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TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

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Educational disadvantage is defined in terms of (i) discontinuities between the competencies and dispositions which children bring to school and the competencies and dispositions valued in schools, and (ii) factors, conceptualized in terms of three forms of 'capital' (economic, cultural, social), which influence development of the competencies and dispositions. Evidence relating to the impact on children's development of the three forms of capital is presented. In the conclusion, advantages, limitations, and implications of the approach outlined in the paper are considered.

The purpose of this paper is to attempt to define educational disadvantage in terms which are more educationally relevant than most existing definitions by focusing on the nature of problems which children from backgrounds associated with disadvantage might experience when they go to school. The definition proposes that children are disadvantaged when discontinuities exist between the competencies and dispositions which children develop in their homes and communities and the competencies and dispositions that facilitate adaptation to, and success in, school. It also seeks to identify and conceptualize factors in terms of three forms of 'capital' (economic, cultural, and social) which are not only associated with, but are causally related to, the development of children's competencies and dispositions.

EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE AS DISCONTINUITY BETWEEN COMPETENCIES AND DISPOSITIONS

Educational disadvantage is frequently defined in terms which are broad and non-specific, for example, as a complex phenomenon that results from the interaction of deep-seated economic, social, and educational factors (OECD, 1992). The 1998 Education Act, in which disadvantage is defined as 'the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education' [Section 32 (9)] is similarly broad, and provides little guidance for educational intervention. It also exhibits a number of other inadequacies. First, the role of cultural, as distinct from social and economic factors, is not recognized. Secondly, the term that is being defined (disadvantage) is also used in the definition (when reference

is made to social or economic disadvantage). Thirdly, no attempt is made to identify the 'impediments' that might be regarded as constituting the core of disadvantage, or how those might serve to prevent students 'from deriving appropriate benefit from education.' However, the key to understanding disadvantage, and to addressing problems associated with it, might lie precisely in an explication of these impediments.

Efforts to operationalize the concept of educational disadvantage (for example, in the context of intervention procedures) have also identified several discrete variables, though the relationship of the variables to children's educational experiences is usually not explored. In the United States, discrete variables associated with disadvantage include minority racial/ethnic group identity, living in a poverty household, living in a lone-parent family, having a poorly educated mother, and having a home language that differs from that used in the school (Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989). In Ireland, the factors used to identify schools for participation in the Scheme of Assistance to Schools in Designated Areas of Disadvantage at the primary level focused on income poverty: the number of pupils in the school whose families reside in local authority housing and the number of pupils whose families reside in a flat or non-permanent accommodation; the number of pupils whose families hold medical cards; and the number of pupils whose families are in receipt of unemployment benefit or assistance under schemes administered by the Department of Social Welfare. Additional factors, some of which are not necessarily associated with poverty, were used to identify post-primary schools: the number of rural pupils from a 'deprived' background; the number of pupils living with a lone parent; the number of first year pupils with significant literacy and numeracy difficulties; and the percentage of pupils who drop out of school at or about 15 years of age without formal educational qualifications (i.e., who leave school without having attempted a public examination or having achieved fewer than three D grades in such an examination).

In the Giving Children An Even Break (2001) initiative, which subsumed the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme, several of the indicators used in the Designated Areas Scheme were used, but there were also differences between the schemes. First, information was obtained in Giving Children An Even Break about the proportion of pupils for which the school received a grant under the School Books for Needy Pupils Grant Scheme. Secondly, a unique indicator was used for urban schools (proportion of pupils living in a lone-parent household) and a unique indicator for rural schools (proportion of pupils living in a family which received financial assistance because of limited means from farm incomes).

