Issues in Education
Relationships Between Housing, Neighborhood, Parenting Attitudes, and Perception of Self-competence of Preschoolers: A Pilot Study
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The physical and social environment supports family functioning and children's personal growth (Bartlett, 1997a; Kaufman, 1996; Sprague, 1991; Stone, 1993). The human ecological framework guided the development of the research questions, survey, and interpretation of findings in this project. The framework theorizes that individuals, especially children, adapt to and influence the social and economic conditions within the household and surrounding community; well-being is influenced by the physical, social, and economic environments in which the family is embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Garbarino, Kostelnky, & Dubrow, 1991; Klein & White, 1996). Many researchers use the human ecological framework to model neighborhood effects on children (c.f. Bogenschneider, 1996; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Garbarino, Kostelnky, & Dubrow, 1991; Klein & White, 1996; McKinney, Abrams, Terry, & Lerner, 1994).

"Good housing can facilitate positive family functioning and child development, just as bad housing can be an impediment" (Bevington & Chawla, 1998, p.34). However, families with few economic resources are limited in their ability to purchase suitable housing, and they are unlikely to reside in neighborhoods with abundant social services, the best schools, and well-equipped playgrounds (McLanahan, 1984; 1989; Spain, 1990). Unsafe, crowded housing and frequent moves put children at risk for poor developmental outcomes and low educational attainment (Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1997; Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996). The concentration of low-resource households in racially and economically segregated neighborhoods creates a limited "geography of opportunity" for parents and children (Galster & Killen, 1995; Jargowsky, 1997; Saegert & Winkel, 1998).

This project includes measures of multiple levels of environments and interactions between housing, neighborhood, and community contexts as well as psychosocial characteristics of the parent and family as well as characteristics of the neighborhood and its social network (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

According to the U.S. Census (1996; 1997), more than half a million children (23.7%) under six years of age live in poverty. In Louisiana, the state with the third highest rate of poverty for households with children, over 110,000 children under the age of six live in poverty (Louisiana Data Population Center, 2000). In this paper, we will summarize a pilot study of 13 African


activists and planners may want to reconsider the importance of investments in child-centered play areas. Improvements in child-centered play areas and efforts to improve perceptions of safety might increase the number of social interactions, increase attachment to the neighborhood, and encourage the development of social capital.

Mothers who feel they have control over their housing are more empathetic toward the needs of their children. However, there is a negative relationship between the mothers’ perception of control over her housing and her perception that the home provides stimulation for her children. Perhaps mothers with low control over their housing perceive that their homes provide an inappropriate amount of stimulation for their children.

The lack of relationships between measures of personal control, parenting attitudes, housing and neighborhood characteristics, and children’s perception of self-competence is striking. We need to identify a wider range of factors that may influence the development of young children’s self-competence. We continue to attempt to unravel the nature of the relationships between levels of the built and social environment and pursue questions regarding parenting and the development of children’s self-competence in families in impoverished neighborhoods. Further research is needed to thoroughly explore the relationships between neighborhood play areas, parenting attitudes, housing and neighborhood satisfaction, and children’s perception of self-competence. This research is needed to develop recommendations for the educators and policy makers who work to encourage social capital among parents and promote the perception of self-competence among children (Bronfenbrenner & Weiss, 1983).

References


values less that 1: Personal control and empathy ($r = .522$, $p \leq 0.09$); Personal control and stimulation in the home ($r = -.563$, $p \leq .043$); Stimulation in the home and empathy ($r = -.742$, $p \leq 0.09$); Neighborhood play areas and safety ($r = .539$, $p \leq 0.057$); Neighborhood play areas and neighborhood satisfaction ($r = .821$, $p \leq .001$); Neighborhood play areas and housing satisfaction ($r = .889$, $p \leq .001$).

Discussion

The pilot study sample is very small therefore the results are not generalizable. However, several findings highlight the need for further investigation. The preliminary findings provide little support for the occurrence of many interactions between systems as defined by the human ecological theoretical framework. Our subjects report more significant relationships within than between levels of the ecological systems.

