

Religious Practice and Educational Attainment

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I. Extraordinary Significance of Religious Practice

The social sciences show religious practice has very beneficial effects on the educational attainment of children. It may well trump income in its effects on educational outcomes.

The direct positive effects of religious practice by the student include:

- Higher grade point averages,
- More time spent on homework, and
- A significant decrease in high school drop-out rates.

All these hold even more so for children from low-income neighborhoods. Religious practice benefits the poor more than it does those children who are relatively well-off, likely because religion is one of the very few well-functioning institutions the poor can readily access and rely upon.

The pathways of these educational gains:

Between religious practice at home and educational attainment in school lie the pathways to this outcome—the means by which religious practice influences educational performance. These include internalized values and norms, strong work habits, high personal expectations, and lower rates of risky behaviors. Families that share religious involvement, and parents who have stable marriages, inculcate these values and expectations in their children.

The indirect positive effects of religious practice help students to:

- Internalize values and norms that help achievement,

- Foster high personal expectations, internal locus of control, productive routines, and
- Avoid socially deviant behavior.

Familial and communal practices lend further advantages:

- Religious families tend to be cohesive and stable, to plan for students' futures, and to expect much of them.
- Religious peers tend to be more academically oriented, and the resulting peer group encourages academic engagement.
- Churches offer students resources, community, and mentorship.
- As academic institutions religious schools are more effective.
- After-school religious activities offer a structured alternative to "hanging out."

II. Negative Outcomes

For some, religious practice impedes educational achievement; more fundamentalist religious groups tend to consider education detrimental to students' religious convictions and often discourage higher education.