide a stimulating learning environment at home can help their children develop feelings of competence, control, curiosity, and positive attitudes about academics, according to various studies.

Researchers emphasize, however, that many factors can hinder parents from providing these kinds of supports. Some parents may be grappling with outside stressors, time and resources constraints, or unfamiliarity with what role they might play. Therefore, parents' involvement and capabilities differ based on their unique contexts (Grolnick, Friendly, & Bellas, 2009). But while resources can limit parents' ability to become involved, that should not be taken to mean that their desire to do so is also limited; research has found that although parents with scarcer resources may be less active in school activities, they can still be entirely aware and supportive of their children's academic progress (Grolnick, Friendly, & Bellas, 2009).

Parents' beliefs and expectations also appear to strongly influence children's motivation. For example, parents who hold high expectations for their children's learning, believe in their children's competence, expose them to new experiences, and encourage curiosity, persistence, and problem-solving can help their children develop an intrinsic motivation to learn. By contrast, parents who are controlling, use rewards and punishments for academic performance, or display negativity or anger about academics can discourage children from developing intrinsic motivation (Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 1994).

Likewise, when parents support autonomy, children are more likely to be intrinsically motivated and engaged in school and have a better ability to self-regulate at school (in other words, to take control of their own behavior and learning). Controlling parents are more likely to encourage extrinsic, rather than intrinsic, motivation in their children (Grolnick, Friendly, & Bellas, 2009). Some parental actions, such as praising children's intelligence rather than their effort and mastery of knowledge and skills, can send a

message that intelligence is a fixed attribute—a belief that can lead children to avoid challenges or fear failure (Dweck, 2010).

Influence of Parents, Teachers, and Peers on Student Engagement

Student motivation is influenced not only by parents, but also to varying degrees by teachers and peers, according to a new study by Ming-Te Wang and Jacquelynne S. Eccles at the University of Michigan (2012). This study examined the relative influence of social support from parents, teachers, and peers on student engagement, as well as the level of student engagement at grades 7, 9, and 11. The researchers measured four different indicators of engagement: school compliance (positive behaviors), participation in extracurricular activities, school identification (interest and enjoyment), and the subjective value of learning (intrinsic motivation). On each of these four measures, student engagement declined on average between grades 7 and 11. Girls reported higher levels of engagement on all four indicators, but also experienced declines in each area as they got older. African American students reported higher levels of school identification and value of learning than their white counterparts but lower levels of compliance with school rules and participation in extracurricular activities.

Most interesting were the effects of parents, teachers, and peers on each factor of engagement. The study found that parent social support was positively correlated with all four indicators and was a stronger predictor than peer support for three of the indicators. Teacher support played an especially important role in slowing declines in compliance, school identification, and value of learning. Social support from peers was more complicated. While students were more likely to participate in extracurricular activities, see value in learning, and identify with school when they had peer support, results for compliance were mixed and depended on the type of peer support and the values espoused by a student's chosen friend group. The researchers concluded that "across all of the behavioral components of school engagement, peers are just as likely to exert positive influences on adolescents as negative influences." (p. 891).

These findings also have important implications for how parents and teachers interact with students. As the researchers note, "the shift in adolescent social priorities toward peer relationships is not as universal as is often assumed to be true. Perceived support from both teachers and parents is an important buffer against the general declines in school engagement found during the secondary school years. [The] results suggest that most adolescents continue to be influenced substantially by their teachers and parents when it comes to school engagement even though they may be tempted into misbehavior outside of the classroom by their peers" (p. 890). Additional findings about the impact of teachers on student motivation are discussed in the fifth paper in this series, which deals with how schools can affect motivation.

Family Background Factors and Motivation

A major goal of the school reform movement for more than a decade has been to close achievement gaps between students from low-income families and their more advantaged peers, and between students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds. These gaps in performance on tests of academic and cognitive skills are apparent by the time children start school and persist as they progress through school (U.S. Department of Education, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2011; Rouse, Brooks-Gunn, & McLanahan, 2005; Timar & Maxwell-Jolly, 2012).

Numerous research and policy studies have explored possible explanations for achievement gaps and ways to narrow them. Studies such as those by Duncan and Magnuson (2005) have concluded that various dimensions of socioeconomic status (SES)—including household income and cumulative wealth, parents' educational attainment and parenting skills, family structure, the quality of the neighborhood, and associated social position and privileges—account for some portion of these achievement gaps. This paper, however, focuses on a much narrower group of studies that address differences between students of different backgrounds that might affect their *motivation*, which in turn is likely to exacerbate achievement gaps.

