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# Encyclopedia of Adolescence

With 47 Figures and 74 Tables

*Editor*

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## Academic Achievement: Contextual Influences

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Academic achievement subsumes a number of indicators to measure cognitive gains and progression through the US educational system. Regardless of the operationalization, the link between academic achievement and later life prospects is well established in the extant literature. Adolescents who earn poorer grades in school are more likely to be retained in grade, to fall behind in credit accrual, and to earn lower achievement test scores, all of which are associated with lower high school completion rates and higher dropout rates (Battin-Pearson et al. 2000; Stearns et al. 2007). High school dropouts, in turn, have lower household incomes, lower occupational status, difficulty finding and maintaining employment, higher incarceration rates, and greater health issues, all of which cost society in terms of lost tax revenue and increased reliance on governmental social services (Rumberger 2001). Although academic achievement is strongly associated with cognitive ability and motivation (Eccles et al. 2003), a comprehensive understanding of adolescents' academic achievement must take into account how the ecological contexts in which adolescents are embedded promote or inhibit their academic achievement.

### Academic Achievement in Context

There is a growing recognition among developmentalists that environmental contexts, such as families, schools, and peers, affect numerous developmental domains, including academic achievement (Chung and Steinberg 2006; Cook et al. 2002). Ecological theory provides one lens for exploring the interactions between the

individual and both distal and more proximal ecological contexts, interactions that ultimately drive adolescent development, including academic achievement (Bronfenbrenner 1979). During adolescence, the most common proximal contexts in individuals' lives are families, schools, and peers (Steinberg and Morris 2001). The structures of these environments as well as the interactions that occur therein can either promote or inhibit adolescents' academic achievement.

An exploration of adolescents' academic achievement must also be situated in an understanding of the larger stratification systems in the US, stratification reflected in the achievement gap between low-income and more affluent youth as well as the gap between African-American and Latino youth as compared to their White and Asian-American peers (Farkas 2003). Although a more distal factor, the sociohistorical context in which adolescents develop, including existing stratification systems in the US generally and in the American educational system more specifically, shapes educational opportunities and academic prospects. As such, a comprehensive understanding of adolescents' academic achievement must entail understanding the larger stratification systems as well as the more proximal contexts of adolescents' development.

### Stratification and Academic Achievement

The achievement gap between African-American and Latino students and their White and Asian-American peers is well established, as is the achievement gap between poor and non-poor youth in the US. National statistics show that African-American youth are most likely to have been retained in grade before ninth grade (16%), followed by Latino (11%) and White (8%) students. Poor students' retention rates (23%) are almost five times that of non-poor students (5%). Moreover, the achievement divide between these demographic groups only widens across time. Dropout rates for Asian-American (3%) and White (6%)

students are relatively low compared to those of African-American (12%) and Latino students (20%), and the dropout rates of low-income youth are approximately five times that of high-income youth (NCES 2009).

Research further metes out the gaps reflected in overall national trends. In comparing standardized achievement test scores for the various race/ethnic groups, research consistently documents the achievement divide (Anderson and Keith 1997; Caldas and Bankston 1997; Lee 2007). These differences are observed across content areas (i.e., English/language arts, writing, mathematics, science, history) and widen from early to late adolescence (Gregory and Weinstein 2004). The race/ethnic achievement gap is also observed for adolescents' grades in school (Fuligni 1997; Lohman et al. 2007) and their dropout status (Lee and Burkam 2003). Consistent with research on the achievement gap across race/ethnic groups, an achievement gap between low-income and high-income youth is also observed for achievement test scores (Blair et al. 1999; Caldas and Bankston 1997), and the proportion of life spent in poverty is associated with lower reading comprehension achievement test scores during adolescence (Eamon 2005). A more detailed discussion of the effects of household socioeconomic status (including not only income but also family structure and educational and occupational status) as a structural characteristic of families is discussed in greater detail below.

### **Academic Achievement and the Family Context**

Numerous studies have explored the link between the structural characteristics of families and adolescents' academic achievement, with the vast majority focusing on various facets of family socioeconomic status (SES). Higher family SES, as measured by parental educational and occupational status and income, is associated with higher achievement test scores (Felner et al. 1995; Gregory and Weinstein 2004; Lee 2007). Moreover, higher-SES adolescents earn higher grades in school (Fuligni 1997; Lohman et al. 2007; Stewart 2008) and are less likely to drop out of school (Lee and Burkam 2003). More extensive reviews of the poverty literature (see Bradley and Corwyn 2002; McLoyd 1998) detail the pernicious effects of being poor or low-SES for adolescents' academic achievement measured

in a number of ways (i.e., achievement test scores, class failure, retention in grade, graduation rates, dropout rates). In addition to SES, family structure is also associated with adolescents' academic achievement – adolescents reared in single-parent headed households earn lower achievement test scores (Caldas and Bankston 1997; Lee 2007) and lower grades in school (Lohman et al. 2007; Stewart 2008), are less likely to complete high school, and are more likely to drop out of school (Rumberger 1987) than those reared in intact, two-parent families.

