

Learning at home and school across the 3-16 life-course: Fifty child case studies of 'risk' and 'resilience' from the EPPSE longitudinal study

Iram Siraj-Blatchford¹, Aziza Mayo¹, Edward Melhuish², Brenda Taggart¹, Pam Sammons³, Kathy Sylva³

¹*Institute of Education, University of London, London, United Kingdom*, ²*Birkbeck, University of London, London, United Kingdom*, ³*Education Dept., University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom*

Background

The Effective Provision of Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) research project has provided a large scale, longitudinal, mixed-method research study that has followed the progress of over 3000 children from the age of 3 to 16 years. A continuing question for EPPSE was whether pre-school, compulsory education or children's home learning experiences could reduce inequality. While the study found that parents' SES and levels of education were significantly related to child outcomes, it also found that the quality of the home learning environment was important. EPPE 3-11 found that it was what parents did that was more important in terms of the children's outcomes than who they were (Melhuish et al., 2001).

In 2008 an extension was funded by the Cabinet Office for the Equalities Review providing a pilot study for the case studies reported in this paper. The pilot focused on the performance of disadvantaged children from White and minority ethnic groups. It found that disadvantaged families often had high aspirations for their children and provided significant educational support in a form similar to that described by Lareau & Weininger (2007) as 'concerted cultivation'. A report on this pilot study has been accepted for publication in BERJ entitled 'Learning in the Home: How working class children succeed against the odds' (Siraj-Blatchford, forthcoming, published iFirst 2009).

In 2009 the DCSF funded a further extension of the mixed methodology work to follow the students throughout their whole compulsory schooling. One aspect of the study has been to conduct 50 qualitative child case studies (CCS) to extend our understanding of child, family and school factors and experiences; how they interact and contribute to the achievement of children in school. We report fully upon these CCS in this paper.

In conducting the CCS we aim to provide further information that might help us understand more fully the statistical patterns that have been found through quantitative analyses on the EPPSE sample, for instance on the effects of early Home Learning Environments. The CCS show when and why some 'at-risk' children succeed 'against the odds' while others fall further behind, and also when and why some 'privileged' children fall behind, despite their positive family characteristics.

Research Questions

- When and why do some 'at-risk' children succeed 'against the odds' while others fall further behind?
- What factors act as protective influences in combating poor outcomes and what factors increase the risk of poor outcomes? What are positive or negative influences for certain groups of children?
- What are the views of vulnerable and resilient children and their parents of their own educational experiences? How do they perceive the events and people that have shaped them?
- What are the key factors within families that shape the educational and developmental outcomes of resilient and vulnerable children? How does this vary with ethnicity? What is the role of the school and teachers in enhancing or undermining a child's academic and social potential at different ages i.e. leading to resilience or vulnerability?

- What factors, external to school and family, influence children's views of themselves as successful learners (e.g. community, computer use, extracurricular activities pursuit of hobbies/interests, family learning or similar activities)?

Methods

Sampling procedure

Achievement in maths and reading at age 11 was predicted using multilevel modelling (Melhuish et al) for the full sample of EPPSE 3-11 children (N=3172), and residual scores for each individual child were obtained, indicating the differences between predicted and attained achievement at age 11. This analysis controlled for age, gender, birth weight, and the presence of developmental problems and family characteristics (i.e., parent education, social class and family income). These multilevel model residuals were then applied to create three performance groups, those; 'succeeding against the odds'; children who 'performed as predicted'; and 'unexpected underachievers'. Family socioeconomic status (SES) was then applied as a further selection criteria.

Methodology

Fifty child and their parent/s were interviewed using semi-structured interview schedules in 2009, and a nominated teacher from their school was interviewed. Each parent and student interview was transcribed following a strict protocol and imported to NVivo 8.0 for analysis.

Frame

This paper reports on the qualitative case studies developed within a mixed method study applying an adaptation of grounded theory (Glazer, 1978, Siraj-Blatchford, et al, 2006).

Two forms of analysis have been applied in the CCS data: the first involving a more detailed analysis of the specific child trajectories and the second a qualitative analysis of the interview data. The first analysis identified the specific trajectory children followed across the study points of assessment. At each point the individual cognitive measures were ranked according to their relative position in comparison to the full EPPE/EPPSE sample at that point of measurement. Five general trajectory patterns of achievement in Maths and English were identified that describe the overall shape of the student trajectories: Those showing stability, improvement, decline, changeability and mixture (where trajectories were different for Maths and English).

This preliminary analysis informed the qualitative analysis affording the opportunity of theoretical sampling and critical comparison. The NVivo software has provided flexibility and allowed us to code the transcripts on different levels and adjust/redefine the coding throughout the process. During the coding the analysis involved constantly moving back and forth between the qualitative interview data, quantitative EPPSE data and the relevant national and international literature. While the final project report will include 'thick descriptive' individual case studies, the findings reported here summarise the more general findings.

Research findings

The findings provide information that can be of use to policymakers and practitioners and may serve to inform policies and practices that aim to increase the chances of children 'at risk' and help in closing the gap between those advantaged and disadvantaged. The project is funded by the DCSF and the findings will be presented in April after which they can be reported at BERA in September.