While the use of indicators such as these can point to fairly readily identifiable characteristics of schools, families, or students that are frequently

associated with educational disadvantage, its limitations should be recognized. One limitation relates to the precision of identification. The presence of an indicator, particularly one relating to schools or communities, does not mean that all students in a school, can be regarded as disadvantaged. A second limitation is the failure to distinguish in the indicators between correlates, causes (e.g., poverty), and consequences (e.g., school failure) of disadvantage. Thirdly, by focusing on factors that are distally related to disadvantage (e.g., poverty), only limited insight is provided into the nature of the problems which children might encounter when they go to school. Fourthly, and arising from the last point, distal indicators can at best provide only a limited basis for the design of intervention procedures to assist children in adapting to school. While a variety of intervention programmes have been found to be helpful to children in areas in which educational disadvantage is common (see Barnett, 1998; Boocock & Larner, 1998; CMRS, 1992; Frede, 1998; Ramey, 1999; Vinovskis, 1999), we still do not have a very secure knowledge base on which to establish guidelines for effective intervention. As long as we rely on indicators that are distally, and not necessarily causally related to disadvantage, our knowledge of the processes through which change or protection is achieved, will remain limited. On the other hand, a definition that improved our understanding of disadvantage might also be expected to provide a sounder basis for action.

A definition of educational disadvantage which, while recognizing the role of distal factors, also reflects children's experiences in the context of the school, was proposed as far back as 1967 at a UNESCO Institute for Education conference (Passow, 1970), as well as elsewhere more recently (see CMRS, 1992; Kellaghan, 1977b; Kellaghan, Weir, Ó hUallacháin & Morgan, 1995; Ogbu, 1982), but there has been little effort to develop the definition or to assess its validity or practical value. The purpose of this paper is to elaborate on this definition in the hope that it will lead to work that will increase our knowledge of the precise difficulties children experience in school and of the origin of these difficulties. The definition proposes that a child may be regarded as being at a disadvantage at school *if because of factors in the child's environment conceptualized as economic, cultural and social capital, the competencies and dispositions which he/she brings to school differ from the competencies and dispositions which are valued in schools and which are required to facilitate adaptation to school and school learning.* [1]

1 The definition does not apply to children with physical, emotional, or mental handicapping conditions or specific learning difficulties, though some children who live in communities/families associated with educational disadvantage may suffer from such conditions.

The relevant competencies and dispositions envisaged in the definition, all of which require further specification in the context of disadvantage, may at this stage be categorized in a number of broad domains. *Cognitive development* and *academic achievement* are at the heart of the work of the school and constitute one domain, and may be defined in terms of the acquisition of basic scholastic skills and development of the ability to acquire and apply knowledge and to solve problems. A further domain relates to *conduct*, which involves self-regulation, rule-governed behaviour, and the capacity to make judgments based on ethical values and goals in life. Aspects of the domain are in evidence early in childhood as children are expected to begin controlling their behaviour and to comply with parents' directives. At school, they will encounter new rules for classroom behaviour. Later in adolescence, adaptation to a broader array of cultural and social norms and values will be required. Other domains that might be identified include *social behaviour* (relationships with other people) and *self-development*, which involves identity, autonomy, motivation to succeed, and attributional style (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

Any attempt to understand problems that children may encounter when they go to school inevitably leads to a consideration of children's home and community backgrounds. This is so because the emphasis given in a particular environment to the competencies and dispositions in any developmental domain, and the particular knowledge, skills, learning styles, and values that are fostered, are determined by their adaptive value for individuals living in the environment. It follows from this that if environments differ, the competencies that they nourish will also differ, a situation that has obvious consequences when individuals move from one setting to another, as when the child moves from home to school. The child's success in meeting the demands of the new environment will depend either on the extent to which the competencies and dispositions developed in the two environments are similar, or on the extent to which she or he can apply the competencies developed in the original environment in the new setting.

That the competencies and dispositions required for adaptation in home and school differ, and that movement from one to the other involves a disjuncture in socialization, becomes evident if we pause to consider the structure, demands, and activities of the two institutions (Jackson, 1968; Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, & Bloom, 1993; Ogbu, 1982). For example, going to school has implications for social behaviour, since it involves moving from life in a small group to life in a crowd, and from a situation in which inter-personal relationships are continuous and particularistic to one in which they are more transitory, less familiar, and universalistic. It also has implications for conduct,

as children move from a situation marked by informality and freedom in the use of time and space to one in which they are allocated to classrooms and seats and expected to work to a predictable daily schedule.