Gaps among socioeconomic groups in non-cognitive skills, including motivation

Nobel laureate James Heckman, drawing on his own studies and the work of others, has written extensively about gaps between socioeconomically disadvantaged and advantaged students in both cognitive skills and what he calls non-cognitive or "soft skills"—traits that include motivation, the ability to work with others, the ability to focus on tasks, self-regulation, self-esteem, and the ability to defer gratification (Heckman, 2011). Indeed, he maintains, these soft skills are critical to success in school and later life, and their importance is often underrated (Heckman, 2008). Heckman notes that family factors can influence children from as early as when they are in the womb. By the time they enter school, children from socioeconomically disadvantaged families possess lower levels of cognitive and non-cognitive skills and lag far behind their more advantaged peers. Even worse, these gaps have been shown to persist as children age (Heckman 2008; 2011).

Another study by Adena Young and her colleagues found that students from families with high socioeconomic status tend to approach academic challenges with a greater sense of internal control over success than students from lower-SES families (Young et al., 2011).

Socioeconomic factors that may contribute to gaps in non-cognitive skills

Although the causes of gaps in achievement or soft skills are not fully understood, some studies have suggested that differences in parenting practices and social context are contributing factors. Children born into socioeconomically disadvantaged circumstances, particularly single-parent homes, are less likely to benefit from the kinds of parental attention, activities, and resources that stimulate soft skills (McLanahan, 2004). As

summarized by Heckman (2011), disadvantaged mothers, as a group, "talk to their children less and are less likely to read to them daily . . . [they] tend to encourage their children less, adopt harsher parenting styles, and be less engaged with their children's school work" (p. 80).

In other words, children from disadvantaged families tend to have fewer opportunities at home to foster competence, encourage them to find interest or see value in learning, promote autonomous learning, or develop social relationships that support and value achievement.

Family background can also result in contextual differences that may affect achievement and motivation. For example, "middle class families are more likely to raise their children to participate in structured activities that develop talents, and, unlike working class and poor children, these children become much better at interacting with and negotiating societal institutions" (Williams Shanks & Destin, 2009, p. 29). Lastly, parents' own educational and skill levels seem to be a factor in children's development; studies have documented a link between parental education and cognitive development in children as young as three months old (Duncan & Magnuson, 2005).

These research findings do not mean that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are doomed to skill gaps and low academic motivation. These findings are based on group averages, and within the group of low-SES families, there are parents who do provide stimulating home environments. Indeed, research has found that a cognitively stimulating home environment is a more accurate determinant of children's academic motivation than is socioeconomic status. As Gottfried, Fleming & Gottfried (1998) summarized, "home environment continued to significantly and positively predict subsequent academic intrinsic motivation even when SES was controlled" (p. 1456). In other words, there was still a motivational difference based on home environment even for families within the same SES group. So what characterizes such an environment? The researchers define "cognitive stimulation" as exposure to different types of learning materials, activities, and media and "the active pursuit of cognitive stimulation in the home," which fosters "curiosity and exploration," promotes inquisitiveness, and provides opportunities to develop competencies (p. 1457).

Many experts on motivation emphasize that actions to address children's beliefs about learning and foster supportive parenting must begin early and cannot be accomplished by schools alone. A variety of programs have been put in place to help low-SES and minority parents create supportive home environments, share successful strategies, and encourage their children to see academic achievement as a meaningful and realistic part of their group identity. According to Ferguson (2007b), some parenting intervention programs have produced moderately large achievement gains even in rigorous trials.

In summary, family environments are major predictors of young children's cognitive and socioemotional skills, but these outcomes are not predetermined. These environmental factors do, however, create a disadvantage for families who lack the resources to develop

their children's' cognitive and non-cognitive skills before they enter school. Heckman (2011) suggests that the solution to this problem is not to blame parents for their children's skill development, but rather to provide disadvantaged families with the resources to prevent these gaps from forming in the first place.

Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Dimensions

Another body of research looks at racial, ethnic, and cultural dimensions of motivation, although, as Sandra Graham and Cynthia Hudley (2005) have commented, "there is simply not enough of a contemporary empirical literature with ethnic populations on any of the motivational constructs that now dominate the field" (p. 392). In this section, we limit our focus to relatively recent studies of racial, ethnic, and cultural factors that may relate to motivation, leaving aside the much broader literature on racial/ethnic achievement gaps and theories from psychology or sociology about racial/ethnic identity in general.

