

The Role of Parental Support in the Home Environment and  
Student Academic Achievement

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to examine differences in the family culture and the effects it has on student academic achievement, as measured by teachers' perceptions of high, moderate and low academic achievement. The study used the students' perceptions of the home environment for families coupled with teacher assessment of student achievement for children in the fifth grade. The study attempted to examine relationships between home environment factors and academic achievement for fifth graders.

The study involved students from the Medford Middle School. Three teachers were involved in the distribution, collection and the analysis of student achievement for the fifty-seven students completing surveys.

The results revealed some relationships between the home environment factors and student academic achievement. Implications for the study include: providing family intervention programs through parent education, implementing classroom strategies

through teacher education and advanced study for home environment and the impact it has on academic achievement.

## CHAPTER 1

### *Introduction*

Children are our future. Some people hear and believe the words of Whitney Houston, "Treat them well, and let them lead the way." Words written by many prominent literaries tell us we are not treating the children of our nation very well at all. Our culture continues to reveal a "moral free fall" (Dobson, 1999).

The home environments for children continue to change. Changes in the family culture affect the home environment. Studies (Baharudin & Luster, 1998; Featherstone & Cundick, 1992; Watkins, 1997) have shown that the home environment affects the academic achievement in children. Many people are raising children and looking to others for answers, whether it is day care centers, schools, evangelists, counselors, or the government. Shifting the blame for children's problems and decreasing parental responsibilities are becoming a societal norm. Traditionalists view these shifts as clear signs that we have lost our moral compass; that our society is doomed if we do not find our way back to what are called family values ("Decline and Fall," 1997).

Change in the home environment affects many aspects of family life. Establishing a daily routine is difficult in a hurried generation. Monitoring out-of-school activities has decreased for latchkey children. The socioeconomic status (SES) of parents, their education, and the contacts they make with the schools affect how they encourage children's development and progress in school. The amount of parent interest and time directly affect the amount of reading, writing, and discussion between family members. The way families share their time together, the amount of support given, parenting styles, and the emphasis on learning, seem to be changing.

The purpose of this study is to examine fifth grade students' perceptions of home environment factors relative to teachers' perceptions of academic achievement. Family environment factors were selected from literature on emerging family styles.

Hopefully, the study will assist in better understanding home environment factors that affect school achievement as well as create school community interventions to offset the negative effects of changing dynamics of the family.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Literature Review*

#### ***Introduction***

This chapter will focus on the current literature as it pertains to changing factors in the family culture. This study will concentrate on poverty, single parents, working mothers and the home environment. The literature review will focus on the impact these variables have on student academic success.

The Center for Families and the Cooperative Extension Service compiled data depicting a sad picture for the treatment of today's American children. Many people believe we are the leading nation in everything. We are the leaders in the military and in higher levels of education, but this is not true for most child-related issues. In fact, among industrialized nations, the U.S. is one of the lowest when it concerns priorities for our children. The citizens of our nation seem to be confused as to who has responsibility for the well being of our children (University of Purdue, 1996).

The government is thought to have the responsibility ("Remembering Latchkey," 1999). The article stated federal funds are currently organizing after-school programs for 380,000 children. Some governments in industrialized nations are increasing compensation for childcare and education. This compensation, however, may have long-term effects on decreasing parental responsibilities.

Orlich (1994) suggest that parents have the responsibility. However, the Education Digest also reported less than seven percent of U.S. households consist of a working father, a mother, and two or more children, compared to 60 percent in 1955. Central parental values ("Decline and Fall," 1997) are commitment, duty, and responsibility. The

commitment involves the realization that marriages are often imperfect, and they take hard work. Traditional family values support that parental duty is to put their own wants behind the needs of the family, and the job of a parent includes taking on the responsibility of raising their children rather than some social agency.

### ***Changes in Society***

#### *Poverty and children.*

Of all the poor in the United States, 40 percent are children. Poor children have a dropout rate three times greater than that of more affluent children (Orlich, 1994). Not only are children the poorest citizens in our country, they are also the poorest children in the industrialized world (Lindquist, 1995).

