

Understanding Factors that Influence the Opportunity for Education and Training

Economic self-sufficiency is best accomplished when an individual possess marketable skills. Education is closely linked with the development of highly valued skills and studies show that people with higher education tend to have higher earnings and more generous benefits. This paper examines the role of rural mother's resources and initial human capital in her ability to acquire additional education or training.

Carolyn L. Bird, North Carolina State Universityⁱ
Jean W. Bauer, University of Minnesotaⁱⁱ

Researchers and legislators have consistently held education as the key element in a person's ability to be economically self-sufficient. This paper examines low-income rural women's opportunity for additional education or training as a contributing element to occupational mobility and improved quality of life.

Background and Literature Review

People with more education tend to have higher wage rates than those with less education, they obtain more generous fringe benefits associated with employment, are less likely to be unemployed, and tend to be in occupations with greater prestige (Chicago Commons, 2003; Seccombe, 2000). Low earnings arise from interactions of worker skill sets and the employer job type in the low-wage market. Anderson, Holer, and Lane (2002) report two factors shaped the earnings of low-wage workers: the worker's low level of skills and the disproportionately low wages paid by the firms for which they work. Low-wage work rarely incorporates opportunities for advancement. A study of occupational mobility of black and white women aged late teens to early 20's indicated service work became a trap for the women (Power & Rosenberg, 1995). Low-wage workers receiving public assistance may be considered to receive training. However, state agencies' educational programs connected to benefits focus on soft skills needed during an employment search and are bereft of the content that mothers need to pursue, secure, and perform more highly paid work. Importantly, low-wage earners and welfare-reliant women recognized education as a means to improve their ability to care for their families and expressed frustration with the inaccessibility of education programs and/or the type and quality of education offered through state-sponsored training programs (Banerjee, 2002; Seccombe, 2000).

The theoretical frameworks of human capital and family resource management provide a means to understand the need low-income mother's have for additional education or training and the family elements which may hinder or assist the mother in accomplishing the goal of additional education or training attainment. Human capital elements include the initial knowledge and skill set of resources a person brings to pursuit or completion of a task. Human capital is internal to and inseparable from the person that posses them and are thus portable and available to be applied on demand to many situations. Family resource management defines many of the functions involved in conducting daily family life, many of which are transparent even to those performing the functions.

Whether an opportunity exists or not is at least partly shaped by the availability or absence of the resources necessary to take advantage of the opportunity. In this study resources are defined as "the means to make a desired outcome a reality: In order for a resource to be helpful, it has to be accessible (possession utility) at the time it is needed (time utility), at the place it is needed (place utility), and in a useful form (form utility)" (Rettig, 2003, p. 102). For example, ownership of a car does not translate into a transportation resource if the car is not operable because it needs a new engine. In general, people who have higher levels of resource availability and lower resource demands will be better equipped to consider the pursuit of education and also to complete the endeavor. Specifically, a mother in a rural area requires the resources of childcare, transportation, and other operational support to meet family-based and other demands while pursuing the desired goal of additional education or training. This study will examine the role of the mother's human capital and the presence of family and external resources in relation to their impact on rural low-income mother's ability to pursue education or training

Sample

This study uses a purposeful sample focusing on mothers and the mother’s opportunity for additional education. Data were drawn from a larger project described in the Symposium Overview paper (Bird). Using a backward selection method, the sample for the present study was drawn from matched data set containing Wave 1 and Wave 2 interviews excluding of all cases present at Wave 1 only and those cases which were present at both Waves but did not contain data on education opportunity. The backward selection method yielded N = 258 present for both Waves and containing data on the education opportunity dependent variable.

The present study selected for the cases responding to the question “ Did you have the opportunity to get additional education or training since we last talked?” There was no difference between the overall matched data sample of N = 315 and the study sample of N = 258. The mothers are Non-Hispanic White (64.0%), Hispanic/Latina (25.5%), African American (8.1%), Multi-racial and Other (6.2%), with Native American (0.8%) comprising the smallest group. Overall, the mothers in the sample at Wave 1 had a mean age of 29.4 years and had over 12 years of education while over one-fourth (25.7%) of the sample had less than a high school education. The mother’s primary occupation categories are comprised of service (25.2 %), laborers (11.2%), and administrative support or clerical (10.5%). There were slightly more working mothers (51.9%) than those who were not working (48.1%). Of those who were working in non-migrant occupations, 38% reported holding one job while 8% reported two jobs. Only a very few (7.8%) identified themselves as students. Mothers who had an education opportunity were Non-Hispanic White (58%), Latina (24.4%), Black (8.4%), and Multi-racial/Other (6.7%). They were also slightly younger (average age 28), most had a child aged 5 years or less (80%), more than half had a child aged 3 years or less (60%), with 3.36 (sd 2.90) years as the average age of the youngest child. Their educational attainment at Wave 1 was some high school (22.7%), high school (22.7%), technical or vocational (15.1%), some college or associates degree (31.9%), bachelors degree (1.7%), and graduate degree (0.8%).

