

The Lack of Academic Achievement in the New Family Structure Models

La ausencia del logro académico en los nuevos modelos de estructura de la familia

Recibido: agosto 8 de 2007 | Revisado: marzo 3 de 2008 | Aceptado: mayo 2 de 2008

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ABSTRACT

The following is an article of discussion associated with research whose objective is to present a position about the influence of family structures on student's academic achievement. It includes a review on traditional and present family structure models in the United States, Latin America and especially in Mexico. The article presents the discussion as to how the internal family structure has been transforming due to external changes. This discussion leads us to think that there is a strong co-relation between the family models where students are raised and the level of academic achievement they might obtain throughout their student's life.

Key words authors

New Family Models, Academic Achievement, Family Support, Latin American, Mexican Families, Family Influence.

Key words plus

Academic Achievement, Family Relations.

RESUMEN

El siguiente es un artículo de discusión asociada con investigación cuyo objetivo es presenta una postura sobre la influencia de las estructuras familiares sobre el logro académico de los estudiantes. Incluye una revisión sobre los modelos de estructura familiar tradicionales y actuales en los Estados Unidos, Latinoamérica y especialmente en México. El artículo presenta la discusión sobre como la estructura interna de las familias se ha estado transformando debido a los cambios externos. Esta discusión nos lleva a pensar que hay una estrecha correlación entre los modelos familiares en los cuales crecen los estudiantes y el nivel de logro académico que pueden obtener a lo largo de sus vidas.

Palabras clave autores

Nuevos modelos familiares, logro académico, apoyo familiar, familias mexicanas, influencia familiar.

Palabras clave descriptores

Rendimiento académico, relaciones familiares.

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Introduction

The purpose of the present article is to describe the characteristics of the family structure considering the models that were typical in the past and their evolution according to the social, political and economical movements that took place in Latin America and the United States. Family structures are defined in terms of their internal composition, the number of members that integrate each model and their relationship, the marital status of the parents, and if there is the responsibility of raising of children.

The Latin American family models are described considering the statistical data reported by INEGI which is the National Institute in charge of the Statistics, Geography and Informatics of Mexico's territory; and other international organisms like the United Nations and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. All these statistical data show a general panorama of the past and the present situation of family structures all around the world and these data are later used to come to reflections and conclusions. The United States situation is considered as to new family models that have arisen as a result of the economical, political and social changes that have happened around the world.

Once all of the above has been considered, the article focuses on the discussion as to what types of families support academic achievement and what are their strong and weak points towards their kids' educational development. Not only the educational outcome is considered but also other factors like the economical incomes, the marital status of the parents, and the presence of other relatives in the homes. The bottom line is to present a general panorama of what is expected from families who want to lead kids to academic success.

Educational achievement in México

A family represents a group where individuals gather and have different roles with a specific purpose. People are born and raised within that group, then, they share their sources, affections and un-

doubtedly; they also share problems and conflicts. The National Institute in charge of the Statistics, Geography and Informatics of Mexico's territory, better known as INEGI, reports that the Family's Day was established in 1993 by the United Nations General Assembly to be celebrated on May 15. In Mexico, the National Family Day was established by the President of Mexico in 2006 to be celebrated the first Sunday of March through activities designed to promote family support. It can be said then, that families have a great impact on the social and political tasks.

The data reported by INEGI show that the percentage of educational completion is very low in Mexico. There are differences depending on the gender, age; the state and the size of the state where students live. In 2005, the school dropouts affect more women than men. The population between 15 to 29 years old who did not complete basic education is 29.6% percent in men and 28.9% percent in women. In Mexico City, 38.2% percent of men dropped out their basic studies, against a 30.7% percent of women. As to dropouts at a technical level, men are more affected than women. Regarding academic failure; men represent the highest percent, in elementary, middle school and preparatory levels in all the states; except at the technical level, where the state of Yucatan has more women with academic failure. The educational opportunities vary according to the size of the state where students live: in rural areas (less than 2500 inhabitants) 2 out of 100 women against 3 out of 100 men have reached the professional level; whereas in urban areas (more than 100,000 inhabitants) 18 women against 22 men have reached a professional level. Therefore; if a researcher wants to make comparisons he/she should consider age, gender, geographical area of the data being analyzed.

Origins of new family structure models

In the 90's there is a change in the nuclear biparental families: men stopped being the only providers. Nowadays, in Latin America, especially in Venezuela, Panama, México, Costa Rica, Chile,

Brazil and Bolivia, women have quit the role of full time housewives in almost half of the nuclear bi-parental families in order to become part of the labour market and contribute to their family income. This external change has had a great impact on the internal family structure and its behavior. Although INEGI reports that in Mexico men as the head of the family model still prevails; that is to say, 77 out 100 homes are lead by men; the number of women as head of families has doubled from 2.8 million in 1990, up to 5.7 million in 2005. All of this means that women have to become not only as an economical supplier, but also as a head of the family.

