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Environmental and Individual Influences on Australian Students' Likelihood of Staying in School

KEVIN MARJORIBANKS

*Graduate School of Education
University of Adelaide, Australia*

ABSTRACT. In this longitudinal study, the author examined environmental and individual influences on the likelihood of Australian adolescents staying in school. Participants were 6,778 Anglo Australian, 350 Asian, and 472 European students (mean age = 14.7 years) who were in Year 9 when the study began. The analyses indicated that adolescents from middle social status backgrounds and Asian families were more likely to stay in school than were those from lower social status backgrounds and Anglo Australian families; academic self-concept, achievement, perceptions of environments, and aspirations had a large independent association with staying in school; and there were significant differences in relationships among the aforementioned variables for adolescents from different ethnic groups and among those who decided to stay in or drop out of school.

Key words: educational aspirations, family background, individual characteristics, proximal learning settings, staying in school

RUMBERGER AND THOMAS (2000) asserted that research has indicated "conclusively that students who drop out of school suffer from a host of negative consequences, ranging from high unemployment and low earnings to poor health and increased criminal activity" (p. 40). Although such negative effects from dropping out of school have been demonstrated, researchers still have no clear understanding of those individual and social factors that influence students' decision to stay in school (see Carbonaro, 1999; Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998; McNeal, 1997, 1999).

Kao and Tienda (1998) observed, for example, that investigators have not examined how students from different ethnic groups respond to the *blocked opportunities* that they may confront in schools. That is, opportunities for some minority group students may, for example, be blocked by acts of discrimination

Address correspondence to Kevin Marjoribanks, Graduate School of Education, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia 5005. Kevin.marjoribanks@adelaide.edu.au (e-mail).

in schools, by the placement of students into unfavorable academic tracks on the basis of group membership rather than academic potential, and by students' family experiences that indicate that for older siblings school achievement has not been rewarded by successful occupational attainment. The authors proposed that blocked opportunities are related to two theoretically distinct reactions. First, students from an ethnic group may overcompensate by overachieving academically. Second, students faced with blocked opportunities may underperform in school if they become skeptical about the value of educational success as a means of upward mobility (also see Ogbu, 1993, 1999). Similarly, Zhou (1997) concluded that children of immigrant groups approach school with varying strategies. These strategies include using the social capital of extended families and communities for assistance in being successful (for which *social capital* refers to those relationships that facilitate individuals' gaining access to economic, human, and cultural resources), rejecting the norms of the larger society and resisting the culture of schooling, and giving up the struggle at school and dropping out.

In this study, I examined relationships among individual characteristics, proximal learning environments, aspirations, and the likelihood that adolescents from different social status and ethnic backgrounds decide to stay in school. The investigation was guided by the theoretical model of human development proposed by Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) and Ceci, Rosenblum, de Bruyn, and Lee (1997). In their bioecological framework, Bronfenbrenner and Ceci suggest that to explain variations in developmental outcomes, one must understand relationships among distal family contexts, individual characteristics, proximal learning settings, and measures of those outcomes. They proposed the following:

The form, power, content, and directions of the proximal processes affecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person, of the environment—both immediate and more remote—in which the processes are taking place, and the nature of the developmental outcome under consideration. (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994, p. 572)

Ceci et al. (1997) emphasized the nature of the relationship between family background and developmental outcomes, stating that "the efficacy of a proximal process is determined to a large degree by the distal environmental resources. Proximal processes are the engines that actually drive the outcome but only if the distal resources can be imported into the process to make it effective" (p. 311). (*Proximal processes* include parent-child and child-child interactions that are related to children's school outcomes; *distal* resources refer to the stability and consistency of families, which allow proximal processes to have their maximum influence on outcomes.) In addition, the bioecological model suggests that measures of individual characteristics and proximal settings mediate the effects of distal family contexts on outcomes. As Baron and Kenny (1986) indicated, variables function as mediators to the extent that they account for the relationships between predictors and outcomes.