Peak (1995) states that some of the children that are lucky enough to have a home, live in housing projects. The projects tend to be high in stress, violence and crime. They also have cramped living conditions and poor community resources, which in fact, are not conducive to a quality-learning environment. Many of these children simply come to school because they believe it to be a safe haven from the streets. They also know they will be warm in the winter and get a hot meal. Learning could be last on their list of reasons to come to school, if in fact, it even made the list.

Unbelievably, the above-mentioned children can also be considered lucky. Kozol (1991) retold a situation where the cafeteria of a school was in the basement. This basement would flood with sewage two to three times a week. He also cited a case where the only natural light the children saw within their school was from a hole in the wall. Peak and Kozol would agree with the Center for Families and the Cooperative Extension Service (Purdue University, 1996) when they talk about children living in poverty. Their

perceptions of poverty do not mean they cannot buy the latest style of Nikes on the market or eat at McDonald's on a whim. There are a striking number of children in this country who are not being given the basic needs for human survival.

Even though Wallis (1998) suggests that you cannot purchase a child's success or wish it into existence, poverty affects a child's academic success in many ways.

Baskerville (1991) tells us, "A U.S. Department of Education study cites the length of time a child spends in disadvantaged conditions, coupled with the degree of poverty of the local school district he or she is enrolled in, as often bearing a direct impact on a child's ability to maintain an expected grade level" (p.1).

*Single-parent families.*

Methods and results of an empirical study (Hines, 1997) show divorce is the most common but only one way a traditional family might develop into a single-parent family. Registered marriages are declining in the United States, but separations and divorces remain very high. Half of all marriages are expected to end in divorce. Then again, not all people who separate actually file for divorce. A more representative statistic might be, approximately 64% of the marriages will be disrupted.

Whether the reason is divorce or something else Orlich (1994) reminds us that 50% of the country's children will live in a single-parent home by the year 2001. An article by Schwartz (1992) cited the National Center for Health Statistics, and reported the lack of a second parent put children at a higher risk for poor academic achievement. Children from divorced families are more likely to have difficulties with school performance, delinquency, and disruptions in peer relationships, precocious sexual behavior and substance abuse (Hines, 1997). McLanahan (1996) compares children from

a two-parent home versus children from a single-parent home as being more likely to drop out of school, less likely to ever-complete college, and more likely to become single parents themselves.

Sandefur (1995) talks about the importance of spending quality time with children. Common sense tells us that single parents have less time to spend with their children. The responsibilities are overwhelming. They are accountable for the entire family income, maintaining a home, nutrition needs and child rearing.

*Families with working mothers.*

The influx of women to the workforce is another reason for less time spent with children. Naomi Freundlich (1997) reported a whopping 50% of the workforce is comprised of women and 55% of all women contribute more than half of their family's income. Finding a balance for fulfilling traditional family roles of housekeeper and caregiver and attaining traditional success symbols of money and power is becoming increasingly difficult.

Many women are devastated with the conflict of working versus child rearing. Fifty million mothers worry about placing their children in daycare, according to the national Institute of Child Health and Human Development ("Quality time counts," 1998).

Whatever losses the children endure, from a working mother of a low-income family, are compensated for by the added paycheck. Therefore, the negative impact of working mothers may be limited to the middle class (Hawley, Rosenholtz, Goodstein, & Hasselbring, 1984). The consequences of "trying to do it all" are not only felt in the heart of the family, but also in the job performance and within the self.

### ***Importance of Home Environment***

Several studies (Baharudin, 1998; Gerris & Dekovic 1997; Harris & Liebert 1987; Hines 1997) show the role of the family and the specific interactions between a child and parent have been determined to be powerful indicators of development. Some specific interactions include regular family discussions, encouragement, limit setting, warmth, daily routine, praise, and intellectual stimulation. These studies have shown all of these connections to produce an impact on academic achievement.