Furthermore, and perhaps this is the area that has received greatest attention in the case of disadvantage, homes and schools may differ in their emphasis on, and how they construct, cognitive development and achievement. The child will find that the school is more concerned with literacy than with oracy (a shock perhaps, particularly for children who come from homes in which the level of literacy is low), and that the main focus of learning is on the cognitive domain. Furthermore, the child will be faced with an approach to learning that is formal and decontextualized. While outside school, children learn in a natural and realistic context as the need arises, in school, learning is formal, deliberate, and conscious, taking place day in, day out, and whether or not it seems to have any particular purpose. Often the purpose is in the future, and may not be very obvious, such as learning to read so that one will be able to access further knowledge; learning to write so as to be able to communicate information; and acquiring various techniques for finding, processing, and organizing information.

We can expect all children to experience some discontinuity in the transition from home to school. However, the degree of discontinuity will vary with the extent to which competencies and approaches to learning developed in response to family life-styles, value systems, belief systems, structure, and functioning differ from those valued in schools. Children for whom the discontinuities are large can be expected to experience the greatest difficulties in adapting to school; those for whom the discontinuities are small, the least.

FACTORS AFFECTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN'S COMPETENCIES AND DISPOSITIONS

In this section, the factors in children's environments that are mentioned in the definition of educational disadvantage as affecting the development of competencies and dispositions, in some cases facilitating scholastic progress, in other cases resulting in difficulty in adapting to school, poor achievement, and other consequences of disadvantage, are conceptualized in terms of three types of 'capital': the familiar *economic or financial capital* which has received most attention in the identification of disadvantage; the less familiar *cultural capital* which relates primarily to the conditions that foster cognitive and scholastic development; and *social capital* which is primarily related to conduct (including moral development), identity (including self-concept and self-esteem), social behaviour, attitudes, and motivations. A value in adopting the conceptualization

is that a good deal of research relating to each type has been carried out. Though the three types may be considered separately, they are interrelated. This is evident when, for example, parents' expectations and encouragement are used in definitions of both cultural capital and social capital. Another aspect of the relationship is in evidence when social capital is considered to enhance cultural capital, or cultural capital is considered convertible under certain conditions to economic capital.

Economic Capital

Economic capital relates to the material, particularly the financial, resources that are available to families and communities. Their absence, of course, constitutes poverty, which of all the aspects of disadvantage that one might consider for impact on development, is probably the most obvious. Many of the indicators which are frequently used to identify disadvantage are designed to provide evidence relating to poverty (e.g., unemployment, possession of a medical card) on the basis that homes with limited financial resources are unlikely to be able to provide the supports for education that one normally finds in better-off homes.

Children in homes that are materially poor may encounter factors that affect their development, such as hunger, malnutrition, pain, and disease, while their communities may exhibit physical decay, crime, gang activity, and drug problems. The association of such factors with what has been called the 'social exclusion' of individuals from the normal exchanges, practices, and rights of the society in which they live (see, e.g., Room, 1995) may add to children's developmental problems (Payne & Biddle, 1999).

Problems of disadvantage do not arise only in cases of extreme poverty. Families that are relatively poor will also be at a disadvantage relative to better-off families in their ability to purchase advantage for their children (e.g., to buy books, to buy extra tuition, to support their children in third-level education).

