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| Delayed Gratification and School Performance:  How Wealth Influences Academic Performance in School |
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**Introduction**

Many people, especially the poor, intuitively know that the present society does not ensure an equal chance at success to its constituents. However, the degree to which opportunities, especially in the field of education, are distributed partially and unequally would be a surprise to most. From a young age people are told that they live in a society that operates under the fundamental principle of meritocracy, where the strong and hardworking succeed and the weak and lazy fail. Meritocracy is a concept particularly attributed to school and education. Indeed, people of advanced industrial societies with high enrollment rates are regularly told that the opportunity to pursue education is open to all, and that the most well equipped and diligent are programmed to succeed. In reality, however, equality of opportunity to pursue education, in particular higher education at reputable institutions, is distributed in favor of a certain demographic: the economic middle and upper classes. There have been numerous studies conducted hitherto which have pointed out a positive correlation between economic background and educational attainment.

This paper will build on past research examining the relationship between educational inequality and class differences by suggesting a new, alternative theory that focuses on the concept of delayed gratification in explaining the performance gap within academia between the wealthy and the poor. First, the paper will briefly summarize selected existing literature on how wealth influences academic performance. Then, the paper will introduce the concept of delayed gratification, explain its relevance to academic performance, and delineate the process in which individuals develop this ability. Finally, the paper will point out how the development of this ability to postpone satisfaction is influenced by an individual’s economic background, drawing the conclusion that this ability is yet another educational advantage unfairly distributed to the privileged upper classes.

**Existing Literature**

In 1966 a groundbreaking government survey conducted by James Coleman showed that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds tended to perform worse in academia than their wealthier counterparts. The report also concluded that school differences and differences in level of *shadow education* (educational pursuits and courses outside of regular school), though not negligible, had relatively low explanatory power in explaining this performance gap. Since this report, numerous studies have been conducted and theories have been devised to explain the relationship between socioeconomic class and school performance. Bowles and Gintis (1976) argued that working class students are instructed in school to be obedient and prevented from developing creativity and critical thinking skills. Bourdieu (1984) introduced the concept of cultural capital to explain that wealth afforded the children of upper-class backgrounds extensive knowledge on the intricacies of culture which worked as an advantage in school. Similarly, Bernstein (2009) contested that schools reward middle-class communication codes and neglect lower-class codes, marginalizing the economically disadvantaged through language.

These theories and many more are important in explaining educational inequality as caused by class differences. The remainder of this paper puts forth a new explanation which finds the root of educational inequality in differences in individual students’ capacity to learn by employing the concept of delayed gratification. This explanation should be regarded not as replacing the existing literature on school inequality and class differences but complementary to it.

**Delayed Gratification: An Educational Asset**

In 1972, a group of Stanford scholars conducted an experiment where they examined the ability of children to delay immediate gratification in return for a higher value reward later in time (Mischel, Ebbesen, & Zeiss, 1972). The now famous Stanford marshmallow experiment, along with its follow up experiments, showed that children who could delay gratification for longer times tended to have higher SAT scores (Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989) and higher educational attainment (Ayduk et al., 2000). A recently conducted replica of the 1972 Stanford experiment yielded similar results (Watts, Duncan, & Quan, 2018). This indicates that the ability to delay gratification is an asset that improves academic performance. Studying and schoolwork are widely considered to be burdensome tasks, but their rewards are held with high regard. It is not hard to imagine how having the ability to postpone immediate gratification in order to achieve satisfaction of a higher order is conducive to improving academic performance.

**Possession of the Ability to Delay Satisfaction**

Not all people possess this educational asset. There is a common misconception that the ability to delay gratification is based solely on will power. In fact, a child’s ability to delay gratification depends heavily on their subjective assessment of the reliability of their environment (Kidd, Palmeri, & Aslin, 2012), not their will power. Individuals who believe that their environment is reliable and that the reward waiting beyond the delay of gratification will certainly be delivered, are better at delaying gratification than individuals who are uncertain about their environment. Children who know for sure that by saving money they will be able to afford treats that will bring them greater satisfaction in the future are more inclined to save money than children who face the threat of confiscation by their parents if they tried to save. Firm trust in one’s environment is essential in the development of the ability to delay gratification.

The main factor that influences an individual’s subjective assessment of the reliability of their environment is the conditions of their upbringing, namely, the reliability of the adults in their lives (Kidd et al., 2012). Furthermore, it can be speculated that the reliability of the adults, or parents, in a child’s life depends on their economic background. In a working-class home where parents just manage to pay the bills, any savings a child might accumulate may be taken and used by their parents. The parents themselves may be living hand to mouth every day spending their money on products that bring them immediate satisfaction (e.g., alcohol, various consumer products, etc.) uncertain of where the next dollar will come from or what event might take away the little savings they have. Since children learn from their parents’ lifestyle and behavioral patterns, children raised in low income households may, to an extent rationally, learn to distrust their environment and spend all available resources on immediate gratification. On the other hand, for children raised in middle- and upper-class households, the certainty of the reward for delaying gratification is ensured. In addition, watching their parents delay gratification in their work and life teaches children to do so themselves, equipping middle- and upper-class children with the ability to postpone satisfaction for greater future rewards.   
 Watts et al.’s (2018) updated marshmallow experiment showed that children from wealthy backgrounds were more likely to be able to exercise self-restraint and wait longer. The study also found that the degree to which children’s ability to delay gratification (measured by the marshmallow test) was able to predict success in school in later years decreased greatly by controlling for socioeconomic family background. This suggests that the the ability to postpone satisfaction alone cannot account for the differing degrees of success in school. Rather, the ability serves as a strong predictor only in its correlation with wealth and financial background. Therefore, delayed gratification must not be considered the only cause, or even the strongest cause, of educational inequality between differing socioeconomic classes, but should be regarded as an addition to the many other causes as outlined in existing literature.

**Conclusion**

In summary, in addition to previously posited theories on educational inequality and class differences, delayed gratification may also explain the positive correlation between wealth and academic performance. The economic background of a child’s upbringing determines their subjective assessment of reliability. A high subjective assessment of the reliability of one’s environment leads to the ability to delay gratification for greater future rewards, while a low assessment of reliability leads to an inability to delay gratification (Kidd et al., 2012). The ability to delay gratification positively influences academic performance (Mischel et al., 1989; Ayduk et al., 2000), thereby giving wealthy children an advantage in school. Furthermore, while delayed gratification may appear to be a strong predictor of success in school, the trait only holds such strong explanatory power because of its relationship with wealth, and though it may still be a valid explanation of the performance differences between children of varying economic classes, it does not account for all of the differences and must be considered along with the many other explanations of class differences and academic performance found in previous research (Watts, Duncan, & Quan, 2018).

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