Children have an unbelievable thirst for knowledge. If parents do not tap into that drive in early childhood it could be lost before the children even enter the school system. The parents that do not foster learning are easily identified. It is truly amazing how little children mention their parents. Parents' encouragement to achieve and interest in school performance are significantly related to student motivation and student achievement (Hawley et al., 1984). Hawley cited Walberg when he found:

What might be called "the curriculum of the home" predicts academic learning twice as well as the socioeconomic status of families. This curriculum includes informed parent/child conversations about everyday events, encouragement and discussion of leisure reading, monitoring and joint analysis of televiewing; deferral of immediate gratification is to accomplish long-term goals, expressions of even occasional doses of caprice and serendipity. In 29 controlled studies conducted during the past decade, 91% of the comparisons favored children in programs designed to improve the learning environment of the home over children not participating in such programs. Although the average effect was twice that of socioeconomic status, some programs had effects 10 times as large.

Because few of the programs lasted more than a semester, the potential exists for even greater benefits from programs sustained over all the years of schooling.

(p.400)

Rosenblatt (1990) spoke about the importance of taking time for children and playing with them. He quoted Nietzsche when he said that there is nothing so serious as a child at play. The decision parents make to either thrust themselves into their children's worlds of amusement or allow them to be unsupervised will make a profound impact on the children's life.

The most vulnerable and dangerous time for children is between 3:00 PM and 8:00 PM. This period is known as "Crime Time". Many people would love to think their children would never be involved in something like a violent crime. They may not be the perpetrators but they very well could be the victims. Victims outnumber perpetrators 10 to 1 (Alter, 1998).

Walberg, Bole & Waxman (1980) declare the importance for families to share interests in hobbies, activities and games. Reading material should be abundant and discussed on regular intervals. The study states that cultural activities and parental involvement show a significant relationship to academic achievement. Some cultural activities include going to the museum, zoo or public library. It does not take money to be enthralled by culture.

### *School Success Strategies*

Watkins (1997) theorized that parents' involvement has made an impact on a child's learning and motivation. The study looked at various types of involvement including home instruction, volunteering in the classroom and participation in school governance. His comments on achievement goal theory were particularly interesting.

Achievement goal theory looks at how children view the reasons for learning and the purpose of education. A child having a mastery goal orientation focuses on learning more than performing, and a child having a performance goal orientation is concerned more with the evaluation they receive than acquisition of skills.

Students with a mastery goal seem to have more persistence and a higher intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, performance goal students appear to have greater difficulty with deep information processing.

There were separate scales used in this study for mastery orientation and performance orientation. Some questions asked about encouraging hard work, talking about what's going on in school and reading with children.

Many authors (Harris & Gibbon, 1996; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001; Jameson, 1997; Wallis & Cole, 1998) discuss factors in a home environment that provide children with educational tools needed to achieve academic success. Jameson (1997) specifies the importance of a quiet time and place for homework. There was also a discussion on the negative impact of television, but the positive impact of praise. Harris & Gibbon (1996) state communication is a vital component for school success. Parents who prepare their children talk about setbacks, possible stressors and coping skills. Wallis (1998) wrote a parent's guide on the importance of encouraging, praising and involvement.

Hofferth & Sandberg (2001) did a study on how American children spend their time. The authors were careful not to try and determine causality, but rather examine some activities significantly associated with achievement. This article has shown that the amount of time spent at home eating, sleeping and reading is linked to children's achievement and behavior. (p. 11) Other activities thought to affect academic success were: household work, household conversations, group leisure activities, and family meals.

Individual differences in children's achievement were studied by Baharudin & Luster (1998) relative to differences in the home environment. They found the quality of the children's home environment to be positively related with achievement. Children with higher test scores came from more supportive homes. The parents of preschool children were asked about conveying positive feelings, answering child's questions, taking trips to the museum, eating meals as a family, requiring the child to keep play area clean, conversing with the child, and encouraging the child to develop and sustain hobbies.

The literature suggests home environment factors affect school achievement, and home environment factors may be influenced if the family culture follows the current trend. The essence of a 'traditional American family' has deteriorated with the stress in many of today's families because of poverty, single parenting styles and working mothers. Stress in the home deteriorates the environment and these stressors affect school achievement. Hopefully, this study will help to examine home environment factors that may impact children's academic achievement.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Methodology*

#### ***Results***

The purpose of this study is to examine fifth grade students' perceptions of family environment factors relative to teachers' perceptions of academic achievement. Factors relating to the home environment were selected from literature on emerging family styles.