In addition to the influence of familial structural characteristics, the processes that occur within families also influence adolescents' academic achievement. Parents' support for academics, discussions around academics, and provision of educational enrichment in the home are associated with better academic performance, in terms of adolescents' achievement test scores and grades in school (Eamon 2005; Steinberg et al. 1992; Woolley and Grogan-Kaylor 2006). Parents' direct involvement in their adolescents' schools, via activities such as open house attendance, parent-teacher association participation, and classroom volunteering, are positively associated with higher test scores and grades (Gutman and Eccles 1999; Park and Bauer 2002; Shumow and Miller 2001). In their meta-analysis of middle-school-aged adolescents' parental involvement, Hill and Tyson (2009) found that academic socialization practices (e.g., discussions around academics, fostering educational aspirations) were more effective in promoting academic achievement than home-based supports or school-based involvement, findings consistent with an earlier meta-analysis of secondary students residing in urban areas (Jeynes 2007).

In addition to direct involvement in their children's education, other processes within the home also play a role in adolescents' academic success. For example, adolescents who believe their parents are warm and supportive tend to earn higher grades in school (Bean et al. 2003; Benner and Kim 2010; LeCroy and Krysik 2008), have higher achievement test scores (Portes 1999), and show greater growth in achievement test scores across adolescence (Gregory and Weinstein 2004). In contrast, adolescents who report greater emotional distance between themselves and their parents as well as those who report higher levels of conflict and harsh discipline often earn lower grades and score more

poorly on standardized achievement tests (Benner and Kim 2010; Crosnoe 2004; Dotterer et al. 2008; Gutman and Eccles 1999). Parents' behavioral control of their adolescents, in terms of monitoring adolescents' activities, is positively associated with higher achievement test scores (Blair et al. 1999; Gregory and Weinstein 2004) and grades (Bean et al. 2003), although the influence of parental monitoring has been found to vary across race/ethnic groups.

In addition to these individual indicators of family processes and interactions, scholars have also examined multiple aspects of parenting simultaneously to identify parenting profiles or typologies, generally focusing on parental warmth and control (see Baumrind 1971; Maccoby and Martin 1983). Studies examining the link between parenting profiles and adolescents' academic achievement find that youth whose parents employ authoritative parenting (high warmth combined with high levels of control) earn higher grades and better achievement test scores than those whose parents employ other parenting styles, although again, some differences emerge across race/ethnic groups (Fletcher et al. 1999; Jeynes 2007; Steinberg et al. 1992). For example, it appears that White and Latino adolescents benefit more academically from authoritative parents than African-American and Asian-American adolescents.

Overall, this body of research suggests that family characteristics, particularly those directly related to economic well-being, influence the academic achievement of adolescents. However, the processes that occur within families can promote stronger achievement – adolescents benefit academically when they have families who are involved in the educational process and who provide warmth and support but also appropriate monitoring of adolescents' day-to-day lives.

### Academic Achievement and the School Context

The school is another primary context of socialization during adolescence, and the relationship between school structural characteristics and adolescents' performance is well established. Adolescents in high-poverty schools (generally measured by the percentage of students qualifying for the federal school lunch program) and schools with high percentages of race/ethnic minority students generally experience more academic difficulties than their peers attending more

affluent schools and schools with fewer race/ethnic minority students (Benner and Graham 2009; Caldas and Bankston 1997; Lee and Croninger 1994; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2004). Although not as consistent, in general greater school diversity is associated with higher grades in school and stronger educational attainment (Borman et al. 2004; Goza and Ryabov 2009). Additionally, adolescents enrolled in large schools tend to perform more poorly on standardized tests and exhibit less growth in achievement across time (Lee et al. 1997), earn lower grades in school (Benner and Graham 2009), and have higher dropout rates (Baker et al. 2001; Lee and Burkam 2003) than students attending smaller schools. Similar academic difficulties emerge for adolescents in schools with higher student-to-teacher ratios (Baker et al. 2001; McNeal 1997).

