

Academic Success and Struggle: A Study of Motivation and Literacy in a Sample of Low-Income 7th Graders

Mastering literacy skills is an essential task for children as they proceed through school (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), and reading and writing competence should be well ingrained by the time they reach adolescence. Academic success in middle school and beyond continues to be strongly related to reading and writing ability, but the role of motivation becomes much more central (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Grolnick, Ryan, & Deci, 1991). Adolescents from low-income families face additional challenges due to financial constraints and limited social capital that negatively influence success for students of all ability levels. In this paper, we investigate the influence of motivation and gender on language and literacy achievement of a group of low-income children in middle school.

Data was collected as part of the longitudinal Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development (Snow, 1991). The study was originally designed to investigate precursors of literacy development, and study participants have been followed since they were 3 years old. Our analyses for this paper focus on several types of data collected when children were in 7th grade, including standardized language ability tests, writing samples and interviews. Data collected prior to 7th grade was also used to provide additional context for our results.

Analyses of Home-School Study participants' language and literacy development from preschool through early elementary school have provided a clearer understanding of the mechanisms by which home and school environments influence reading outcomes (see

Dickinson & Tabors, 2000). In their early years, children acquire literacy through development of phonological awareness (Adams, 1990; Scarborough, 1991), having numerous and varied opportunities to engage in extended discourse with parents and teachers (Snow, Tabors, & Dickinson, 2001), and by exposure to new and novel vocabulary words (Tabors, Beals, & Weizman, 2001), to name a few key aspects of literacy acquisition. Young children who have reading difficulties tend to be diagnosed early and are often placed in school programs designed to provide remedial service (often with a strong emphasis on strategies to improve phonological processing by understanding segmentation of words (Blachman, 2000). However, by the time children reach later elementary school, reading difficulties can begin to manifest in more subtle ways as students begin to read less, and with less fluency and comprehension.

In their review of the research on reading motivation, Guthrie and Knowles (2001) describe the tendency for researchers to view motivation as a goal-driven process in which the reader is either intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to read. Readers may seek to read because it is an end in itself, in the enjoyment it provides (Deci, 1992), or because it is a means to an end, such as grades, or rewards (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). Intrinsic motivation has the potential to positively reinforce learning goals, in that the enjoyment and challenge of reading leads to mastery, which is an incentive to continue and expand reading practices. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation may lead to a reliance and undue focus on the reward at the expense of mastery (Meece & Miller, 1999). In addition, interest in reading may be personal or situational, with personal influences more likely to positively influence comprehension (Schiefele, 1992). Readers who are more engaged in the reading process, drawing from a variety of

strategies to understand text, tend to have better comprehension and achievement outcomes (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

Much of the research on reading has not found significant gender differences for young readers (Snow, Barnes, & Griffin, 1998) and the same is true in our early findings from the Home-School Study. However, the literature does suggest gender differences with respect to special education identification, retention, and dropping out, with more boys being identified than girls (U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics, 2000, 2001). We found similar trends in the Home-School Study sample, as well as indications that girls' reading motivation tended to be intrinsic, while boys described being motivated for extrinsic reasons (Porche, Ross, & Snow, in press). Thus, we were particularly interested in examining gender differences related to motivation and achievement as students move through middle school.

We hypothesize that cognitive ability, performance, engagement in school, academic self-esteem, and socio-economic status all contribute to achievement. Secondly, although there is little evidence of gender differences in the literature on early reading and language skills, we hypothesize that a difference does exist because boys and girls are socialized in and motivated towards language activities in different ways, such that girls are expected to do better in language arts and boys are expected to excel in math and science.

Method

Sample. This paper examines literacy motivation and success for a sample of racially and ethnically diverse low-income students (n=54) who have

participated in a longitudinal study of literacy and language development since they were in preschool. To be included in the study, the families of these students had to qualify for Head Start services. Two-thirds of the children identified as White (67%), 21% as African American, 5% Latino, and 7% bi-racial. Twenty-two boys and 32 girls completed the 7th grade testing and interview protocol. The original sample included 83 children who joined the study when they were 3 years old (non-systematic attrition is attributed to families moving out of the area or either the parents or child choosing to end involvement). Thirty-two percent of the children in the full sample came from homes with single mothers and 39% came from homes where the family received AFDC. At the start of the study 54% of the mothers had a high school diploma and the remainder had between 6 and 11 years of formal education. Although none of the mothers had college degrees at the start of the study, several had taken college-level courses at community colleges or enrolled in post-high school training programs. Students attended different schools in the metro Boston area, including public, private and parochial schools. By 7th grade some were still in elementary settings while others were in middle schools. Several students were enrolled in public exam schools.

Procedure. Students were visited at school, where project staff administered standardized literacy assessments, a writing task, and a one-on-one survey that included both forced response and open-ended questions (and was audio-taped and transcribed). Parents had given written consent at the start of the study and again each year prior to school visits (annual visits, with the exception of one year, were made to either the home or school or both).

Quantitative Measures. Literacy assessments and self-reports of motivation, aspirations, and grades