#### ***Subjects***

The study was conducted in Medford, WI School District. Medford is a small town of nearly 5,500 people. It is the county seat for Taylor County. The largest employers are Medford Memorial Hospital, Marathon Cheese, Tombstone Pizza, Weather Shield Windows and Hurd Windows whose products are marketed nationally. Farming is also an important industry to this small, rural, Midwest community. The community has limited cultural diversity.

Medford Area Public Schools has two elementary buildings, one middle school, and one high school. It is the 84th largest (student enrollment) school district in the state of Wisconsin (426 districts) and serves approximately 450 square miles. Fifth grade students in the Medford School District were the participants for this descriptive study. Students were grouped according to their scheduled math class. Three math classes received surveys. The participants were approximately 12 years old. Surveys were distributed to 57 out of 69 students. Two parents chose not to participate, four children did not return the consent forms, and four were absent. Males and females were surveyed.

Approval to conduct the study was granted by the district administrator of the school district and the building principal. The researcher sent an email to the district administrator describing the study and at his suggestion the school board was made aware of the researcher's educational status and this study. The surveys and the consent letter were approved by: the principal, district administrator and parents.

At the end of the school year, a consent form (see Appendix A) was mailed to the parents of students in three math classes. The teacher kept a record of students returning signed permission slips. A survey (see Appendix B) addressing perceptions of the home environment was handed out to the students with permission to participate. It was necessary to give the survey at the end of the year so the classroom teacher could have time to assess the academic abilities of the students. As the completed surveys were handed in, the teacher marked the surveys with their perception of the students' low, moderate or high academic achievement. An L was used to designate the low academic achieving child, an M for a moderate achiever, and an H for the high achiever.

### ***Instrumentation***

The researcher developed the survey instrument utilized in this study. It contains approximately 20 questions using a five point Likert scale response format. Questions represent family environment factors affecting school performance. Students were asked to respond to statements regarding their perceptions of interactions with parents in the home environment ranging from never (1) to always (5). Questions relating to the home environment were derived from recent literature on factors that seem to have an impact on academic achievement.

Piaget once stated the perceptions of children's interactions with other people was best indicated through responses of children older than 11 years of age. These perceptions are thought to be as accurate as any other self – report (Fallon and Bowles, 1997).

### ***Procedure***

Students and teachers involved in the survey were identified. Approval to conduct the survey was received from school administrators. Parent consent forms were distributed and collected. The classroom teacher handed out surveys to the students who had returned signed consent forms. As the surveys were handed back to the teacher, the teacher assessed academic achievement of students ranking them in low, moderate, and high categories. The researcher collected the survey results and student achievement rankings from teachers. Mean scores were computed on each of the survey items and examined relative to teacher perceptions of low, moderate and high achievement. Results were reported followed by a summary, implications and recommendations.

### ***Limitations***

The survey was researcher developed and had face validity. The sample was limited to one school district.

Teacher perceptions of student achievement may not be a sufficient method of determining the academic achievement of children. Social biases may be present and perceptions are not a discrete measure.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Survey Results*

Student surveys were separated by teachers' perceptions of low, moderate and high achievement. Each group's mean score was computed for the 20 student survey questions. Table 4.1 shows a comparison of mean scores and the teachers' perceptions of students' low, moderate or high academic achievement.

Predictions based on the findings of home environment factors and the possible impact they have on academic achievement were not revealed in some mean scores. Relative to academic achievement rankings, students' mean scores showed a difference of only 0.1 or 0.2 for items numbered 5, 7, 13 and 15. Questions 4, 8, 10, 11, 12, 18, and 19 revealed a difference of 0.3 or 0.4 between mean scores. Reasons for these results could be due to the limitations of this study.

Some items from the survey reveal mean scores of moderate and high achievers to be similar. Results from the survey allow the moderate and high achievers to be grouped together and to compare them to the low achievers. Low achievers scored item number 3, "My parents talk about me going onto school after high school" much lower than their moderate and high achieving counterparts. They also believe their parents do not enforce consequences when rules are not followed (item 14). Compared to moderate and high achievers, low achievers think their parents do not want to know where they are going or what time they will return home (item 16). This possible lack of concern could support the low score given to item 20, "I feel I am an important part of my family".

