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Delayed Gratification and School Performance:

How Wealth Influences Academic Performance in School

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. The people of advanced industrial societies with high enrollment rates are 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 capital and educational attainment. This paper offers an explanation on the mechanism behind why the wealthy hold such an advantage over the economically disadvantaged by focusing on the ability of delayed gratification and how that relates to academic performance and economic background.

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 follow up experiments, showed that children who could delay gratification for longer times tended to have higher SAT scores (Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989) and educational attainment (Ayduk et al., 2000). 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 satisfaction in order to achieve satisfaction of a higher order later in time is conducive to improving academic performance.

Who Can Delay Gratification?

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 of money by their parents if they tried to save money. 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 her parents. The parents themselves may be living hand to mouth every day spending their money on immediate sources of satisfaction, uncertain of where the next dollar will come from or what event might take away the little savings they may 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 delay gratification for greater future rewards.

Conclusion

In summary, the economic background of a child’s upbringing determines their subjective assessment of reliability. High reliability in one’s environment leads to the ability to delay gratification for greater future rewards, while low 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 the school system.

References:

https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3073393/