Cultural Capital

Of the three types of capital, cultural capital would seem to be the one most closely related to the cognitive competencies and dispositions involved in scholastic achievement, and so is most relevant to our proposed definition of educational disadvantage. Three forms have been identified. The first comprises personal *dispositions*, considered to be long-lasting, and which relate to an array of cognitive and non-cognitive competencies which are influenced by past experience (particularly within the family) and are used to organize future experience. In the second form, cultural capital is 'objectified' in cultural goods

(e.g., pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments). The third form is institutionalized (as, for example, in educational qualifications). Language forms an important part of cultural capital since, in addition to being a means of communication, it provides, together with a richer or poorer vocabulary, a system of categories, which enables one to decipher and manipulate complex logical and aesthetic structures (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

In Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) terminology, cultural capital is mediated to the child in the immediate settings in which he or she develops through the microsystems of families and friends, though these are usually, but not inevitably, shaped largely by the broader ideological, demographic, and institutional patterns of the macrosystem in which they function. Many of the discrete factors that are often cited in the context of disadvantage are implicated: parents' occupation; their level of education; the quality of adult-child interactions; and parents' expectations for children.

Separate strands of research in education (Bloom, 1981; Caldwell & Bradley, 1984; Kellaghan et al, 1993) and in psychology (Moos & Moos, 1994) have systematized the structure and activities of homes that are associated with cultural capital and, in turn, the development of competencies related to success in school. Six components have been proposed: (i) modelling (in use of complex language and in planning and organization to ensure that time and space are well structured and used); (ii) stimulation to explore and discuss ideas and events; (iii) providing motivation for, guidance in, and reinforcement of school-related activities and independence in decision-making; (iv) holding and communicating high academic aspirations and expectations; (v) providing guidance on school matters and direct instruction, and monitoring/helping with homework; and (vi) ensuring that activities engaged in are developmentally appropriate (Kellaghan, 2001).

A number of points have been made about cultural capital. First, the value of capital will vary with the 'markets' in which it can be used advantageously. Secondly, capital required for success in school is defined by the dominant social groups in society. Thirdly, 'ability' or 'talent' is the product of an investment of time and cultural capital. Fourthly, while the focus in the provision of capital is on the family, extra-familial sources assume increasing importance as children mature.

Finally, the notion of cultural capital has been used to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from different social classes. Children who bring the 'right' kind of capital to school will do well. If they come from homes in which time and space are well structured and used, in which ideas and events are discussed and explored, and in which parents are sufficiently

familiar with the demands of schooling to be able to provide guidance and support for school-related activities, they will have a decided advantage when they go to school. If, however, the cultural forms of children rely on restricted linguistic codes, working-class or oppositional modes of dress, and if they downplay the ethos of individualism and espouse a form of solidarity, children are likely to be at a decided academic, social, and ideological disadvantage in most schools (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1988; Bourdieu, 1986).

Social Capital

Social capital, a concept derived from social exchange theory, is the term used to describe another form of capital located in families, communities, and other institutions that contributes to the development of children's competencies and dispositions. Various definitions of the concept exist. Because these tend to be imprecise, and because social capital is less tangible than other forms of capital (since it is embodied in relationships between individuals), it has proved difficult to obtain unambiguous evidence about its relationship to children's development.

In most definitions, social capital is considered to be embedded in relationships between individuals in informal social networks. Furthermore, it is defined primarily by its function, which is represented as the ability of individuals to secure benefits by virtue of their membership of the networks (Portes, 1998). A number of further characteristics may be specified. First, social capital consists of shared values and norms, together with sanctions and rules which are also shared and are enforced to shape and control behaviour. Secondly, it is based on trust and involves the accumulation of obligations between individuals on the basis of reciprocity. Thirdly, it involves information channels in which donors provide access to information to others, again with the understanding that this will be reciprocated (see Bourdieu, 1986; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Coleman, 1987; Coleman, 1988; Coleman, 1990; Garbarino, Kostelny, & Barry, 1997; OECD, 2001; Portes, 1998).

Social capital is regarded as an important source of social control, of parental and kin support, and of network-mediated benefits (including cultural capital) beyond the immediate family (Portes, 1998). Furthermore, its acquisition and maintenance are considered to be major motivations of human behaviour, particularly family behaviour (Astone, Nathanson, Schoen, & Young, 1999). It should be noted, however, that not all aspects of social capital are positive. While Coleman sees it as involving positive social control, effects can be regarded as negative when individual freedoms are restricted, when outsiders are denied

access to resources, and when social capital, as Bourdieu (1986) proposes, becomes a tool of reproduction for the dominant class.