The lack of family and/or friends in the neighborhood suggests few informal networks in close proximity. The majority of parents feel their children are safe inside the home; however, only 39% feel that the neighborhood is safe for children. They also report few friends in the neighborhood. It appears the families are isolated in their homes; they are not building social capital within the home and neighborhood contexts. Perhaps these mothers and children are too isolated to be influenced by neighborhood effects (Tigges, Browne, & Green, 1998).

On the other hand, the relationships between good neighborhood play areas with the perception of safety and satisfaction are significant. The variables measuring home safety, overall satisfaction with the housing unit as a place for children to grow, and overall satisfaction with the neighborhood as a place for children to develop are

None of the mothers were dissatisfied with the overall size of their housing unit and the quality of the schools. On global indicators of housing satisfaction, 3 were dissatisfied with the housing unit as a place for children to grow, 2 were neutral, 5 were satisfied, and 2 were very satisfied. The majority of mothers reported that their children had places to play (62%), could be noisy (78%), could make a mess (54%), and had privacy inside their home (78%). The majority (70%) also reported that their children had a place they could call their own and their home provided stimulation for the children (78%). Eleven (85%) of the mothers reported that they feel safe inside their home.

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When asked to rate overall satisfaction with the neighborhood as a place for children to grow, three were dissatisfied, two were neutral, six were satisfied, and two were very satisfied. Eight mothers wanted to move if given the opportunity. Four mothers (31%) agreed that the neighborhood provided lots of opportunities for children; four mothers (31%) agreed that the neighborhood had good play areas. Five mothers (39%) agreed that the neighborhood was a safe place for children.

The parenting attitudes about childrearing had the following means for the four subscales: Inappropriate expectations (-4.00), empathy (-5.08), corporal punishment (-1.08), and role reversal (-69). The means for the subscales of perception of self-competence is as follows: Cognitive competence (3.14), physical competence (3.13), peer acceptance (3.17), and maternal acceptance (3.12).

Social Capital

The majority of respondents know between 4 to 8 people by sight in the neighborhood; 2 have close friends in the neighborhood. Seven mothers strongly disagree or disagree that “there are lots of children in the neighborhood for my children to play with.” Nine mothers strongly disagree or disagree that they frequently have children over to play in their home.

Correlations between the following variables indicated significance at p-
had less than a high school education, 8 have a high school degree, and 3 have some college education. Three (23.1%) were married with the spouse present in the home. Another mother was married, however, the spouse did not reside in the same household. Three mothers were divorced, one was separated, and five had never married.

The objective and subjective indicators suggested low levels of economic well being. The median household income was $8,899, and 6 of the 13 (46%) of mothers worried “all of the time” that household income was not enough to meet family expenses. Three of the mothers (23%) received Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. Although ten mothers were single parents, none received child support.

Housing and Neighborhood Characteristics

None of the families reported going without adequate housing within the past year. Five families owned their unit; five were renting their own unit and three currently lived rent free with another family. Seven families lived in single-family units, 3 in a duplex, triplex or townhouse, and 3 lived in apartments. Number of rooms ranged from two to six; median number of rooms was 4.5 and the median number of baths was 1.5. Two households received housing assistance; three have doubled-up with family or friends in the past.

None of the mothers were dissatisfied with the overall size of their housing unit and the quality of the schools. They were also satisfied with the proximity to grocery, friends and relatives, and the Head Start center. On global indicators of housing satisfaction, 3 were

Graduate students administered the Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance (Harter & Pike, 1983) to the children. Data from parents was from self-administered surveys. Self-competence of the children was measured with the Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance questionnaire (Harter & Pike, 1983). The scale measured children’s perception of self-competence in four areas: physical competence, cognitive competence, peer acceptance, and maternal acceptance. In this study, the cognitive and physical competence sub scales were combined and the maternal and peer acceptance sub scales were combined to demonstrate the perception of competence and social acceptance, respectively.

