

Social/Behavioral Skills and the Gender Gap in Early Educational Achievement

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Abstract

Though many studies have suggested that social and behavioral skills play a central role in gender stratification processes, we know little about the extent to which these skills affect gender gaps in academic achievement. Analyzing data from the Early Child Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort, we demonstrate that social and behavioral skills have substantively important effects on academic outcomes from kindergarten through fifth grade. Gender differences in the acquisition of these skills, moreover, explain a considerable fraction of the gender gap in academic outcomes during early elementary school. Boys get roughly the same academic return to social and behavioral skills as their female peers, but girls retain an advantage both because they begin school with more advanced social and behavioral skills, and because their skill advantage grows over time. While part of the effect may reflect an evaluation process that rewards students who better conform to school norms, our results imply that the acquisition of social and behavioral skills enhances learning as well. Our results call for a reconsideration of the family and school-level processes that produce gender gaps in social/behavioral skills and the advantages they confer for academic and later success.