A number of further general points may be made about social capital. First, the resources in a network may not be equally available to all members. Individuals will vary in the number of relationships they have, the strength of relationships, and the nature and amount of resources available as a result of the relationships (Astone et al, 1999). Secondly, the nature of participation will change as children develop, progressing from passive to active engagement in the exchange of goods, services, information, and emotional support. Thirdly, social capital can change over time, accumulating or decreasing as the character of communities, and individuals' involvement in them, change. Deliberate effort may be required to maintain it. Fourthly, social capital, unlike cultural capital, cannot be exchanged with or given to another person. Finally, although not completely fungible, social capital can be used in a variety of ways (Astone et al, 1999; Cochran & Brassard, 1979).

Coleman (1987) illustrated the difference between social capital and other forms of capital in an anecdote about a school district in the United States where children purchased textbooks. It was found that some Asian households were purchasing two books. On investigation, it turned out that one was for the mother to enable her to help her child in school. Although the mother was uneducated and would have lacked school-appropriate cultural capital, her concern about her child's school performance, and her willingness to devote effort to support it, revealed a high level of social capital in the family.

Social capital is not confined to the family. In the community, it is exhibited in the

> interest, even the intrusiveness, of one adult in the activities of someone else's child. Sometimes that interest takes the form of enforcing norms imposed by parents or by the community; sometimes it takes the form of lending a sympathetic ear to problems not discussable with parents, sometimes volunteer youth group leadership or participation in other youth-related activities. (Coleman, 1987, p.36)

According to Coleman, there has been in recent decades an extensive erosion in the United States of the social capital available to children and youth, both in the family and outside it. This is reflected in the family by a reduction in the number of adults (in the extreme case, in the lone-parent family) and in a decline in the range of exchanges between adults and children about academic, social, and personal matters. This has been happening even as cultural capital has increased, as exemplified by higher levels of educational attainment. In communities outside the family, evidence of erosion is to be found in the decline

of effective forms of social control, religion, and informal relations between children and adults. Both family and society generally have become infused by notions of individualism, in which the cultivation of one's own well-being has replaced interest in others. This is likely to have its greatest impact in a family if parents consider it more important to respond to their own needs than to those of their children. It is not clear to what extent changes in social capital may be occurring in countries other than the United States. However, shifts in norms, values, and patterns of social interaction in families and communities are clearly in evidence in some countries, including Ireland.[2]

EVIDENCE RELATING TO THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT OF FORMS OF CAPITAL

Before considering research relating to the impact of the three types of capital described above, whether in the context of intervention or without intervention, it should be acknowledged that inter-relationships between the types makes it difficult to isolate the effects of any one type. The issue may be illustrated by reference to two intervention programmes. While not conceptualized in terms of development of 'capital', the focus in the Rutland Street project would appear to have been on the cognitive, language, personality, and social development (cultural capital) of 3- to 4-year old children (Kellaghan, 1977b). However, its success, illustrated in the attainments and achievements of participants in later years (Kellaghan & Greaney, 1993), cannot be unequivocally associated with this emphasis since the project also recognized the importance of parents' participation, and included activities that, in effect, involved the development of social capital exemplified in social networks of parents and school personnel, of interpersonal trust and co-operation, and of values and attitudes supportive of children's education.

By contrast, the focus of the Home School Community Liaison Scheme on developing relationships between schools and parents and other organizations and agencies in local communities might reasonably lead one to infer that its major concern was the development of social capital (Conaty, 2002). However, activities directly related to children's development of cultural capital were also

2 Most interpretations of social capital consider it to be based on relationships between individuals or between an individual and a group. In recent discourse, however, it has been equated with level of 'civicness' of communities, states, or even entire nations. Putnam (2001), for example, has argued that the national stock of social capital is decreasing in the United States. Regarding social capital as a property of communities or nations is problematic in a number of ways, not least that it can lead to interpretations in which it is simultaneously a cause and effect (Portes, 1998).

provided in, for example, classes designed to familiarize parents with the scholastic tasks facing their children so that they could supervise or assist in homework. As in the case of the Rutland Street project, it is not possible to distinguish between the influence of efforts to develop social and cultural capital in explaining the not quite expected improvements in the scholastic achievements of children (see Ryan, 1999).