The largest difference in the survey is seen in item 17. Low achieving students gave a mean score of 2.7 as to whether their opinions were important within the family. Moderate and high achieving students scored this item with a 3.7.

Item number 1 shows everyone is expected to do chores and it does not matter whether they are low, moderate or high achievers. Moderate achievers, however, perceive their parents as setting expectations on a time and place to do homework more than low or high achieving students.

Table 4.1

## Responses of Student's Surveys on Home Environment

Survey Question	Mean		
	Low Achievers	Moderate Achievers	High Achievers
1. I am expected to do chores every week.	4.2	3.6	4.1
2. I have a set time and place to do my homework.	1.8	2.7	2.3
3. My parents talk about me going onto school after high school.	2.2	2.8	2.9
4. My family eats in the same place and at the same time.	3.0	3.4	3.4
5. My mom and dad are home when I am home.	3.3	3.5	3.3
6. My family has hobbies we do together (skiing, biking, hunting).	3.0	3.1	3.5
7. My family discusses what we read.	2.0	2.1	2.0
8. I go to museums, zoos or libraries.	2.7	3.1	2.8
9. I talk to my parents about things I learn in school.	3.5	3.6	3.0
10. I talk to my parents about problems I have at school.	2.6	3.0	2.8
11. My parents encourage me to do my best in school.	4.2	4.6	4.2
12. My parents praise me or tell me I do a good job.	3.8	4.1	4.0
13. I can only watch television for an hour a day.	2.4	2.3	2.5

Table 4.1 - continued

## Responses of Student's Surveys on Home Environment

Survey Question	Mean		
	Low Achievers	Moderate Achievers	High Achievers
14. My parents enforce consequences when I don't follow the rules.	2.8	3.4	3.6
15. My family talks about the television programs we watch.	2.6	2.5	2.4
16. My parents want to know where I'm going and when I'll be back.	3.6	4.4	4.5
17. I think my opinions are important in our family.	2.7	3.7	3.7
18. My parents listen when I want to talk to them.	3.5	3.8	3.9
19. When I'm home, it is important to ask questions about things I don't understand.	3.4	3.7	3.8
20. I feel I am an important part of my family.	3.5	4.2	4.2

The results suggest that some home environment factors cited in the literature may have a positive or negative impact on children's academic achievement. Students perceived to be moderate and high achievers had higher mean scores on:

- 14. My parents enforce consequences when I don't follow the rules.
- 16. My parents want to know where I'm going and when I'll be back.
- 17. I think my opinions are important in our family.
- 20. I feel I am an important part of my family.

It is unclear from this study how the other home environment factors affect children's academic achievement.

## CHAPTER 5

### *Summary*

The idea of the traditional, American family has changed dramatically in the last 30 years. Family cultural change is inevitable, and it affects the development of children. We are beginning to understand how poverty, single parent families, working mothers and home environmental factors affect children's academic achievement. Hopefully, we can go beyond understanding and move into an action stage. There needs to be decisions made as to how we can offset negative effects of this change in our families.

This study suggests that following through with consequences, knowing the whereabouts of children, respecting opinions and feeling important in the family are home environment factors that may positively impact student academic achievement.

Parents could offset the impact of home environment factors on student academic achievement. They might create consistency and stability in the home by enforcing limits. Parents and children could communicate and let each other know where they will be and when they will be home again. Affective listening and conversations about various aspects of life might allow families to become closer where everyone feels a sense of worth and importance through mutual respect.

Schools might consider programs and activities to minimize the negative effects of these home environment factors. Schools could reap the benefits of additional studies if administration and government advocate education and action. Counselors, teachers, secretaries and janitors will view effects of changing families. Each of them will make individual decisions of how to serve our children's social and learning needs.

Community agencies and employers could be another vital component to addressing the negative effects of changing family environments. Employers may wish to judge a person's performance by the ability to complete tasks rather than the number of hours spent in the office. Area businesses could support after school programs and on site day cares. Simply knowing the impact their policies can have on our children can make a difference.

