Religion and Reading in Early Childhood

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Recent evidence on school sector and academic achievement in early childhood suggests that public schools are doing as well or better than independent schools in fostering higher standardized test scores in mathematics.[1] Using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey (ECLS)[2] and the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) studies have shown greater mathematics achievement and higher gains during elementary school for students who remain in the public school sector compared to those who remain in the private school sector, holding demographic factors constant. This research has its critics, which point to various problems in the analysis of the data.[3]

However, math achievement and gains are only one indication of school performance. We suggest that any one measurement of school sector performance is inadequate to determine the relative success of one or another type of school. To that end, this report investigates the relationship between religious school attendance and reading outcomes during the early elementary school years. In what follows, we first discuss various reasons why religious schools might influence academic outcomes, and then turn to our findings on reading achievement from the ECLS data.

Religious Schools and Academic Outcomes for Children

The first concern for religious schools is that various conservative religious movements have been associated with lower educational attainment of adherents, and in some cases of anti-intellectualism. Although there is evidence of social mobility among evangelical Protestants, a legacy of tension with educational fields may shape schools in these traditions. For example, the school climate within evangelical Protestant schools may not include a strong emphasis on academic success. Academic goals may be crowded out by efforts toward moral and spiritual formation of students. Evangelical Protestant schools may embed a tension with cultural elites in dominant educational institutions that has implications for norms and practices in their schools. That tension with dominant models of education may lead, for example, to the use of textbooks and instructional material from evangelical publishers. This tension is also reflected in the use of phonics approaches to reading in evangelical Protestant schools rather than whole language. In addition, we would expect that many evangelical Protestant schools are accredited through religious organizations, if at all, and they have a lower percentage of certified teachers.

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There is the additional problem for conservative religious schools that in effect they create strong social boundaries that limit access to knowledge and other resources that may be important for academic success. The pattern of social ties in evangelical Protestant schools, for example, may be "norm-reinforcing" rather than "horizon expanding."[4] As a result, some would say, conservative religious schools have social capital that is entirely inward-focused and lacks connections to useful outside sources of information and norms. All told, these patterns in schools may parallel processes within conservative religion that supposedly result in lower levels of cognitive capacity, especially as evidenced by verbal ability.[5]

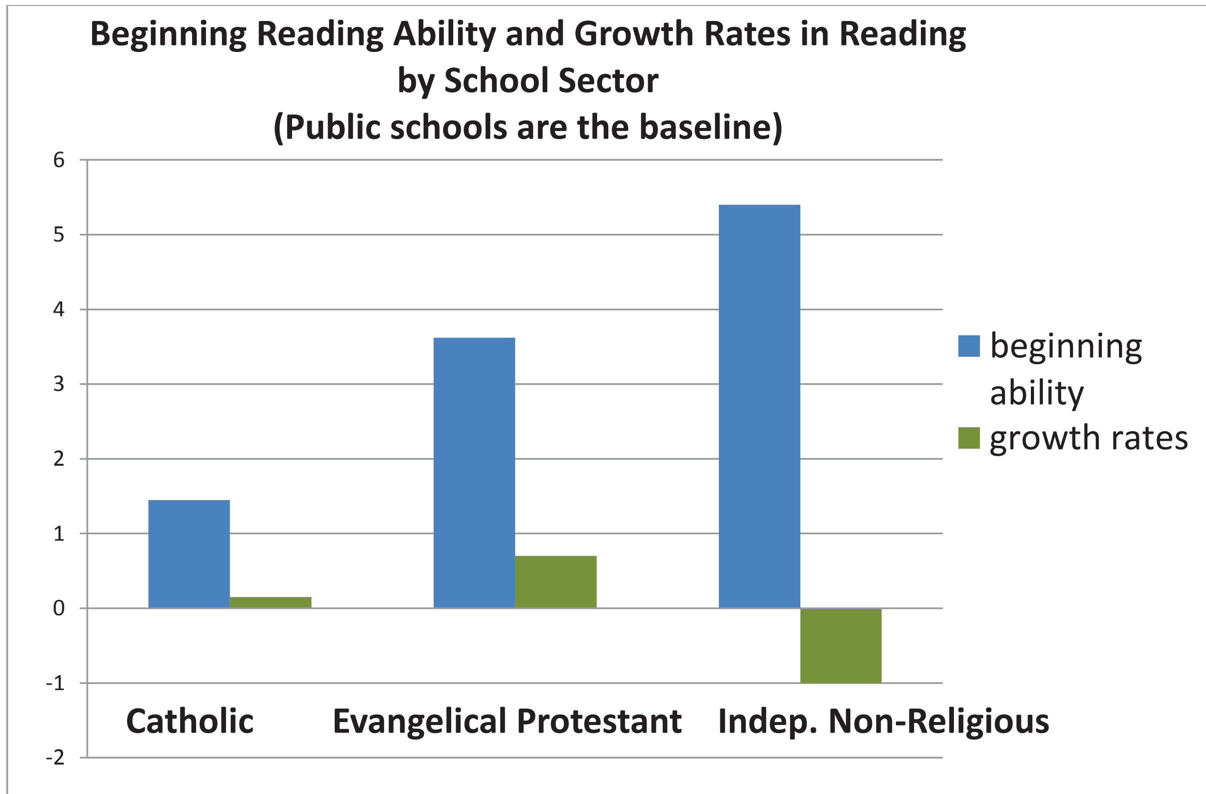
However, there may be other aspects of social patterns in evangelical Protestant schools, such as connections to churches, which facilitate for students more extensive relationships with adults, which may mitigate any negative effects of the "norm-reinforcing" social capital. In general, the focus on family and school integration may be particularly important in the early years for promoting student academic success. In addition, we might expect that in the younger years, the extent that a church-school-family web generates social control processes and a consistent approach to child socialization that keep students on-task and perhaps engaged at school may counteract any negative effects of the high social boundaries that some have found in evangelical Protestant "totalitarian" organizations.[6]