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Interested parents were asked to complete a self-administered survey and complete a consent form if they agreed to have their child tested during class time. The Your Home, Your Neighborhood, and Your Child survey was designed to measure individual and family characteristics, housing and neighborhood attributes and satisfaction, and parenting attitudes among low-resource parents. The survey collected data to measure family characteristics, and interactions between the neighborhood and its social networks.

individual aspects of their housing and neighborhood. We paid particular attention to characteristics that related to children, such as satisfaction with play areas and playmates. Parenting attitudes were measured with the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (Bavolek, 1984). The scale measured parenting attitudes in four areas: role reversal, corporal punishment, inappropriate expectations, and empathetic awareness.

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Analysis

The small size of the pilot study (N=13) limited the level of statistical analysis. We used descriptive statistics to summarize the sample, as well as the housing and neighborhood contexts. We examined a correlation matrix to identify relationships between environmental influences, parenting attitudes, and children’s perception of self-competence.

Findings

Family Characteristics

The mean age of the African American mothers was 33.5 years; 11 (85%) of mothers were employed; several worked more than one job. The mean family size was 3.6; the representative configuration was a mother and two children. Three mothers reported that someone other than a family member resided in the household. Two mothers
organizations, family behaviors and well-being, housing and neighborhood characteristics and satisfaction, human and social capital development, and parenting attitudes. As researchers we had a collaborative relationship with the administrators of the Head Start Centers in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. We interacted with mothers at parent meetings and by greeting them at the entrance to the Centers. Except for our relationships there was little incentive for parents to participate in a research study. The descriptive findings suggested the participants are better educated than the overall population of Head Start parents suggesting that educated parents were more likely to participate in the research project.

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An important aspect of this study was locus of control within the housing and neighborhood environment. "It is precisely the parents’ control over the home environment that gives them the freedom to raise their children according to their own values and beliefs, which find material expression in the home" (Barlett, 1997a, p. 172-3). The Leford Test of Tenant Locus of Control (LeBrasseur, Blackford, & Whissell, 1988) measured the parents’ perception of control over their home. Parents evaluated satisfaction with many

Researchers in early childhood indicate it is vital to foster perceptions of self-competence at an early age, since it has positive ramifications in all areas of development and influences positive perceptions of self-competence at later ages (Harter, Hubbard, Coie, 1994; McAddo, 1985; Parker & Ashe, 1987). The development of perception of self-competence is influenced by a number of variables such as: the child’s age, cognitive maturity, developmentally appropriate practices, and parenting attitudes (Broughton, 1978; Gottschalk, 1993; Harter & Pike, 1984; Jambunathan, Burts, & Pierce, 1999; Jambunathan & Hurlbut, 1998). However, more research focusing on the influence of environmental factors on the perception of self-competence is needed.
Perceived self-competence refers to feelings of confidence that are earned through the successful accomplishment of tasks (Harter, 1983). Young children’s perception of self-competence is multidimensional. There are four defined dimensions that are developed during the preschool years: cognitive competence, physical competence, maternal acceptance, and peer acceptance (Harter, 1983).

estimated at 567,388 (Louisiana Data Population Center, 2000; Louisiana Department of Economic Development, 1998). In 1998, the overall poverty rate for the United States was 13.2%. The poverty rate in the state of Louisiana between 1996 and 1998 was 18.6%; only the District of Columbia and New Mexico had higher poverty rates than Louisiana. In East Baton Rouge Parish, 32.2% of the population is below the poverty line (Louisiana Population Data Center at Louisiana State University, 1997). The state poverty rate for Louisiana children under the age of 5 years was 33.8%. In other words, more than 110,000 preschoolers in Louisiana live below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Louisiana is primarily a rural state, with a few urban areas serving as centers for the provision of human services. Baton Rouge, as an urban center and the state capital, offers more services and employment opportunities than more rural parts of the state. The unemployment rate in East Baton Rouge Parish (county) is 4% compared to 6.7% across the state. The unemployment rate among females is 6.6% within the Baton Rouge metropolitan area compared to 7.3% across the state (Louisiana Department of Economic Development, 1998). In the Baton Rouge metropolitan area, 38% of the householders are Black, and 28% of family households are headed by a female (Center for Business & Economic Research, 2000). The median household income is $26,921 in Baton Rouge compared to $28,742 across the state (LEAP Center for Business and Economic Development, 2000).