Federal funds are providing after school programs. Congress is giving approximately 2 million dollars to Boys & Girls club. Grants are being issued to schools to start before and after school programs with tutoring, nutritional benefits and daily activities. Perhaps the future will allow us to follow a pattern of other Western industrialized nations where child allowances are given or child care is heavily subsidized.

Responsibility lies with all of us when it concerns the well being of this nation's children. Academic achievement can be affected by home environment factors. Minimizing the effects of negative family factors is a shared responsibility of the schools, government, and community.

### ***Recommendations***

Further study might be done on home environment factors and the impact they have on student academic achievement. A replication of this study could be done using standardized test scores or other measures of student academic achievement in addition to teachers' perceptions for identifying student academic achievement. These measures would then provide an opportunity for sophisticated data analysis among school achievement and family environmental factors.

A longitudinal study involving more schools and families across the nation would allow for comparisons of the effects of changing families over time relative to student achievement. Results from such studies will help to identify home environment factors that may change school achievement for all students.

A recommendation is to develop programs for teachers and student services personnel that would sensitize them to the impact of home environment factors on student academic achievement. Teachers may target home environment factors in the classroom by using strategies involving self worth. Student services personnel may become more involved with character education and providing family intervention programs through parent education. A greater understanding of home environment factors that affect school achievement will help all children in their academic achievement.

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*Appendix A*

Dear Parents,

May 8, 2001

Your child has the opportunity to be involved in a study about academic success. In addition to being your child's teacher, I am also a student at UW-Stout. I am asking permission to have your child participate in a survey.

All students are kept completely anonymous. Their names will not be put anywhere on the surveys or in the research paper. The first survey will have multiple choice questions asking things about their age, if they have televisions at home and if mom works outside the home. The second survey will ask them to rate activities from zero to five. The activities center around time spent outside of school. Some questions could ask about television watching, talking with family members, or eating meals together.

If you have any questions please call me at school, 748-2516 or at home, 748-0921. Please sign the attached form indicating whether or not you have agreed to have your child help me out with this project and return it by May 16<sup>th</sup>.

Mr. Penn has approved this letter. Thank you very much for your time and support.

Sincerely,

Tina Dietzman

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, my child may answer these anonymous questions.

\_\_\_\_\_ No, my child cannot participate.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Note: Questions or concerns about participation in the research or subsequent complaints should be addressed to the researcher or the researcher advisor and second to Dr. Ted Knous, Chair, UW-Stout Menomonie, WI, 54751, phone (715)-232-1126.

*Appendix B*

Circle one number for each item. Use the rating scale at the top of the page. Please respond to every statement. There are no right or wrong answers. I am only interested in your personal opinion. Please notice there are two sides to this survey.

Never	Hardly Ever	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
1	2	3	4	5

1. I am expected to do chores every week. 1 2 3 4 5
2. I have a set time and place to do my homework. 1 2 3 4 5
3. My parents talk about me going onto school after high school. 1 2 3 4 5
4. My family eats in the same place and at the same time. 1 2 3 4 5
5. My mom or dad is home when I am home. 1 2 3 4 5
6. My family has hobbies we do together (skiing, biking, hunting). 1 2 3 4 5
7. My family discusses what we read. 1 2 3 4 5
8. I go to museums, zoos or libraries. 1 2 3 4 5
9. I talk to my parents about things I learn in school. 1 2 3 4 5
10. I talk to my parents about problems I have at school. 1 2 3 4 5
11. My parents encourage me to do my best in school. 1 2 3 4 5
12. My parents praise me or tell me I do a good job. 1 2 3 4 5
13. I can only watch television for an hour a day. 1 2 3 4 5
14. My parents enforce consequences when I don't follow the rules. 1 2 3 4 5
15. My family talks about the television programs we watch. 1 2 3 4 5
16. My parents want to know where I'm going and when I'll be back. 1 2 3 4 5
17. I think my opinions are important in our family. 1 2 3 4 5
18. My parents listen when I want to talk to them. 1 2 3 4 5

19. When I'm home, it is important to ask questions about things I don't understand.

1 2 3 4 5

20. I feel I am an important part of my family.

1 2 3 4 5