In the Table 1, family structure has changed through time due to social, economical and political movements. The traditional post-war family model used to be the nuclear –biparental with children where men took the role of male breadwinner model and woman took the role of child taker and housewife. This model started to decrease as the XXI Century changes began to influence the family structure. In 1990, the nuclear family represented 46.3% of all types of Latin American families; this percentage went down to 42.8% in 2002. Even though this traditional family model has decreased

in all Latin American countries it still co-exists with other family types classified by Sunkel (2006) which are represented in the following chart:

It can be noticed that the nuclear and uni-personal types of families are childless but still are considered a family as they depend o each other or only on their own. It also shows that in the extended and composed family types, if there are kids, this responsibility is shared with other relatives that live in the same home, in other words, other relatives may take the role of the parent missing as to the education of the kids is concerned. In the family without nucleus is hard to identify the role of the head of the family because they might be at the same level; for instance, in the case of two orphan brothers, the role of each parent should be taken over by one of them so that the family composed by them can get organized. In the case of grandparents living with their grandchildren they will surely take the role of parents or the parent missing. Having said all this, the needs of an individual of security, affection, authority and basic sources should be provided by the members of the family depending on the role each one takes in the family model they belong.

TABLE 1
Latin American Families

Family type	Characteristics	Children
Nuclear-biparental	A legally married couple	Yes
Nuclear-monoparental	One of the parents (mother or father).	Yes
Nuclear	Married couple	No
Extended	Father or mother, or both and other relatives.	with or without children
Composed	Father or mother, or both, with or without relatives, and other non-relatives.	with or without children
Uni-personal	Integrated by only one person.	No
Without nucleus	Those where there is not a marriage or a relation like father/mother-child although there might be other relatives (two brothers, a grandfather and his grandchildren, etc.).	with or without children

Source: Sunkel (2006)

Family structures and academic achievement

Fifty years ago, the United States suffered an economic, cultural, social revolution so that young women started working even after they had children and men continued their labour. For Weaver, Umaña-Taylor, Hans and Malia (2001) American families are more ethnically and racially diverse than ever before that is why family structures vary widely as a result of marital transitions and cultural, social and technological changes that have had an impact on parenthood. According to Stephens, Nicholson and Knoester (2005) many researchers have questioned if family structure really mattered for child and adult outcomes but they have only examined the long term effects of family structure at an early age with outcomes in later life. Theoretically, the authors point out that experiencing a marital transition is stressful and it usually leads to a depression, and this is an immediate effect that deserves to be considered because it is a short-term effect. When a couple undergoes a transition the effects have an impact on the family system, if an adult is added or subtracted from the family, there will be changes in self-identity, roles, and the quality of close relationships. Therefore, transitions require adjustments and new means of dealing with challenges which have implications for the well-being of every family member, in the Table 2.

Parke (2003) presents other types of families that are nowadays common in the United States which are integrated in the chart below.

One can notice that all these models involve the raising of children. If one of the parents is missing; families tend to have disadvantages in several ways. In the case of never married mothers, they seem to be younger with a lower socioeconomic and educational level; children living in a single-parent home are more likely to experience health problems, accidents, injuries and poisonings, a child born to an unmarried mother is less likely to complete high school than a child whose mother is married. For the average Hispanic child, the risk of dropping out school was 25% in a two-parent family and 49% in a single- or step-family. Consequently, it would be advantageous to check those children who are under this category to avoid future negative effects in different aspects of their lives.

Children of widowed parents do the best of all categories of children of single parents. Research indicates that children of widowed mothers are about half as likely to drop out of high school or have a teen birth as children of divorce or children born outside of marriage. It seems that there is a lack of conflict and more stability, the widow or widower manages to handle all decisions and becomes the head of the family and the only one that makes decisions as to children's education, behavior, life style, etc. plus there is the advantage that

TABLE 2
American Family Models

Family type	Characteristics	Children
Divorced	Mother or father	Yes
Widowed	Mother or father passed away.	Yes
Never married mother	Single mother	Yes
Cohabiting-parent families	Homes in which two adult partners of the opposite sex live together but are not married.	Yes
Step-families	Step mother or father.	Yes
Same sex couples	Two women or two men.	Yes

Source: Parke (2003)

children can easily accept the fact that the death of their parent was beyond their control.

Cohabiting-parent families: homes in which two adult partners of the opposite sex live together but are not married. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2002 reports that in 1996 nearly 3.3 million children were living in cohabitating families. Researchers who have analyzed this situation conclude that in comparison to married couples, cohabitating families are qualitatively different. Although having two caretakers, parental resources are less than in a married couple; teenagers of single unmarried mothers are similar to teens living with cohabitating step-parents except that teens of cohabitating parents have lower grade point averages and higher levels of delinquency (Stephens et al., 2005). This cohabitating family model is more common among couples with low levels of education. The jury is still out on this matter; for Parke (2003) school achievement and behavioral problems are similar among children living with both biological parents, regardless of marital status.

As to step-families; half of marriages are projected to end in divorce, 60% of which have children and many of these couples re-marry, it is estimated that that in 2003 one third of all children may live with a step-parent. Despite their better economic circumstances on average, children in step-families face many of the same risks as children of never-married or divorced parents. They are more likely to have negative behavior, health and educational outcomes; in consequence, step-families are a greater risk of dissolution than other marriages; about 60% of step-families get divorced.