The available research does suggest that how students see themselves—as well as any particular group to which they belong—in the context of their school and community can influence students' identity formation, values, feelings of competence and relatedness, and goal-setting (Murdock, 2009). Research also suggests that cultural differences in parents' values and behaviors may have an impact on motivation.

Self-image and societal context

Several studies have explored how social and cultural context can have a bearing on students' motivations or aspirations. Based on a review of a variety of studies, Graham and Hudley (2005) identified several historical and cultural forces—including cultural stereotypes and discrimination, the perceptions of others, and a desire to protect their group identity—that have motivational significance for people of color. For example, some researchers assert that experiences with or perceptions of discrimination can damage the confidence of students of color and contribute to academic disengagement. Additionally, students who experience prejudice may adopt a mindset that attributes failure to external reasons beyond their control, as a means of protecting their self-esteem and group identity. This is significant because an external-attribution mindset can undermine the feelings of control and autonomy that are necessary for strong motivation.

Other scholars maintain that social context can lead some children to perceive that certain types of behavior, such as spending time on homework, are pointless and "not for people like me" if they form their identity in a context that provides no example of how academic achievement might be relevant to their personal goals (Oyserman & Destin, 2010, p. 1002). As Tamera Murdock explains, categories—whether racial, ethnic, gender or other—help students define who they are and construct a vision of who they might become. Contexts in which students are able to view academic achievement as a realistic aspect of their group identity and develop positive images of that identity can foster motivation (Murdock, 2009, p. 451).

Other scholars have suggested that "stereotype threat," or a fear that poor performance on tasks may confirm negative racial stereotypes, can undermine the competence of African American students—or any other group faced with a task that can invoke a damaging stereotype. They note that stereotype threat can dampen African American students' competence (and therefore their motivation) by heightening their anxiety, depleting their self-regulation skills, or spurring them to avoid challenges (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Aronson & Steele, 2005). Motivation can also be affected if students view the stereotype as an incentive to work harder than they otherwise would have, or if students purposefully minimize their effort or disengage from school as means of protecting themselves from the stereotype (Graham & Hudley, 2005).

On the other hand, stereotype threat can affect the behavior of some Asian American students who fear that poor performance will disprove a stereotype that they are naturally gifted in academics. Some Asian American students may display failure-avoidance or may experience anxiety and be unable to perform under pressure (Graham & Hudley, 2005). In short, both negative and positive stereotypes may affect how minority students set academic goals, if they set them in accordance with, or in opposition to, perceived stereotypes of their group (Graham & Hudley, 2005, p. 400).

Other researchers have conjectured that a desire to maintain a distinct cultural identity in opposition to the dominant group can negatively affect academic motivation—most notably, when high-achieving African American students are accused by their peers of "acting white" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fryer & Torelli, 2010). But this conclusion has been challenged by researchers who cite evidence that both African American and white students want to succeed in school and that high-achieving students share similar experiences and challenges, regardless of their race (Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005).

Parent values and behaviors among different cultural groups

As discussed earlier in this paper, parent involvement in students' education has been linked not only to higher achievement but also to increased academic motivation. Parenting style in general, like parental involvement, is shaped by background factors and context, as well as the unique values of each parent. Therefore, parenting behavior is different among different populations, and as parents express different values and behaviors, children's motivation is affected differently (Grolnick, Friendly, & Bellas, 2009). Through their parenting choices and actions, parents communicate a set of values and family characteristics to their children; these can affect how children conceive of their own identities, abilities, and goals (Grolnick, Friendly, & Bellas, 2009). Parent opinions and values can also impact children's mindsets about control over academic achievement and their conceptualization of intelligence as something fixed or something one can work to attain (Dweck, 2010). This may explain why children of different cultural backgrounds engage in school differently, as the educational values of their culture are reinforced by their families.

One example comes from a body of research looking at the academic achievement of students who are immigrants or children of immigrants. Researchers have found that the values communicated by immigrant parents to their children may account for differences in motivation. "Communicated parental values about hard work and the importance of a good education appear to be among the most important factors accounting for higher achievement among immigrants and children of immigrants," Graham and Hudley observe (2005, p. 404). Especially for students of Asian and Latino immigrant groups, it appears that higher parental expectations of academic success contribute to increased student motivation. Immigrant parents may also stress values such as hard work and persistence in the face of adversity—traits that were necessary in their immigration experience but also serve to foster motivation in their children. Lastly, immigrant parents who communicate a strong sense of obligation to the family—a feeling of duty to do well and consider one's family rather than just one's self when making decisions—tend to have high-achieving children (Graham, & Hudley, 2005).