In the following sections, evidence relating to the impact on children's development of capital is considered separately for each type. However, it is unlikely that any of the studies on which the evidence is based was successful in isolating the unique contribution of any of the types.

Economic Capital

There is evidence that income poverty affects the quality of the home environment (Garrett, Ng'andu, & Ferron, 1994) and also influences many aspects of children's development, including their cognitive, verbal, scholastic, and socioemotional functioning (McLoyd, 1998). Material deprivation is also related to the inclination, resources, and capacity of parents to encourage and help their children succeed and to children's adjustment at school (e.g., Dubow & Ippolito, 1994; Garner & Raudenbush, 1991; Mortimore & Blackstone, 1982). Not surprisingly, the effects of persistent poverty have been found to be more adverse than the effects of transitory poverty. Furthermore, policies that raise the incomes of poor families have been found to enhance children's cognitive functioning and school learning (McLoyd, 1998).

Cultural Capital

Studies of relationships between home characteristics exemplifying cultural capital as set out above and children's school achievements lead to a number of conclusions. First, home characteristics involving modelling, stimulation, motivation, and guidance are strongly related to measures of children's scholastic ability and achievement. The correlation between such characteristics and general scholastic ability has been found to be about .70, while correlations between them and achievement in specific areas of the curriculum range from .56 to .79 (Iverson & Walberg, 1982; Kellaghan, 1994; Kellaghan et al, 1993; White, 1982). The importance of the structure and activities of the home represented by the characteristics is supported by the findings of studies that show that interventions in which the processes were manipulated improved children's level of cognitive functioning (Janhom, 1983; Pizarro Sánchez, n.d.).

Secondly, characteristics associated with cultural capital are more closely related to children's scholastic performance than are measures of social class,

family structure, or parental characteristics (which yield correlations varying from about .2 to .5). Thirdly, and related to the last point, considerable variation in family environments, even ones associated with frequently used indices of disadvantage, exists within socioeconomic groups, and this variation is associated with variation in children's scholastic achievement (Kellaghan, 1977a). This finding has been interpreted as meaning that it is what parents *do* in the home, rather than their socioeconomic status, that is critical to success at school. Fourthly, although the relationship between home characteristics exemplifying cultural capital and scholastic ability and achievement is stronger than the relationship between socioeconomic status and scholastic ability and achievement, possession of cultural capital is related to the home's socioeconomic status. Homes classified as high in socioeconomic status are likely to be rated higher in cultural capital than homes classified as low in socioeconomic status.

Social Capital

It is argued that social capital in the child's home and immediate communities will foster the development of shared aspirations, will provide mutual aid and support, especially in time of need, will lead to the exchange of information, will define and uphold standards, and will help individuals learn how to make use of community resources. In turn, these conditions are seen as contributing to the development in children of basic attachments, attitudes, willingness to make certain efforts, and concepts of self, all of which can contribute to the development of the competencies and dispositions that support school learning, and will work to children's advantage when they go to school. A variety of individuals and organizations that can help children with these developmental tasks have been identified: siblings, grandparents and other members of the extended family, neighbours, churches, and various social and cultural groups (Coleman, 1987; Coleman, 1988; Coleman, 1990).

Several indices of social capital have been found to predict school attrition, educational achievement, intellectual development, occupational attainment, education-related psychosocial factors, and juvenile delinquency (Partes, 1998). The findings, however, are often difficult to interpret. It is difficult to design studies in which the role of social capital is isolated and that will allow unambiguous inferences about cause-effect relationships (in which, for example, the influence of factors that may account for both social capital and its supposed effects is controlled). Furthermore, Coleman's studies, do not distinguish (as Bourdieu does) between resources and the ability to obtain them by virtue of membership in a social structure. The frequently cited studies of

Catholic schools in the United States (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987) in which students were found to exhibit better retention rates and higher levels of achievement than students in comparable non-Catholic schools may be flawed since children's social capital appears to have been measured by indicators of group membership (whether or not living in a non-intact family or attending a Catholic school). Unless it can be assumed that membership in such categories provides more social capital than alternatives, the effects observed in the studies cannot be ascribed to possession of social capital (Astone et al, 1999).