Result

The independent variables were grouped by the theoretical constructs of human capital resources, resources internal-to-the-family: demands, resources internal to the family: assistive, and resources external-to-the-family. The independent variables are Wave 1 (1999-2000) measures of family level resource demands and resource availability to the mother at the time of the reported opportunity to get additional education or training. The present study employed logistic regression to study rural low-income mother’s opportunity to get additional training or education. Logistic regression is somewhat more flexible than linear multiple regression in its ability to allow for independent variables that can be categorical, such as gender, as well as interval and ratio level data. The dependent variable in logistic regression is a non-metric variable and thus well suited for analysis of the dichotomous (no =0, yes = 1) education opportunity variable. The hierarchical enter method was used to bring in each variable into the equation. The model Chi-square (χ^2) measure indicates whether the inclusion of a variable has significantly improved prediction over the previous model. An increasing and significant χ^2 indicates model improvement from the previous step. All factors of the theory were significant.

Table 1
Results of Hierarchical Logistic Regression Examining the Opportunity to Get Additional Training or Education (N = 258).

Variables	Model χ^2
Step 1. Participant’s Year 1 Education (Human Capital)	4.584*
Step 2. Pre-school aged child (Resource Demand)	15.085***
Step 3. The number of children in the home (Resource Demand)	19.873***
Step 4. The presence of a partner in the home (Resource Assistance)	19.934***

*p ≤ .05 **p ≤ .01 ***p ≤ .001

Conclusions

The mother’s initial education level was important to her pursuit of additional education or training. Greater initial education increased the likelihood of obtaining additional education and those with less education

were disadvantaged in improving their educational status. Preschool-aged children increased mother's likelihood of additional education by 2.58 times. Conversely, the number of children decreased the likelihood of additional education as did the presence of a partner. Children represent a resource demand against a mother's time, energy, and monetary resources. As the number of children increase it is reasonable to expect fewer resources to be available to devote to educational endeavors. The presence of partner was hypothesized as an assistive resource in managing household and family demands. However, it may be that the partner is another source of resource demand or that the partner's income serves as a disincentive to the mother's pursuit of education.

Policy Implications

The mother's initial level of education provided human capital that facilitated obtaining additional education. Therefore, it is important to help young people stay in school as long as possible and at a minimum improve high school graduation rates. The value of the initial education likely extends beyond academic abilities to include interpersonal effectiveness, learning how institutional systems work, how to navigate systems when seeking information and the experience of overcoming obstacles. That preschool children positively influence the opportunity for education was an unexpected result. However, preschool children are not connected to formal education structures which provides the mother greater schedule flexibility. In addition, childcare providers are likely to give space preferences to children requiring full-time rather than after-school care. This suggests programs can be designed to heighten mothers' awareness of the life-stage advantages to seeking education and provide appropriate supports.

Education opportunity is important not only for the connection to increased income, but also for access to benefits that buffer work and family life which are typically associated with higher quality employment. Specifically, paid time off from work in the form of vacation and sick days contribute to the ability to manage work and family obligations. In addition, positions requiring higher degrees of human capital tend to offer greater control over work life including when and how work is performed. In an era of increasingly scarce public resources, it is crucial that public investments do more than provide temporary support but become, individually or in concert, ladders to leave poverty. Effective ladders to leave poverty may require new forms of inter-agency communication, collaboration, and planning.

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ⁱ Assistant Professor, Department of 4-H Youth Development and Family & Consumer Sciences, Campus Box 7605, Raleigh, NC 27695. Phone: 919.513.7793 Fax: 919.515.2785 Email: Carolyn_Bird@ncsu.edu.

ⁱⁱ Professor, Department of Family Social Science, 375 McNeal Hall, St. Paul, MN 55108. Phone: 612.625.1763 Fax: 612.625.4227 Email: jbauer@umn.edu.