Family factors appear to have particular relevance in explaining the high academic achievement of Asian American students as a group. A review of the research literature on the motivation of Asian American students by Eaton and Dembo (1997) found that Asian Americans more often attribute academic outcomes to effort, whereas their white peers more often think academic outcomes are a result of innate ability. This belief in effort over ability leads to higher parental expectations of student academic outcomes, resulting in higher parental pressure and greater fear of academic failure among Asian American students. The desire to meet parental expectations leads to more time spent on homework and academics and less time on leisurely pursuits. This analysis also noted that Asian American parents, on average, have higher academic expectations of their children than do parents of other groups, and that parental pressure and a desire to meet high parental expectations appear to be primary catalysts of motivation among Asian American students. The authors conclude that the research overall suggests that Asian American students focus less on whether or not they are able to complete a task, and more on the importance of completing it and completing it well; they note, however, that this has detrimental effects on underachievers.

A study by Iyengar and Lepper (1999) found that a group of Asian American students who were of Chinese or Japanese background and spoke a language other than English at home performed better on a series of tasks when they were told the tasks had been chosen by their mothers than they did when they chose the tasks for themselves. This was not the case for white students, who were far less motivated and performed worse when personal choice was removed. The researchers concluded that "in particular contexts, individuals from some cultures may actually prefer to have choices made for them by significant others" (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999, pp. 362-363).

Some studies have found racial/ethnic variations in parenting behaviors, such as nurturance, discipline, teaching, and language use. For example, Brooks-Gunn and Markman (2005) observed that African American and Hispanic mothers talked less with their young children than did white mothers and were less likely to read to them daily; they

also found differences in harshness of discipline. These effects were smaller when SES was controlled for but did not disappear altogether. Graham and Hudley (2005) note, however, that research on the relationship between racial/ethnic identity and child-rearing practices has been limited in its ability to draw a strong link between parenting practices and either motivation or achievement and has sometimes portrayed some racial groups in a negative light. A more enlightening avenue of research, according to Graham and Hudley, examines family social and economic contexts and their effects on motivation.

Ferguson notes that disparities in social and material resources—such as disparities in income and accumulated wealth, parents' level of schooling and academic skills, and access to social networks and institutions that control information or can provide assistance—partly explain differences in parenting practices among low-SES parents or among racial/ethnic groups (2007b).

In sum, research suggests that parental background, family context, and family values can play an important role in children's academic motivation. While some differences in these characteristics have been noted among different racial or ethnic groups, socioeconomic status appears to plays at least as important a role in the formation of motivation in children.

What Do These Findings Suggest about the Roles of Parent Involvement, Family Background, and Culture in Student Motivation?

The circumstances in which children are raised and the involvement of their parents in their early education play a role in shaping academic mindset and motivation. Culturally sensitive parent involvement programs that focus on ways to create a stimulating home environment and motivate children to achieve can make a difference. For example, parents can help foster motivation by praising effort, persistence, and mastery of subjects rather than general achievement or intelligence and talent. Reading and talking to children, celebrating their learning with them, and providing opportunities for creative exploration can also encourage factors associated with motivation. Moreover, parents can foster motivation by helping children see academic achievement as a realistic part of their identity, setting realistic but high standards and expectations, and starting all these strategies as early as possible.

While the gaps in early achievement and non-cognitive skills among students of different socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and culture are not inevitable or unchangeable, one should not underestimate the problems many families face. School-based programs for parents, although helpful, cannot be expected to eliminate disparities that have been long in the making. The differences highlighted in this paper speak to the need for broader societal efforts to prevent disparities in background that can have a negative effect on motivation and achievement. These efforts include a range of policies, such as public information campaigns about effective ways to foster children's motivation, culturally

sensitive programs to support parenting skills, and efforts to address poverty and other root causes of achievement gaps.

Finally, our analysis suggests several areas in which additional research would be useful. Examples include research on the racial, ethnic and cultural dimensions of motivation, such as differences in child-rearing practices or cultural context that might affect motivation, and on differences between high-achieving and lower-achieving students within the same racial/ethnic group that might shed light on the relationships among group identity, group stereotyping, and motivation. There is also a scarcity of research on the impact of specific programs to improve motivation that target low-SES or minority families.

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