In the case of same-sex couples, since many children raised by gay or lesbian have undergone the divorce of their parents, researchers have considered the most appropriate comparison group to be children of heterosexual divorced parents. It can be deduced that children of gay and lesbian parents do not look different from children raised in heterosexual divorced families regarding school performance, behavior problems, emotional problems, early pregnancy, or difficulty finding employments.

It seems that the panorama gets darker for those families that are out of the traditional nuclear biparental model. On one hand, Gruber (in Pollak & Ginther, 2003) found that unilateral divorce has a negative and significant effect on children's educational attainment. Ling (2002) does not favor single-parent families; the author argues that children raised by single parents suffer short-long term negative outcomes including the educational achievement. That is to say, children who live with single parents will have a disadvantageous situation in several aspects of their lives like, the lack of company, security, etc. over children who live with non-conflict parents.

On the other hand, to Demuth and Brown (2004) children whose parents have high-conflict marriages are less well-adjusted than children living with happily married parents. Besides, the 1995 National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (in Demuth & Brown, 2004) reports that in the United States one third of all children are born to unmarried mothers and one half of children will spend some time in a single parent family. Besides, Stephens et al. (2005) argues that divorce almost always means that one parent will be leaving the established home which can be stressful and upsetting to a child of any age. Hence, if there is a change, a separation in the family structure, children will go through changes in the educational, social and behavioral area.

Families that promote academic achievement

Families play an important role on student's academic achievement. According to Prelow and Loukas (in Saracho, 2007) supportive relationships including positive encouragement from parents contribute to school achievement. Parents are a key element for their children in several aspects of their lives. In other words; if there is parental support and behavioral control students are more likely to have a higher social and academic achievement and fewer problem behaviors (Bean, Barber & Crane, 2006). As a result, the more supervision a child gets from his/her parents, the

more chances he/she will have to get a better educational attainment.

It seems that the traditional nuclear family model has some advantages as to its essential role in education. According to Parke (2003) children raised in other types of families are more likely to achieve lower educational levels; in general, children do best when raised by two married, biological parents who have low-conflict relationships. It is not the marriage itself, the author calls it the "selection effect" where two individuals who married and stay married and are committed to loyalty and future orientation for children. Accordingly, their mutual commitment will be spread to their children's well-being in different areas of their lives: their home comfort, their school achievement, their relation with siblings, their health conditions, etc.

Pollak and Ginther (2003) also support the previous statement by saying that on average, children that are raised in traditional nuclear families have substantially better educational outcomes than stepchildren from stable blended families. Additionally, Stephens et al. (2005) insists on the importance of two parents suggesting that the best situation for children is when two parents are happily married to each other, because a happy family environment will make children happy. In other words, bi-parental families are more likely to strengthen the parent-child relationship to prevent school failure because they both can supervise their children's behavior and give them access to resources and materials which will help children to achieve academic success and later on to be able to get access to a professional labor market.

Conclusions

The family is a crucial institution that provides the individual with the tools he/she needs to face life and reality, if a family is well structured, individuals will be able to reflect this well-being into academic achievement and good behavior.

The educational attainment was considered not only in Mexico but also in Latin America and the United States because these areas are close together and have an influence on the surrounding areas. Also, when considering statistical data, age, gender and geographical area where students live was considered, so that the reader could judge the situation illustrated in this reflection.

It seems a little surprising all the changes that family has gone at a world wide level as it has been illustrated in this article. The political, economical and social contexts play an important role in the population's decisions, life style and behavior. If everything is continuous change families are not the exception because women have reacted to the economical situation by becoming part of the labor market. When women started being economically independent the divorced rate raised and the bi-parental family structure model started to decrease.

Once born, the individual becomes part of certain type of family structure, and he/she has to fill out his/her necessities for affection, security, and basic sources, even though his/her parents are not present, these roles have to be taken by other members of the family where they belong.

If one of the parents is missing there have to be adjustments that might have a negative impact on the child's stability and well-being, and may be reflected on his/her behavior and consequently on his/her educational achievement. It would be advisable to check those children who belong to this category in order to design social programs that can help the single parent situation.

Children of widowed parents do the best in all categories of single parents. It can be said that the lack of conflict between parents helps children gain stability and the fact of accepting death as a fact of life helps them gain confidence in their later life, rather than guilt that children usually feel when one of the parents leave home.

On the other hand, it can be inferred that children of step-families and children raised within same-sex couples have the same problems regarding school performance, behavior problems, early pregnancy, etc. In short, when there is a se-

paration of one of the member of the family, or a substitution, children will usually go through negative changes on their education attainment and social behavior, among other aspects of their lives. Children of a single parent have a disadvantageous situation in several aspects of their lives like, the lack of company, security, etc. over children who live with non-conflict parents.

Children who live in a bi-parental model usually have more supervision from their parents and this is reflected on their educational achievement and social behavior. The more commitment of the married couple, the more positive life style their children will have, independently from the couple's marital status. The main characteristic of a good family is not marriage itself, but commitment among the members, loyalty, respect for rules, and overall, the idea of taking care of each other's necessities and communicating their hopes and dreams.

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