

Education vital for social mobility

Educational performance appears to be one of the main barriers which stop people moving out of poverty. Yet studies indicate that poorer children are still failing to achieve their educational potential. How should these continuing inequalities be addressed? Policies that focus on early years, greater 'school readiness' and support for parents are clearly important but research also points to the multiple structural problems that prevent poor children from achieving their potential, including the pressing need for more 'good' schools.

Key findings

- The strong correlation between parental education and children's achievement in the UK is very high by international standards. Education mobility for the current generation of children has not changed for the least educated households.
- By 11, only around 75 per cent of children from the poorest fifth of families reach the expected level at Key Stage Two, compared to 97 per cent of children from the richest fifth. Only 21 per cent of the poorest fifth of children (measured by parental socio-economic position) manage to gain five good GCSEs, compared to 75 per cent of the top quintile.
- Government child poverty and social mobility strategies should tackle the multiple structural problems (such as inadequate school funding in poor areas, low-quality teaching, exclusions, schools failure to address bullying) which currently prevent poorer children from achieving their educational potential.
- The achievement advantage of children of higher educated parents relative to those of lower educated parents widens throughout the school

years. This widening gap is almost entirely accounted for by the fact that children from degree-educated parents are far more likely to attend higher performing secondary schools and so benefit from a positive school effect.

- A major obstacle to education mobility is that pupil intakes into secondary schools in England remain highly segregated. Radical options to create more balanced intakes in state schools must be considered as well as piloting innovative schooling approaches to improve attainment for the most disadvantaged children.
- Better schools are needed: with better teachers and other educational resources, and a better classroom environment, including better behaved pupils and better interactions among pupils and between pupils and teachers.
- Re-introducing grammar schools and secondary moderns would not help improve social mobility, according to research based on the National Child Development Study. Findings show that the selective system as a whole yields no overall mobility advantage to children from any particular origin.
- Research suggests that conversion of schools to academy status generates a significant improvement in the quality of their pupil intake and a significant improvement in pupil performance.
- Aspirations, attitudes and behaviours of parents and children have an important part to play in explaining why poor children typically do worse at school.
- The Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) increases participation rates in post-16 education among eligible young adults.
- Poor attainment in secondary schools is more important in explaining lower Higher Education (HE) participation rates among students from disadvantaged backgrounds than barriers arising at the point of entry into HE. These findings highlight the need for earlier policy intervention to raise HE participation rates among disadvantaged youth.
- Raising the school-leaving age has a significant impact on individuals' labour market returns only if those individuals compelled to stay on are induced to complete national recognised qualifications.

Disadvantaged children less ready for school

Disadvantaged children are more likely to arrive at school lacking basic socio-emotional skills

The importance of early child health and development for later life health and social outcomes is widely accepted. The three chief domains of early child development are physical, socio-emotional and cognitive domains, and favourable profiles in these strongly predict whether or not young children are 'school ready'.

Recent work from the ESRC Centre for Lifecourse Studies in Society and Health shows that disadvantaged children are more likely to arrive at school lacking basic socio-emotional skills such as the ability to take part in conversations or to pay attention to others¹. Children from poor households are also less likely to benefit from home learning activities or have a quiet space in which to study, and more likely to suffer frequent illnesses due to inadequate housing.

Children living in poverty, or with a lack of material resources, have substantially lower scores in measures of their cognitive ability at ages three, five and seven years, although the exact causal mechanisms that lead from child poverty to lower cognitive attainment are still uncertain². This suggests a possible link between poverty and social (im)mobility in that children living in poverty achieve less at school, which in turn leads them to gain low levels of qualifications. Lower qualifications mean fewer opportunities in the labour market which can typically lead to employment in lower paid semi-skilled or unskilled occupations.

Attitudes and behaviour matter to educational attainment

The aspirations, attitudes and behaviour of parents and children play an important part in explaining why poor children typically do worse at school

It is well known that children growing up in poor families have lower educational attainment than children growing up in richer families. By 11, only around three quarters

of children from the poorest fifth of families reach the expected level at Key Stage Two, compared to 97 per cent of children from the richest fifth³. Only 21 per cent of the poorest fifth of children (measured by parental socio-economic position) manage to gain five good GCSEs, compared to 75 per cent of the top quintile.

The ways that affluence and disadvantage can influence educational attainment are potentially very broad. Research by the ESRC Centre for Market and Public Organisation (CMPO) and the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) suggests that aspirations, attitudes and behaviours of parents and children potentially have an important part to play in explaining why poor children typically do worse at school.

The research shows that poorer children who performed well in Key Stage tests at age seven were more likely than better-off children to fall behind by age 11, and poorer children who performed badly at seven were less likely to improve their ranking compared with children from better-off backgrounds – an important factor behind the widening gap.