The families in this study resided within three zip code areas: 70802, 70805, and 70814. The social economics within these neighborhoods were below the state and parish averages: 80% of the residents were Black, 43% had less than a high school diploma, 45% of females were unemployed or not in the labor force, and median household income was $5,790.

Method

Data Collection

This is a summary of the pilot of a larger research project of families with children enrolled in Head Start programs in East Baton Rouge, Louisiana. We collected information to describe the children’s perception of self-competence, community activism, resources, and participation in community groups and
variables: child’s age, cognitive maturity, developmentally appropriate practices, and parenting attitudes (Broughton, 1978; Gottschalk, 1993; Harter & Pike, 1984; Jambunathan, Barts, & Pierce, 1999; Jambunathan & Hurlbut, 1998). However, more research focusing on the influence of environmental factors on the perception of self-competence is needed.

Parenting Attitudes

Parenting attitudes influence how parents rear their children. A variety of factors such as their socialization experiences, cultural and ethnic background, familial history, their own personality and that of the child influence parental attitudes.

Social Capital

Social capital researchers often measure the relationships between family members, their housing, and their neighborhood that enrich and support the development of social capital. Social capital can be defined as the "resources embedded in social relations among people and organizations that facilitate cooperation and collaboration in communities" (CED, 1995, p.12). Examples include information sharing and the formation of a system of trust. We focus on the social relationships individuals develop to help make the best use of their personal resources (Louy, 1987).

The Community Context

Baton Rouge, Louisiana is the state capital and the state’s second largest metropolitan area. The population of the city of Baton Rouge is 231,276; the population of the metropolitan area is

In Louisiana, the state with the third highest rate of poverty for households with children, over 110,000 children under the age of six live in poverty. In this paper, we will summarize a pilot study of 13 African American mothers with preschool-aged children in East Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Given the number of children in poverty, there is little research on the development of perception of self-competence and issues related to persistent and pervasive poverty (Fisher & Brennan, 1992; Graham, 1992; Hagen, Paul, Gibb, & Wolters, 1990). To better understand impoverished, we describe the characteristics of the housing unit, the neighborhood context, parental control, parenting attitudes, social interactions, and children’s perception of self-competence.
limited world indeed for both parents and children" (Bartlett, 1998, p. 410).
Without safe environments to practice independent activities, children miss the opportunity to develop a sense of confidence and parents miss the opportunity to exhibit trust in their child’s abilities (Zimring & Barnes, 1987).

Restricting children due to concerns over safety may also increase parental stress because the children are “under foot”. As the housing unit becomes crowded, parents are more likely to be punitive in their parenting. Parents with a tendency toward abusive actions may be unable to accommodate their need for physical distance, a need that may be essential in their attempt to maintain control over themselves (Bartlett, 1998).

Children’s Perception of Self-Competence

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Housing and Neighborhood

A safe neighborhood with residents possessing financial, social, and human capital resources supports parenting (Pattillo-McCoy, 2000). Neighbors who function as surrogate parents and provide positive role models support parents by providing a protected context where children can practice skills independently (Pattillo-McCoy, 2000; Zimring & Barnes, 1987). Working poor parents struggle to accumulate money for rental application fees, security deposits, and monthly rent payments. They may also face additional resource constraints, such as poor credit and rental histories that limit their housing choices. Moreover, they may find the only housing available to them is in neighborhoods where they fear crime and delinquent behavior. This fear leads to social isolation as parents confine themselves and their children to the housing unit. "When families live in unsafe neighborhoods, are without transportation and have no resources for outings, the inside of their apartments may be the only environment their young children know. When they are crowded, unsafe, and lacking in stimulation and variety, it becomes a