

[INSIGHTS]

THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP: ARE PARENTS OR POLITICIANS RESPONSIBLE?

Parents have long heeded the call to get involved in their children's learning. But how effective is their support? Do disadvantaged parents stand a chance of narrowing the UK's notorious achievement gap between their children and the offspring of wealthier families? Using a representative sample of nearly 10,000 seven-year-olds from the Millennium Cohort Study, I examined whether parental support is the key to children's language and literacy levels at age seven – or whether other factors are of greater importance.

KEY POINTS

- 1 The strongest indicators of language and literacy levels at age seven are family income, and mother's education and reading habits.
- 2 No significant link was found between parental support for learning and children's language and literacy levels at age seven.
- 3 Three-quarters of parents, from all socio-economic groups, routinely helped their children with their schoolwork.
- 4 The percentage of parents who helped at least several times a week was not significantly affected by children's abilities in language and literacy.

MAJOR IMPLICATIONS

- 1 Social class still shapes young children's progress through school, a finding which highlights the need for public debate on class and its impact on families.
- 2 Parental involvement alone is unlikely to close the persistent achievement gap between poor and wealthier children.
- 3 Quality, rather than lack, of parental support may be the problem. Genuine education opportunities, especially for deprived parents, are crucial to promoting learning at home.
- 4 Government policy does not need to persuade parents to get involved, but should support them in tackling the structural constraints poverty imposes on their life.

THE RESEARCH

Since the 1970s, parents have increasingly become involved with their children's education. This trend continued in the first decade of this century and has been positively linked to achievement in relation to school. Nevertheless, questions remain as to the effectiveness of parental support, given that the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their wealthier peers is as wide as ever.

Recent research has shown that the extent to which parents encourage learning at home is not the primary mechanism through which poverty translates to achievement gap. Far more relevant as to whether young children fall behind in their language, literacy and social development is their parents' income, social class and educational qualifications. In disadvantaged families, especially those in which parents lack education and the intellectual capital that comes with it, the impact of their involvement may be weak. Although they are as likely to help as wealthier parents, they may have less time to spare and the help they offer may be of limited value. The stresses and strains of coping with poverty may also undermine their efforts.

Given the uncertainty surrounding the effectiveness of parental involvement, we need to better understand what aspects, if any, of the multi-faceted home learning environment could potentially narrow the achievement gap. This study examined the relationships between children's language and literacy at the end of Key Stage 1 and:

THE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT:

- maternal learning support both in relation to school (help with homework) and in relation to personally enriching activities (book reading),
- the quality of mother-child interactions,
- maternal reading habits.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC INDICATORS:

- family income,
- maternal educational qualifications.

CHILD FACTORS:

- behaviour,
- cognition,
- attitude to school.

Data came from a sample of 9,419 seven-year-olds taken from the fourth 'sweep' of the Millennium Cohort Study, a major piece of research that is tracking the lives of nearly 19,000 children born in the UK in 2000.

Analysis of the data revealed little association between children whose mothers offered learning support (help with homework and reading books) and achievement in language and literacy as rated by teachers at the end of Key Stage 1. Children's behaviour, attitudes to school and cognition were associated with achievement, but not to the same degree as family income, maternal educational qualifications and maternal reading habits.

In other words, children from the poorest fifth of families with unqualified mothers are highly likely to be rated by teachers as below average for speaking and listening, reading and writing. The odds drop dramatically for families above the bottom fifth, and continue to fall as family wealth and mother's education qualifications rise to degree level. Educated mothers who read frequently for enjoyment are likely to promote reading as a

shared experience at home. Their children have easy access to books, magazines, newspapers and other forms of print as well as their parents' cultural and intellectual capital.

Parents, it seems, matter mostly for who they are (for example, educated, capable of accessing resources and services) rather than for what they do. This is not to suggest that they shouldn't bother supporting their children's learning. Their involvement does matter, but it cannot be seen as the way to level the playing field for deprived children.

Within government policy on the family, parenting has come to be viewed as a way of compensating for social and economic disadvantage. But parents, no matter how good or effective they are, cannot overcome structural problems of poverty to maximise their children's educational opportunities and life chances. Equality of opportunity and social mobility require political, not individual, solutions, likely to be achieved through income redistribution and tax policies. They also require an open and honest debate about social class and structural inequality.

MAJOR IMPLICATIONS

Despite many parents' efforts, the achievement gap between poor and wealthier children persists. This persistence indicates the complexity of the relationship between a child's home learning environment, their socio-economic background and their progress at school. We struggle to understand fully the subtle implications of relative degrees of inequality and uneven opportunities for social mobility and, crucially, the many ways in which poverty can stunt a child's language and literacy. But it is clear that families are trapped in a vicious circle.

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Socio-economic inequality shapes the relationship between home learning and school outcomes. It makes educational resources and institutions unattainable, which in turn makes it hard for parents and their children to embark on the long climb out of poverty.

Our understanding of inequality is also not helped by debates about a 'culture of poverty' or poverty that results from a minority of parents' choice to deviate from the mainstream. Such debates put the onus for tackling underachievement on the shoulders of individual parents. Families are micromanaged, instead of being 'lifted out' of poverty through the promotion of political and collective action.

Moreover, views about a 'culture of poverty' are likely to trivialise the challenges faced by deprived families. To regard parental learning support as a key strategy to raise achievement without considering families' individual circumstances may be overly simplistic and potentially ineffective. This is especially the case given that underachievement appears sustained by structural inequality, and not lack of parental involvement with children's learning.

In deprived families, home learning is likely to be undermined by a lack of money to spend on educational resources and services. Given the current economic downturn, →

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this situation is unlikely to change until at least 2020. It is important, therefore, that policies to support families do more than merely focus on parenting skills. They should offer parents education and employment opportunities to build up their 'human capital'. Family interventions, if they are parent driven and go beyond parenting

skills, stand a chance of being of greater benefit to young children.

Finally, the increasing focus on parents' skills and behaviour promotes a view that the problems of poverty, inequality and injustice can be solved by individuals facing up to their particular challenges. This is a very different approach to that which considers parents to be capable of acting and thinking together to tackle inequality in ways relevant to their local communities. ●

FURTHER INFORMATION

Hartas, D. (2011) Families' social backgrounds matter: socio-economic factors, home learning and young children's language, literacy and social outcomes. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37 (6).

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