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Religiosity and Achievement: The benefit of religious schooling for religious youth

Brett Peterson, Benjamin Gibbs PhD

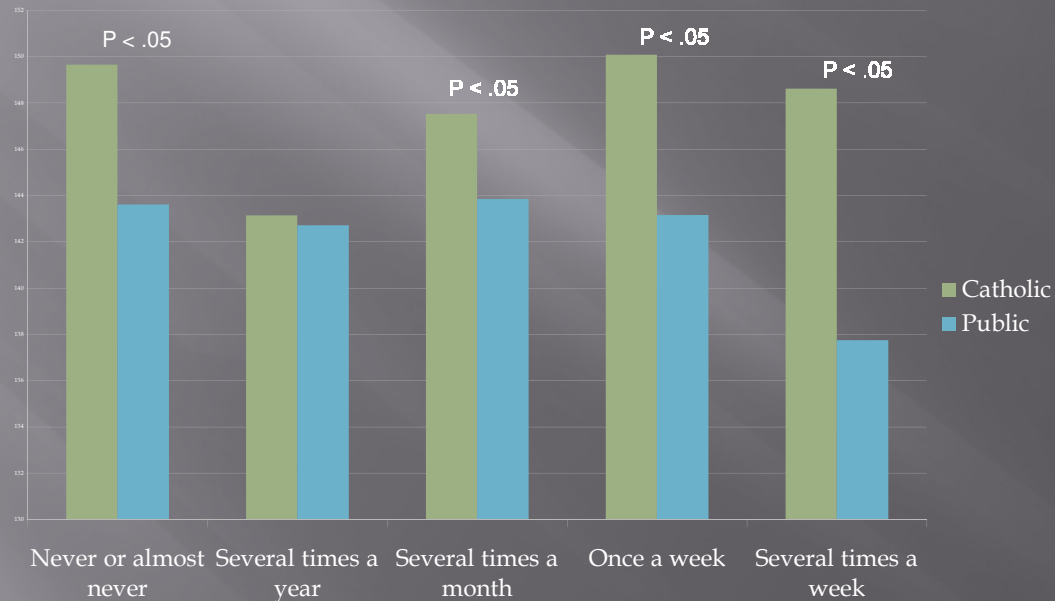
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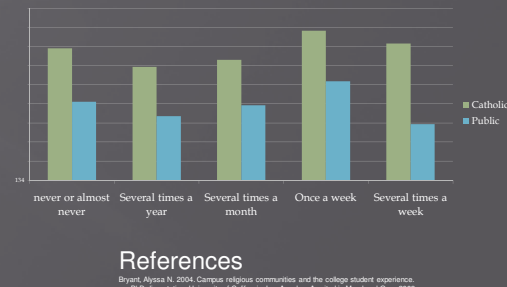
Abstract

Parental religious involvement and its effects on child math achievement in Catholic and public settings was examined at various age categories in the National Childhood Longitudinal Study: Kindergarten Cohort (NCLS-K). A mother's attendance at a religious service was found to have a significant, negative impact on student achievement overall, varying by the degree of maternal religious involvement and the religious affiliation of the child's school. From the data, we conclude that children with very religiously involved mothers are at greatest disadvantage in non-religious schools, and further conclude that children of very religious mothers would benefit most from religious educational environments.

Mother's Attendance at a Religious Service and Child Math Scores in 8th Grade



Mother's Attendance at a Religious Service in Child's Fourth Grade and Child Math Scores in 8th Grade



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Introduction

Research concerning the effect of religious belief on student cognitive achievement is mixed and unclear (Maryl and Oeur 2009), with some studies demonstrating religiosity's positive impact on student achievement (Mooney 2005, Regnerus 2000, Jeyns 1999, Jeyns 2002) and others demonstrating a significant negative impact (Driessen and Van der Slis 2001, Bryant 2004). Most of the extant positive research deals with high school and college achievement; much of the negative research deals with elementary and middle school outcomes. Apparently, the effect of religiosity varies based on population and context. The current study seeks to isolate the effects of maternal religious involvement (as measured by attendance at a religious service) on child math scores at various points between school entry and eighth grade in Catholic and public school contexts.

Hypothesis

We expected to find a significant, positive correlation between parental religiosity and child achievement in public, and Catholic school settings. We anticipated also that students attending Catholic school would enjoy a greater benefit from a greater degree of religiosity; i.e., religiosity would have a larger impact on students in Catholic schools than religiosity had on student achievement in public schools.

Data

Research by De Roos et. al. suggests that mother's religious involvement has a significant impact on children's religiosity in childhood (2004); in lieu of direct measures of child religiosity in the ECLS-K data, maternal religious involvement was used as a measure of religiosity. Data on maternal religious involvement, and on student math achievement, was available for spring of the child's first grade and eighth grade year in the ECLS-K data set; this data was used in analysis. The mean achievement scores for children in public, Catholic, and other schools were calculated for each category of maternal religious involvement in the child's first and eighth grade years. Additionally, the mean math achievement scores for children in eighth grade

Results

The data showed a clear trend across grade years. Minimal maternal involvement in school activity was accompanied by relatively high math achievement scores. Mothers who attended religious services only several times a year were significantly correlated with lower scores. Those who attended several times a month had significantly higher scores; those who attended once a week were correlated with the highest scores in the sample. Mothers of children at public schools who attended religious services multiple times per week were found to have the lowest scores in the sample. Mothers of children at Catholic schools who attended religious services multiple times per week correlated with some of the highest scores in the sample. Significant differences in scores between school types were found for four of the five levels of religious involvement; i.e. there was a significant difference at the p<.05 level between children who attended public school and children who attended Catholic school.

Conclusion

Based on the data and the accompanying research literature, we conclude that the although religious involvement has a significant, negative impact on school achievement, the negative impact may be compensated for by attending a religious school. Children with very religious parents will probably succeed best in religious scholastic environments. The reasons for this are as yet unknown, although the current research literature suggests that religiously involved parents do not support secular education to the same degree that less religious parents do. Future qualitative research on the differences between those who attend religious services multiple times per week and those who attend less often is necessary to determine the mechanism causing a significant difference in scores between families of the same degree of religious involvement at Catholic and public schools.