The Catholic school advantage, according to Bryk, Lee and Holland, includes an organization marked by strong community.[7] The shared mission and a strong sense of belonging, along with a commitment to a core curriculum in which all students are expected to learn at high levels, has been shown to create a context that promotes academic success of students. An implication for school organization that may affect average levels of academic achievement is that Catholic schools may eschew ability grouping and tracking. A strong ethos or normative climate and an effective disciplinary climate in Catholic schools may be conducive to younger students staying on task in the classroom. We would add that many of these school characteristics would seem to apply to evangelical Protestant schools, though these schools have been less well studied due to their small student population.

While evangelical Protestant schools may exhibit many of the characteristics of Catholic schools that advantage students academically, there is one difference that may be expressed within the school culture and organization: evangelical Protestants place a strong emphasis on religious socialization of children through reading the Bible. This Protestant emphasis had a strong impact on social, economic, and political development,[8] and may take root in evangelical Protestant schools as well. We would expect that evangelical Protestant teachers and students are more engaged in reading for the very reason that reading is such an important practice for the faithful. That reading is connected to religious and spiritual goals and practices may mean that students are more strongly motivated to develop their reading skills.

Data and Results

We use the 1998 Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey (kindergarten sample) to find evidence for these claims. The ECLS is designed to be a national sample of kindergarteners in the US. Over 17,000 students were sampled in the first year, and most were followed through the eighth grade. We focus on the IRT reading test score gains of students between the fall of their kindergarten year to the spring of their first grade year (measurements at three time points). We classify schools based on



Evangelical Protestant and Independent non-religious school students began Kindergarten with significantly higher IRT reading test scores than did public school students, net of socioeconomic standing, race, gender, rate of religious attendance, and urban/rural home environment. However, while evangelical Protestant students made significantly higher gains in reading compared to public school students, public school students outpaced independent non-religious school students. There were no significant differences found in either beginning scores or growth rates between Catholic school and public school students.

denominational information for each selected school available from the Private School Survey, which is conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics. The large ECLS sample size provides 1,769 Catholic school students, 99 mainline Protestant school students, 624 evangelical Protestant school students, and 229 private nonreligious school students. The public school student sample is 14,130.

In our models, we accounted for several school variables, including percent white and all-day kindergarten, as well as several family and individual-level variables, including parent religious attendance, parent educational attainment, and the child's gender and race/ethnicity.

