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Socio-economic factors, home learning and child language, literacy and social competence

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Background

Countless studies have established a link between poverty and children's cognitive abilities and social-emotional competence (eg, Dahl & Lochner, 2005; Gershoff et al, 2003; Mayer, 2002; Seccombe, 2000). The effects of socio-economic disadvantage on children's development have been explained through parents' decisions about how to allocate a range of resources, eg, money, time, energy (investment model) (Becker, 1991; Foster, 2002). The amount of money parents spend on children (e.g., purchasing books, toys), and the time they spend with them in joint activities (e.g., visiting the library or reading books) are considered investments that have the potential to enhance children's cognitive skills and language (Gershoff et al, 2007) and emergent literacy (eg, Dickinson and Tabors, 2001).

Despite the increasing emphasis on the benefits of parent involvement for children's development, there is little research on the impact of socio-economic factors and the frequency of home learning activities on young children's language / literacy and social-emotional competence prior to and during the first year of formal schooling, utilising a nationally representative sample. The effectiveness of home learning is ambiguous (eg, Dearing et al, 2006), requiring an examination of its impact on child emergent literacy and social competence within diverse socio-economic contexts and across various learning activities. Finally, the link between home learning and child social adjustment has been relatively under researched in young children (Pomerantz et al., 2006). This is important considering that the effects of socio-economic disadvantage are stronger in early childhood (Yueng et al, 2002) and are linked to adjustment problems in later life (Tremblay, 2000).

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between home learning and socio-economic factors at ages 3 and 5, and their impact on child language / literacy and socio-emotional competence at the end of the reception year. Socio-economic indicators included family income and maternal educational qualifications in that family income can vary temporally, whereas maternal education is less varied over time. Also, for some families with income below poverty line, having parents with some educational qualifications may make them more resourceful in making ends meet.

The research questions were:

Are there any differences in the frequency with which parents from different socio-economic groups (eg, above / below poverty line, mothers with educational qualifications v mothers without) engage with their children in home learning prior to (i.e., age 3) and after the start of formal schooling (age 5)?
What are the effects of family income and maternal educational qualifications as well as the frequency of home learning on children's language / literacy and social competence as measured by teachers at the end of reception year?

Are family income and maternal educational qualifications associated with variation in children's language / literacy skills and social -emotional competence?

Methods

The data for this study came from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), a national longitudinal birth cohort study, which offers a large-scale information about the 'New Century's Children' and their families. The second and third surveys were carried out when the cohort child reached the age of 3

and 5 respectively. The working sample used for this study consisted of 15,600 singleton cohort children. The parent interviews took place when the cohort child was 3 and 5 years old, and teacher questionnaire ratings were recorded at the end of the reception year.

Measures

The socio-economic measures, obtained via face-to-face interviews with parents at 3 and 5, included: family income for which living below the poverty line was based on below the 60% of the national median income before housing cost; and maternal educational qualifications, ranging from no qualifications to qualifications at a postgraduate level.

Home learning involved support with homework (i.e., help with reading and writing), engagement with emergent literacy activities (i.e., learning the alphabet, songs / rhymes and book reading) and other enrichment activities such as playing music, which may not be directly related to school but constitute a form of cognitive-intellectual involvement.

Foundation Stage Profile (FSP): Teacher ratings of Personal, Social and Emotional development (PSE) and Communication, Language and Literacy (CLL) were obtained. PSE contains Dispositions and Attitudes; Social Development; Emotional Development, and CLL contains Language for Communication and Thinking; Linking Sounds and Letters; Reading; Writing.

Frame

A series of univariate analyses of variance were conducted to examine the main and interaction effects of family income / maternal educational qualifications and home learning activities at ages 3 and 5 on child's FSP-CLL and FSP-PSE. Descriptive statistics (eg, cross-tabs:chi square tests) provided information on the percentage of parents and the frequency with which they were involved in learning activities.

Research findings

The findings consistently showed that, regardless of socio-economic factors, parents engaged with home learning roughly equally. Children of educated mothers and children living above the poverty line significantly outperformed in language / literacy and social skills their less well -off peers whose mothers had no educational qualifications. Family income and maternal educational qualifications yielded moderate effects on social adjustment. Regarding language / literacy, family income had a moderate main effect whereas maternal educational qualifications yielded strong effects, highlighting the importance of the human capital generated through education compared to income alone.

The findings from this study illustrate that it is not enough to say that income matters for children in terms of reducing the socio-economic gap in their literacy and social skills. Although increases in family income, particularly among poor families, have a positive impact on child development (Gershoff et al, 2007), maternal educational qualifications and human capital, have a strong influence on young children's language and literacy in particular. The findings also showed that the frequency of home learning alone cannot iron out the effects of socio-economic disadvantage on children outcomes because, although, across socio-economic groups, parents engaged in learning activities equally frequently, socio-economic disadvantage in the form of low income and limited maternal educational qualifications, remained powerful in influencing literacy and social-emotional well-being at the start of formal education. These findings have equity implications, especially as the socio-economic gap in our society widens.