Exploring some of the possible explanations for the widening gap during primary school, researchers point to factors such as parental aspirations for higher education. For example, parental aspirations and attitudes to education varied strongly by socio-economic position, with 81 per cent of the richest mothers saying they hoped their nine-year-old would go to university, compared with only 37 per cent of the poorest mothers. The adverse attitudes to education of disadvantaged mothers are one of the most important factors associated with the lower educational attainment of their children at age 11.

The study also found that young people are more likely to do well at GCSEs if the young person him/herself has a greater belief in his/her own ability at school; believes that events result primarily from his/her own behaviour and actions; finds school worthwhile; thinks it is likely that he/she will apply to, and get into, higher education; avoids risky behaviour such as frequent smoking, cannabis use, anti-social behaviour, truancy, suspension and exclusion; and does not experience bullying.

Since young people growing up in poor families do less well in all these respects compared with those in better-off

¹ Kelly, Y., Sacker, A., Del Bono, E., Francesconi, M. and Marmot, M. (2011). What role for the home learning environment and parenting in reducing the socioeconomic gradient in child development? Findings from the Millennium Cohort Study, *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, vol. 96: 832-837.

² Blanden, J. and Machin, S. (2010) Changes in inequality and intergenerational mobility in early years assessments. In Hansen, K., Joshi, H. and Dex, S. (eds), *Children of the 21st century (Volume 2): the first five years*. Bristol: The Policy Press; Jones, E. and Schoon, I. (2010) Cognitive development. In Hansen, K., Jones, E., Joshi, H. and Budge, D. (eds), *Millennium Cohort Study Fourth Survey: A User's Guide to Initial Findings*. London: Centre for Longitudinal Studies

³ Goodman, A. and Gregg, P. (2010), CMPO and IFS. Poorer children's educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviour? Joseph Rowntree Publication

families, this provides some explanation for their poorer educational attainment by the end of compulsory schooling.

These findings suggest that attitudes and behaviour are potentially important links between socio-economic disadvantage and children's educational attainment. While drawing policy conclusions from this evidence must be done with care, this research highlights two major areas where policy might help to reduce educational inequalities. First, in relation to parents and the family home:

- Improving the home learning environment in poorer families (eg. books and reading pre-school, computers in teen years);
- Helping parents from poorer families to believe that their own actions and efforts can lead to higher education;
- Raising families' aspirations and desire for advanced education, from primary school onwards.

Second, the child's own attitudes and behaviours:

- Reducing children's behavioural problems, and engagement in risky behaviours;
- Helping children from poorer families to believe that their own actions and efforts can lead to higher education;
- Raising children's aspirations and expectations for advanced education, from primary school onwards.

Better schools key to higher achievements

Better educated parents put their children into 'better schools', particularly at the secondary school level

The way English children are sorted into secondary schools affects inequality in their educational achievements.

Children of better educated parents improve their educational performance more during secondary school than those of less educated parents, according to data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE)⁴. A generally accepted target for achievements at the end of compulsory secondary school is for the student to have five GCSEs at grades A*-C, including English and Maths. Forty-seven per cent of the sample reach this target overall, with the percentage rising from 20 per cent of the lowest parental education group to 79 per cent of the top group.

Findings from the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) reveal that adolescents with better educated parents have greater chances of improvement in school test results between 11 and 16. Part of the reason for this, say researchers, appears to be related to the sorting of children into secondary schools. Better educated parents put their children in better quality schools, and the

association between school quality and parental background is stronger at secondary school than primary school.

A 'better school' would be one with better teachers and other educational resources, and a better classroom environment, including better behaved pupils and better interactions among pupils and between pupils and teachers. Better educated parents manage to send their children to better schools primarily by living in areas with good access to these type of schools.

How can policy reduce educational inequality related to parental background? More equal access to good schools could make some contribution, but as long as there is large variation in school quality it would be limited because more affluent parents can afford to locate closer to better schools. Reducing the variance of school quality through a 'levelling up' of quality could make a large contribution, but although we know what makes a school better, it is not clear how this can be achieved.

Improving education mobility is a pressing need as education mobility for the current generation of children has not changed in the least educated households⁵. Indeed, the disadvantage of having poorly educated parents in terms of performing well in tests at age 11 and age 16 is the same for the current generation of children as the previous generation.

However, the advantage of having degree-educated parents in terms of performing well in tests at age 11 and age 16 has diminished for the current generation of children compared with previous generations, indicating an improvement in education mobility.

In 2006 (for children born in 1989/90), the chance of obtaining at least five GCSEs with grades of A*-C was four times higher for children of degree-educated parents than for children whose parents did not go to university. However, the relative advantage has declined over time. In 1974 (for children born in 1958), the odds were 6.5 times higher.