Our first set of results are from a simple regression model that includes fall kindergarten reading scores to predict spring first grade reading scores. The average change in reading score during this period was 10 points. The results show positive effects of attending a conservative Protestant school compared to public schools on the change in reading score, and this was statistically significant. We did not find statistically significant differences for Catholic school attendance, but independent nonreligious school students, on average, had

a significantly negative reading score gain compared to public schoolers, suggesting that these schools may be focusing on academic goals other than reading during this period. The effect of religious service attendance is positive, but does not entirely account for the religious school findings. Including measures of network closure did not account for the religious school effects either.

Our second set of analyses predicted the starting reading score and the trajectory of the reading score across the three time points. Using a latent growth curve model, we estimated reading trajectories, including the intercept and slope on reading for each child, and attempted to explain differences in trajectories with our independent variables. In terms of starting points, we find that evangelical Protestant and nonreligious independent school students are significantly higher than public school students, suggesting that these students started school with a higher reading ability than their counterparts in public schools.

What is more important, however, is the association between school sector and growth rates in reading. The evangelical Protestant sector is significantly positive on reading growth rates during this period of elementary school. Therefore, evangelical Protestant school students begin school with a higher ability level than public school students, and then make faster gains in reading skills than their counterparts in public schools. However, this significant effect cannot be interpreted as a cumulative advantage of beginning school with more advanced reading skills as nonreligious independent school students have a significantly negative growth rate in relation to public school students. These findings suggest that evangelical Protestant schools are placing a greater emphasis on teaching and encouraging reading than are public and other private schools.

Conclusion

The positive effects of evangelical Protestant schooling on academic outcomes runs counter to recent analyses of the ECLS data.[9] One of the main differences, of course, is that we are focusing on reading rather than math. On this score, it is possible that an emphasis on highly structured learning, including phonics instruction, and a general orientation toward basic skills pays off in the first years of schooling. This evidence is consistent with the claim that evangelical Protestant schools have the kind of culture and structure that is geared toward reading in the early years. The kind of schools that evangelical Protestantism builds may emphasize reading given the importance of Bible to the individual devotional practices and religious socialization of children in the evangelical Protestant world. This would be consistent with a long line of historical research that has connected Protestantism with literacy.[10]

The evangelical Protestant school reading advantage may not carry into the later years. Our next set of analyses will investigate the longer term trajectory of reading in elementary school. And our future work will attempt to capture characteristics of the schools that may explain differences in growth trajectories by school sector.

Notes

[1] Lubienski, Christopher A. and Sarah Theule Lubienski. 2013. *The Public School Advantage: Why Public Schools Outperform Private Schools.* University of Chicago Press.

[2] United States Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences. National Center for Education Statistics. Early Childhood Longitudinal Study [United States}: Kindergarten Class of 1998-1999, Kindergarten-Eighth Grade Full Sample. ICPSR28023-v1. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor].

[3] Wolf, Patrick J. 2014. "Comparing Public Schools to Private." Review of *The Public School Advantage: Why Public Schools Outperform Private Schools. Education Next* 14:3.

[4] Morgan, Stephen L. and Aage B. Sørensen. 1999. "Parental Networks, Social Closure, and Mathematics Learning: A Test of Coleman's Social Capital Explanation of School Effects." *American Sociological Review* 64:661-681.

[5] Sherkat, Darren E. 2010. "Religion and Verbal Ability." *Social Science Research* 32:2-13.

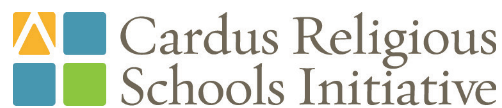
[6] Peshkin, Alan. 1986. *God's Choice: The Total World of a Fundamentalist Christian School*. University of Chicago Press.

[7] Bryk, A. S., Lee, V. E., & Holland, P. B. 1993. *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

[8] Woodbury, Robert. 2012. "The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy." *American Political Science Review* 106:244-274.

[9] Lubienski and Lubienski 2013.

[10] Becker, Sascha O. and Ludger Woessmann. 2009. "Was Weber Wrong? A Human Capital Theory of Protestant Economic History." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 124:531-596; Gawthrop, Richard and Gerald Strauss. 1984. "Protestantism and Literacy in Early Modern Germany." *Past and Present* 104:31-55.



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