CONCLUSION

The major advantage of a conceptualization of educational disadvantage in terms of a discontinuity between the competencies and dispositions that a child brings to the school and the competencies and dispositions that are associated with scholastic success is that it provides a concrete focus for identifying and addressing problems which a child may encounter in adapting to the work of the school. To the extent that it is successful in doing this, it represents an improvement on definitions that are based on indicators such as poverty, place of residence, or living in a lone-parent family. While such indicators have a role to play in the identification of young people living in conditions associated with disadvantage, they provide little information on how these conditions impact on children or affect their ability to succeed in school that would be relevant in the design of intervention.

A further advantage of the proposed definition is that it takes account of the fact that even in the most disadvantaged areas, not all children fail academically or later in life. There is ample evidence of variation in academic achievement among children who might be described as living in disadvantaged circumstances. For example, in a study of the reading achievements of pupils in disadvantaged urban areas, 4.2% of third class pupils and 3.4% of sixth class pupils had a score that was one standard deviation above the mean (Weir, 2001). Following school, most children who grow up in what might be regarded as negative family and community environments become healthy competent adults (Gabarino et al, 1997).

At least two factors seem relevant to a consideration of the variation in achievement that one finds in disadvantaged areas. First, the capital that is available to families within a community can vary. Some families may be economically poor, but may not be poor in cultural capital, or although poor in terms of a particular kind of cultural capital, may be rich in social capital and so contribute to the development of school-related competencies and dispositions.

Families in a community may also vary in social capital since the resources in a network may not be equally available to all individuals.

Secondly, while certain aspects of an environment (inside and outside the home) may be shared by children, each child's environment is also to some extent unique. For example, it is obvious that the environment of an eldest child differs from that of a youngest child in the availability of siblings and in the way it is treated. Furthermore, every child to some extent shapes its own environment, reacting to conditions and events in an idiosyncratic way, which in turn can evoke idiosyncratic responses from those around it. Thus, the socialization process is bidirectional: children, as well as parents, are active in the process, seeking, selecting, and shaping input from their environment (see Grusec & Kuczynski, 1997). Indeed, it may be that a focus on family variables that are common to all children (e.g., socioeconomic status, general parenting style) has resulted in an under-estimation of the extent to which nonshared environmental influences (e.g., a child's personality or the way the child is treated by parents and siblings) contribute to variation in children's characteristics (Plomin & Rende, 1991).

There is an obvious need for greater attention to variation in the availability of capital and to the role of non-shared environments in the quest for identifying factors associated with the development of children in disadvantaged areas, since we might expect them to affect many aspects of the child's development: the establishment of attachment relationships between caregivers and children; the development of information-processing skills that may help in coping with adversity; the development of students' self-regulation skills; and the development of self-confidence and self-esteem (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). To the extent that these vary, even within areas broadly described as being associated with educational disadvantage, we might expect the competencies and dispositions that children develop also to vary, greater knowledge of which should provide a basis for more individualized attention to children's needs.

While the definition proposed in this paper may have value, it should be recognized that it does not describe educational disadvantage in detail, and really only points in the direction of describing it. Major questions remain about the precise competencies and dispositions that children bring to school and what degree of discontinuity is necessary before a child can be regarded as being at a disadvantage in school. Questions also remain about how the three kinds of capital that have been described relate to discrete factors that are frequently associated with educational disadvantage (such as living in a poor home, having a mother that was poorly educated, having a father who has been out of work for a long time, and living with only one parent), as well as how these impact on the

development of children's competencies and dispositions. And why do boys differ from girls, with or without intervention, in their ability to develop school-related competencies? Further study of the origin and development of competencies and dispositions may also throw light on differences between disadvantage in urban and rural areas. While we know that the combination of poverty and school failure exists in rural areas (Kellaghan et al, 1995), we do not know how educational disadvantage in rural areas may differ from educational disadvantage in urban areas. Answers to these questions should provide a sounder base for intervention than is available at present.