This effect, researchers explain, could be due to the increase in proportion of children in this top educational grouping, making it less exclusive than successive generations as the education levels of parents have risen.

Nonetheless, stark achievement gaps between children of degree-educated parents and those of uneducated parents remain. In 2006, 79 per cent of children with degree-educated parents obtained at least five GCSEs at A*-C grades compared with 33 per cent of children whose parents left school without any O-levels or equivalent qualifications – a gap of 46 percentage points. In 1986 and 1974 the equivalent achievement gap in O-levels was 44 percentage points.

⁴ Del Bono, E. and Ermisch, J. (forthcoming) Schools and Inequality in Educational Achievements. ISER

⁵ Ermisch, J. and Del Bono, E. (2010) Education Mobility in England. ISER for the Sutton Trust

More qualifications needed from longer stay in school

The effect of gaining a certification and not just merely length of schooling alone plays an important role in explaining future economic outcomes

The commitment to keeping young people in education for longer is of questionable value unless it is also accompanied by an increase in the qualifications that pupils achieve.

One of the Government's responses to concerns about the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), (a payment of up to £30 a week to children from poorer families who remain in post-16 education) has been to mention their commitment to raising the school participation age to 18. The details of this latter policy need to be carefully thought through for it to have a real impact on the life chances of disadvantaged young people.

Findings from a 2006 ISER study show that raising the school-leaving age has a significant impact on individuals' labour market returns only if those individuals compelled to stay on complete national recognised qualifications.

This finding has important implications. The current policy would compel young people to stay in education or training until the end of the academic year in which they turn 17, and as from 2015 until their 18th birthday. It is not clear that, as it currently stands, this policy will bring about an increase in qualification levels and therefore substantial improvement in an individual's life chances⁶.

The Government decision to scrap the EMA – and replace it with a smaller payment – was on the grounds that the EMA is expensive (£553 million in 2009/10) and that about 88 per cent of EMA recipients would stay in education even without this subsidy. But a 2007 Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) report found that the EMA significantly increased participation rates in post-16 education among eligible young adults⁷. In particular, it increased the proportion of eligible 16-year-olds staying in education from 65 per cent to 69 per cent, and increased the proportion of eligible 17-year-olds in education from 54 per cent to 61 per cent.

A more recent study by IFS researchers finds that in areas where the EMA was available, students as a whole were around two percentage points more likely to reach the thresholds for Levels two and three of the National Qualifications Framework and they also had A-Level grades around four points higher (on the UCAS tariff) on average⁸.

Which schools promote social mobility?

The selective system as a whole yields no mobility advantage of any kind to children from any particular origin: any assistance to low-origin children provided by grammar schools is cancelled out by the hindrance suffered by those who attended secondary moderns.

Re-introducing grammar schools and secondary moderns would not help improve social mobility, according to research based on the National Child Development Study⁹.

Academy Schools may provide a more fruitful way forward. A recent study from the Centre for the Economics of Education suggests that moving to a more autonomous school structure through conversion to academy status improves the quality of their pupil intake and improves pupil performance. Researchers also find significant external effects on the pupil intake and the pupil performance of neighbouring schools. All of these results are strongest for the schools that have been academies for longer and for those who experienced the largest increase in their school autonomy¹⁰.

Poor educational attainment linked to lower HE participation

Secondary schools are important not only for attainment but also to encourage students from poorer backgrounds to apply to high-status institutions

Recent IFS research into the determinants of Higher Education (HE) participation among individuals from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds follows two cohorts of students in England – those who took GCSEs in 2001-02 and 2002-03 – from age 11 to age 20¹¹. Findings suggest that while large raw gaps in HE participation (and participation at high-status universities) by socio-economic status remain, these differences are substantially reduced once controls for prior attainment are included. So students who perform well in earlier stages of education – regardless of background – are likely to go on to HE participation. Moreover, these findings hold for both state and private school students.

This suggests that poor attainment in secondary schools is more important in explaining lower HE participation rates among students from disadvantaged backgrounds than

⁶ Del Bono, E. and Galindo-Rueda, F. (2006) The long-term impacts of compulsory schooling: Evidence from a natural experiment in school-leaving dates, ISER Working Paper 2006-44, Colchester: University of Essex

⁷ Chowdry, H., Dearden, L., Emmerson, C. (2007) Education Maintenance Allowance: Evaluation with Administrative Data London: IFS

⁸ Chowdry, H. and Emmerson, C. (2010) An Efficient Maintenance Allowance? London: IFS

⁹ Boliver, V. and Swift, A. (2011) Do comprehensive schools reduce social mobility? *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol 62, Issue 1, 89-110

¹⁰ Machin, S. and Vernoit, J. (2011) Changing School Autonomy: Academy Schools and their Introduction to England's Education, CEE Discussion Paper 123, London School of Economics

¹¹ Chowdry, H. et al (2010) Widening participation in Higher Education: Analysis using linked administrative data. IFS Working paper W10/04

barriers arising at the point of entry into HE. These findings highlight the need for earlier policy intervention to raise HE participation rates among disadvantaged youth.