Tracking systems are another structural characteristics of many American middle and high schools. Tracking, whether it emerges de facto or as a more systemic practice, "places students who appear to have similar educational needs and abilities into separate classes and programs of instruction" (Oakes 1987, p. 131). Higher socioeconomic diversity and race/ethnic diversity are associated with more pronounced de facto tracking in mathematics and English courses in American schools (Lucas and Berends 2002), and in general, research suggests that track placement serves to only promote and reinforce existing academic inequalities, with African-American and Latino adolescents and low-income adolescents being placed in the "lower" tracks at substantially higher rates than their White, Asian-American, and more affluent peers (Oakes 2005). Not surprisingly, adolescents' track placement has a significant influence on changes in their academic achievement across time, such that placement in higher tracks (i.e., honors, advanced) promotes greater achievement than placement in lower tracks (i.e., very basic, basic; Hallinan 1994; Oakes 2005). The structure of tracking systems also influences adolescents' achievement – when there is immobility within tracking systems (i.e., little movement of students changing academic tracks across time), a greater achievement gap in achievement test scores exists between tracks, whereas high levels of inclusiveness in a tracking system (i.e., proportion of students in a college-preparatory curriculum) are associated with a smaller gap in achievement across tracks (Gamoran 1992).

School transitions, normative experiences that occur when adolescents enter middle or junior high school and high school, involve a shift in both the structural characteristics of the schools adolescents attend and the relationships and interactions that occur within and across the school contexts. As such, it is not surprising that school transitions are influential for adolescents' academic achievement. Initial research posited that the academic challenges experienced in early adolescence were due to the developmental transition into adolescence, but Simmons and Blyth's (1987) groundbreaking work illustrated that the transition to middle school was a driving force in explaining early adolescents' academic declines. Subsequent research has corroborated these initial findings, documenting substantial declines in both grades and teacher-rated academic performance from elementary to middle school (Gutman and Midgley 2000; Rudolph et al. 2001). Although less is known about the transition to high school, scholars identify similar achievement disruptions across the high school transition (Barber and Olsen 2004; Reyes et al. 1994). Research suggests that the declines observed across the high school transition persist across the first 2 years of high school and are particularly disruptive for incongruent African-American and Latino adolescents who transition to high school with few same-ethnicity peers (Benner and Graham 2009).

Interactions that occur within schools, beyond the changes in those interactions observed across school transitions, also influence adolescents' academic achievement. Interactions specifically around academics, beyond the obvious instructional activities, promote academic achievement during adolescence. For example, when adolescents believe their teachers have high regard for them as students, they earn higher grades in school (Roeser and Eccles 1998), consistent with the extensive teacher expectancies literature that highlights a strong link between teachers' educational expectations for students and students' academic achievement (Gill and Reynolds 1999; Muller et al. 1999; Smith et al. 1998). Although teacher opinions about particular students can influence academic achievement, teachers' overall views of the academic caliber of students in their schools are also linked to adolescents' academic success. For example, teachers' general ratings of the achievement orientation of the student body are associated with adolescents' reading

and math achievement test scores as well as their grades in school (Brand et al. 2008).

In addition to interactions and processes directly tied to academics, the emotional connections within schools are also important for adolescents' academic achievement. When adolescents feel closer to their teachers and express more positive perceptions about student-teacher relationships, adolescents exhibit stronger academic achievement, in terms of achievement test score growth, grades in school, and dropout status (Crosnoe 2004; Gregory and Weinstein 2004; Lee and Burkam 2003; Woolley and Grogan-Kaylor 2006), although interestingly, *teacher* perceptions of the student-teacher relationship are not predictive of adolescents' achievement (Brand et al. 2008). Similar trends are observed for more general ratings of school climate – adolescents who view their schools more favorably and feel more connected to their schools receive higher grades (LeCroy and Krysik 2008; Stewart 2008; Zand and Thomson 2005) and earn higher scores on achievement tests (Eamon 2005) than those who view their schools more negatively. Perceptions of specific aspects of the school climate are also important for adolescents' academic success. For example, adolescents who report more positive evaluations of their schools' interracial climates have better academic achievement (Mattison and Aber 2007). Similarly, perceptions of school safety also promote academic performance – when adolescents are in schools that they perceive as more safe or that their teachers rate as more safe, they perform better on achievement tests (Brand et al. 2008; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2004) and are less likely to drop out of school (Rumberger 1995). Adolescents also perform better academically when in schools where teachers rate the student body as less disruptive (Brand et al. 2008).

Overall, the patterns of influence observed in the school context closely mirror those observed at the family level. The structural characteristics of schools, particularly the SES and racial/ethnic make-up of schools, are directly related to adolescents' academic achievement. Yet this body of research suggests that the processes and interactions that occur within schools can promote the academic achievement of all students, with adolescents benefitting from close bonds with their teachers specifically and their schools more generally.