A major criticism of the approach to disadvantage presented in this paper, and of most intervention procedures, that can be anticipated relates to the implied contrast between the characteristics of homes associated with disadvantage and those of many middle-class homes, and to the fact that interventions seek to make children and homes from non-middle-class backgrounds more like middle-class children and homes. In line with such criticisms, some commentators who extol 'working-class' values and practices object to efforts to have working-class homes adopt them. The problem with this position is that schools *are* middle-class institutions, espousing, indeed creating, middle-class values and practices that contribute to success in later life in industrial and post-industrial societies. Policies based on the preservation of 'minority' cultures are not always beneficial as far as the life chances of individuals are concerned when those individuals have to compete in the 'majority' culture.

These considerations may serve to bring into focus a number of issues which may contribute to progress in the quest for appropriate intervention procedures to address problems associated with disadvantage. Firstly, not all aspects of any culture, which develops in response to a variety of circumstances, can be regarded as intrinsically valuable. If this is so, then it becomes necessary to consider what is worth preserving and what is not, though what value system one would apply to this exercise is far from obvious. Secondly, more consideration needs to be given to how individuals might function in two cultures, for example, using the competencies developed in one culture in another culture, or preserving working-class values of solidarity while adopting some of the values and practices associated with success at school. Thirdly, all the onus for change should not be laid on homes. Since schools have been assigned the responsibility in society for the formal education of children and are given public funds to perform that task, it can be argued that they should do more to capitalize on the skills, knowledge, and values that children bring to school. In this context, some commentators have exhorted teachers to make a concerted effort to find out what the child does at home and to incorporate this into school activities, rather than

teaching parents how to teach their children (Silvern, 1988). It has been suggested that this might be done by recognizing the categories of meaning that children bring to the classroom (in the words of our definition, the competencies they have developed in their homes and communities), since it is in terms of these meanings, often ignored in the school curriculum, that students produce and interpret knowledge (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1988).

While the task of bridging discontinuity between the competencies and dispositions children bring to school and those valued in schools and of transferring learning acquired in one context to another should not be underestimated, there is evidence that individuals can be helped to apply knowledge and skills in new contexts if similarities between contexts and tasks are identified for them (see Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, 1983). Language can play a major role in this since it can be used to encode relevant relationships and to point out important connections between contexts and tasks that children may not identify without assistance. Verbalizing and making explicit connections can help the child to see relationships between tasks in different contexts and to appreciate how skills already developed at home can be applied in the school. However, the use of such procedures in the context of disadvantage will require a greater understanding of the competencies and dispositions of children when they come to school, how they develop, and how they relate to the competencies and dispositions that contribute to school success.

Recognition in the definition proposed in this paper of the role of economic, cultural, and social factors is congruent with all conceptualizations of educational disadvantage. A clear implication of this position is that intervention is likely to be more effective if all three areas are addressed. Since the school is unlikely to contribute much to economic capital, except in the provision of financial assistance to some students, most interventions in disadvantaged areas, whether in the school or in the home, have focused on cultural capital, attempting, however imprecisely, to make available to children and/or parents a wider range of school-related cognitive competencies and skills. However, the effectiveness of such inventions is likely to be limited unless the issue of social capital is also addressed, which most likely will involve agencies outside the school, and perhaps even outside the education system. Even when the focus of intervention is the individual, it will need to be comprehensive, providing a wide range of services and supports if it is to address the multifaceted origins of disadvantage. Whether or not conceptualization of the roots of disadvantage in terms of three forms of capital provides an adequate description, or is likely to help in identifying specific forms of intervention, must await the findings of further research.

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