Pupil premium needs to follow disadvantaged pupils

Efforts to make the school funding system more equitable might help to improve the UK's record on social mobility since this is correlated with inequality

A 2010 evaluation of education policies by the ESRC Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) suggests that a 'pupil premium' that would follow disadvantaged pupils to the schools they attend would help to correct inequities in how funding is allocated to schools¹².

The report states that local authorities decide on their own funding formulae for schools. Although they have to take

account of deprivation, they can decide how to do it and to what extent. The result is that schools facing the same level of deprivation receive different amounts of funding, depending on where they are located. Therefore, there is no guarantee that individual pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds would benefit from the extra school funding even if the pupil premium were adopted.

However, evidence clearly suggests that economically disadvantaged pupils benefit disproportionately from rises in general school expenditure. Hence, a pupil premium that follows disadvantaged pupils could help correct inequities in the school funding system.

¹² McNally, S. (2010) Evaluating Education Policies: The Evidence from Economic Research. CEPEA008.

ESRC SOCIAL MOBILITY EVIDENCE BRIEFINGS

This is one in a series of seven briefings that summarise a selection of ESRC-funded research on the topic of social mobility. As well as education, the briefings cover health, parenting, poverty and skills.

An overview of the major ESRC investments covered in the briefings follows overleaf. For a full listing of all ESRC major research investments please see: www.esrc.ac.uk/about-esrc/what-we-do/our-research

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The ESRC Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) examines the determinants of economic performance at the level of the company, the nation and the global economy by focusing on the major links between globalisation, technology and institutions (above all the educational system and the labour market) and their impact on productivity, inequality, employment, stability and wellbeing – cep.lse.ac.uk

The ESRC Centre for Lifecourse Studies in Society and Health (ICLS) investigates processes throughout the life course that relate the development of personal and professional skills to health and wellbeing and to patterns of employment and social participation. This research is possible due to the unique longitudinal birth cohort studies that have been carried out in the UK and the availability of comparative national and international data – www.ucl.ac.uk/icls

The ESRC Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS) is an ESRC Resource Centre which houses three of Britain's internationally-renowned birth cohort studies:

- 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS)
- 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70)
- Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)

The studies involve multiple surveys of large numbers of individuals from birth and throughout their lives. They have collected information on education and employment, family and parenting, physical and mental health, and social attitudes – www.cls.ioe.ac.uk

The ESRC Centre for Market and Public Organisation (CMPO) is a leading research centre combining expertise in economics, geography and law. The centre aims to study the intersection between the public and private sectors of the economy, and in particular to understand the right way to organise and deliver public services – www.bristol.ac.uk/cmppo

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) promotes effective economic and social policies by increasing understanding of their impact on individuals, families, businesses and the government's finances. The IFS has hosted an ESRC research centre since 1991. The ESRC Centre for the Microeconomic Analysis of Public Policy (CPP) aims to carry out core analytical research that will allow informed microeconomic analysis of major public policy issues, from productivity growth to poverty reduction, and from promoting employment to ensuring sound public finances – www.ifs.org

The Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) is jointly core-funded by the ESRC and the University of Essex. ISER hosts the ESRC Research Centre on Micro-Social Change (MiSOC) and the ESRC UK Longitudinal Studies Centre (ULSC). ISER is also home to *Understanding Society*. The central focus of MiSOC's work is the individual life course and the changing nature of society and its team of world-class researchers and associates come from a range of social science disciplines including economics, sociology, psychology, demography, geography and statistics. The ULSC goal is to ensure the collection of longitudinal data of the highest quality to meet UK social research needs and to promote its widest and most effective use – www.iser.essex.ac.uk

The ESRC Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) in the United Kingdom – the 2011 Survey project's primary purpose is to advance state-of-the-art theory and practice of poverty and social exclusion measurement. To improve current measurement methodologies, the research will develop and repeat the 1999 Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey – www.poverty.ac.uk

Understanding Society is the largest household panel survey in the world. It collects information annually from 100,000 people across 40,000 UK households and provides valuable new evidence about the people of the UK, their lives, experiences, behaviours and beliefs. The study allows for deeper analysis of a wide range of sections of the population as they respond to regional, national and international change. *Understanding Society* will greatly enhance our insight into the pathways that influence people's longer term occupational trajectories, their health and wellbeing, their financial circumstances and personal relationships – www.understandingsociety.org.uk