

# Encyclopedia of Diversity in Education

## Parental Human Capital and Education

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Parental human capital—usually defined by social scientists in terms of educational attainment, income, occupational prestige, and/or wealth—is inextricably linked to children's educational outcomes. There is no debate as to whether greater levels of parental human capital are linked to more favorable outcomes for children; rather, researchers examine the magnitude of the effects and the mechanisms through which parents transmit advantages or disadvantages to their children.

Empirical studies in modern sociology are usually traced back to the status attainment literature pioneered by Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan in their classic book, *The American Occupational Structure*. Soon thereafter, the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study was developed to examine the lasting effects of parental human capital for children. Although these early studies set the benchmark for understanding the link between parental human capital and educational attainment, they were not designed to explore differences by gender, race, ethnicity, or immigrant status. Early qualitative social scientists often examined disadvantaged [p. 1645 ↓] families. In the 1960s, these researchers asked whether growing up in poverty led to coping mechanisms or cultural values that kept the next generation in poverty. In his study of Puerto Rican families, Oscar Lewis argued that families develop a culture of poverty to survive the harsh realities of economic hardship. Paul Willis's *Learning to Labor* and Jay MacLeod's *Ain't No Makin' It* also claimed that parents' socioeconomic status is transmitted to their children via cultural norms.

There are several proposed mechanisms through which parental human capital affects children's education. First, some researchers have investigated how educational aspirations account for the intergenerational transfer of human capital. Beginning with status attainment research, studies show a positive correlation between parental education and aspirations for their children, which affects children's aspirations and, subsequently, educational attainment. Other studies examine the material resources provided by parental human capital—books and computers, classes outside of school, and other experiences that promote cultural capital. Pierre Bourdieu argued that the upper class distinguish themselves by developing tastes in culture and music that are not by themselves associated with labor market skills, but nonetheless help transfer

advantage intergenerationally. More recently, Annette Lareau extended this argument to include material culture. Finally, some researchers posit that parents of high socioeconomic status are likely to live in advantaged neighborhoods and, therefore, send their children to resource-rich schools with other advantaged children. Thus, neighborhoods and peers may link parental human capital to children's educational attainment.

More recent studies have complicated the relationship between parental human capital and children's educational outcomes with respect to immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities. For instance, although Asian American parents have, on average, higher levels of education, that advantage alone cannot account for the higher educational outcomes of their children. Because most Asian American parents are immigrants (previously severe restrictions against Asian immigration were relaxed with the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act in 1965), some researchers have argued this may result from selection. Kao and Tienda called this the "immigrant optimism" hypothesis and, more recently, researchers refer to this as the immigrant paradox.

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*See also*

- [Assimilation, Segmented](#)
- [Cultural Capital](#)
- [Families and Schools](#)
- [Immigration and Education](#)
- [Race and Education](#)
- [Social Capital](#)

Further Readings

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