## Academic Achievement and the Peer Context

Although research linking the structural characteristics of peer/friendship groups to academic achievement is more rare, evidence suggests that these characteristics do in fact play a role in adolescents' achievement. For example, adolescents with higher-SES peers generally earn higher grades and are more likely to complete high school than those with lower SES peers, although these effects are often race/ethnic dependent (Goza and Ryabov 2009). The academic achievement of an adolescents' peer group is also linked to their own academic achievement. Whether examining reciprocated friendships or larger peer networks, the grades of those with whom adolescents are closest are positively associated with adolescents' own grades in school (Altermatt and Pomerantz 2005; Mounts and Steinberg 1995; Ryan 2001). Similarly, when adolescents are embedded in highly dense networks of high achieving peers, they have the highest achievement levels, whereas adolescents embedded in highly dense networks of low-achieving peers have the worst achievement (Maroulis and Gomez 2008). Related to this, adolescents who have more friends who have dropped out of school have a greater likelihood of later dropping out themselves (Ream and Rumberger 2008).

In addition to the structural characteristics of peer groups and friendship groups, the quality and support adolescents receive from these significant others also influences their academic achievement. Not surprisingly, when adolescents' peers are achievement oriented and provide academic support, adolescents typically earn higher grades in school (Herman 2009; LeCroy and Krysik 2008; Steinberg et al. 1992; Stewart 2008; Wentzel et al. 2004) and have a lower likelihood of later school dropout (Ream and Rumberger 2008). More generally, associating with prosocial peers is linked to higher grades in school (Wentzel et al. 2004), whereas having more deviant and disruptive peers is associated with poorer school performance during adolescence (Berndt and Keefe 1995; Fuligni et al. 2001). Feeling accepted by peers, whether measured as a reciprocated friendship or by more general ratings of support and acceptance, is positively associated with adolescents' academic achievement (Hartup 1996; Wentzel et al. 2004; Wentzel and Caldwell 1997). Victimization by peers, in contrast, is associated with

poorer school performance (Graham et al. 2006; Juvonen et al. 2000).

The link between peer processes and achievement has received particular attention from scholars examining oppositional identity and the "burden of acting white" for African-American adolescents (Fordham and Ogbu 1986). Fordham and Ogbu argued that the underachievement of African-American adolescents is linked, in part, to a peer culture that devalues academic effort and achievement, labeling it "acting white." A number of studies have challenged the theses of Fordham and Ogbu, acknowledging that although adolescents of color may experience peers' accusations of acting White, these accusations do not influence adolescents' subsequent academic achievement (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Bergin and Cooks 2002). Moreover, Tyson and colleagues (2005) identify not only racialized peer pressure with African-American adolescents, but also class-based peer pressure with White adolescents, where lower-income White adolescents equate academic achievement with acting "high and mighty" (p. 598).

Overall, although the research linking adolescents' peer groups to their academic achievement is more scarce, a clear pattern emerges. When adolescents have friends who perform better in school, are more oriented to school, and provide more academic support, adolescents benefit academically. In addition to the academic characteristics of peers and academically based interactions, more general emotional support and friendship quality also seemingly promote academic success during adolescence, whereas rejection and victimization by peers is detrimental to adolescents' academic well-being.

## Future Directions of the Adolescent Academic Achievement Literature

Across the primary contexts of adolescents' development – families, schools, and peer groups – a consistent pattern of findings links both the structural characteristics of each context and the processes and interactions that occur therein with adolescents' academic achievement. When contexts are characterized by more resources and less social marginalization, adolescents perform better academically. Moreover, warm, academics-oriented relationships within each context promote academic achievement and educational growth. Although these patterns are clear, much is left to

explore in relation to adolescents' academic achievement, and ecological theory serves as an important guide for future inquiry.

First, ecological theory suggests a fundamental interplay between the structural characteristics of a given ecological context and the processes that occur within that context, yet researchers sometimes conflate structure and process and create models that do not differentiate between the two. Future research on adolescents' academic achievement should examine how the structural characteristics of families, schools, and peer groups influence the processes and interactions that occur within these contexts (see Benner et al. 2008 for an example). Investigation of the differential effects of structure and process will provide insights into what aspects of contexts are more amenable and malleable to change in order to better promote adolescents' academic success.

A second area ripe for future inquiry relates to the interplay across the ecological contexts of adolescence. The contexts of adolescents' development do not exist within a vacuum – parents attend activities at their children's schools, teachers promote academic involvement and support in homes, peers interact both within and outside the confines of school. These cross-context interactions, as well as the consistency in relations across contexts, influence adolescent development, yet researchers have, with few exceptions, ignored these mesosystemic influences. Those scholars who have explored cross-system interactions have highlighted the importance of these for adolescents' academic achievement. For example, Crosnoe (2004) found that close relations to parents were associated with higher grades in school when adolescents also attended schools with more positive student–teacher bonds. Similarly, Gregory and Weinstein (2004) found that monitoring and regulation by parents and teachers exerted an additive effect for adolescents' mathematics achievement. Future research should further explore the additive (and possibly compensatory) nature of relationships across ecological contexts as well as the extent to which the structural characteristics of a given context might influence cross-context interactions. It is through understanding these more nuanced processes and interactions that we will be able to more effectively promote the academic achievement of all adolescents.

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