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## **The learning life course of at 'risk' children aged 3-16: Perceptions of students and parents about 'succeeding against the odds'.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Understanding how we can support children through their learning life course has become a policy imperative, particularly those children from poor homes who would normally be facing a low achiever trajectory. The paper reports on 50 in-depth Child and Family Case Studies (CFCS) that were conducted as part of the Effective Provision of Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3-16) research project. The CFCS was designed as a mixed-methods study in order to look at why and when certain children manage to succeed 'against the odds' while others do not. Using in-depth interviews with students, parents and teachers, quantitative data available from EPPSE and a literature review on risk and resilience, the CFCS provides 'thick descriptions' and explanations of how child, family and school factors interact and contribute to children succeeding against the odds of disadvantage. The study uses over 13 years of data collected from the 50 families and shows that in families with children 'succeeding against the odds', parenting is characterised by 'active cultivation' and that schools, teachers, peers and the wider community contribute to children's academic success by providing emotional, practical and relational support. As a result these children are facilitated and encouraged to develop a combination of positive cognitive and socio-behavioural characteristics that helps them become active agents in their learning life-course. The CFCS provide information that can be of use to both policymakers and practitioners. It has implications for parenting and home-school relations 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 who are academically and socially advantaged and disadvantaged.

### **BACKGROUND**

The Effective Provision of Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) research project is a large scale, longitudinal, mixed-method study that has followed the progress of 3000+ children from the age of 3 to 14 and will continue to do so beyond the end of their compulsory schooling (age 16 in the UK). It has been funded by the Department for Education in England from 1997-2014. An ongoing focus for EPPSE is the extent to which pre-school, compulsory education and children's home learning experiences (HLE) can reduce inequality. While the study found that parents' socio-economic status (SES) and levels of education were significantly related to child outcomes, it also found that the quality of the HLE (especially in the very early years) was important: it was what parents did that was more important in terms of the children's outcomes than who they were (Melhuish et al., 2001; Sammons et al, 2002).

A pilot study funded by the UK Cabinet Office focussed on disadvantaged children who were unexpectedly over-achieving at the end of primary education. It found that their families often had high aspirations and provided significant educational support that resembled 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010).

In this paper we report on 50 mixed-method Child and Family Case Studies (CFCS) that were conducted when the children were in secondary education, in order to extend our understanding of how child, family and school factors interact and contribute to children's achievements (Siraj-Blatchford and Mayo, 2014). We set our focus on investigating the proximal process experiences that are related to children's expected or unexpected academic achievements. Proximal processes are particular forms of interaction between the child and environment that provide the child with culturally regulated experiences through which children's potential for effective psychological and social functioning are actualized (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

The CFCS aimed to help us understand more fully the statistical patterns that have been found in the quantitative analyses of the EPPSE sample. The general question addressed in the CFCS was '*When and why do some 'at-risk' children succeed 'against the odds' while others fall further behind?*', specifically looking at:

1. Key factors within families shaping educational outcomes of resilient and vulnerable children and how this varies with ethnicity;
2. The role of the school and teachers in enhancing or neglecting to promote children's academic and social potential at different ages i.e. leading to resilience or vulnerability;
3. Factors, external to school and family, that influence children's views of themselves as successful learners;
4. Views of vulnerable and resilient children and their parents of the children's educational experiences.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In developing the CFCS we applied an adaptation of grounded theory. A systematic purposeful sample was obtained by using multilevel modelling on the EPPSE 3-11 sample (N=3172). Cognitive assessments collected as part of EPPSE from age 3 onwards were used to create individual learning trajectories for the children. Trajectory patterns and transitional periods within trajectories were described separately for children's Maths and English achievement up to the end of primary school. Residual scores were created for each child, indicating differences in predicted and obtained academic achievement for English and Maths at age 11, while controlling for age, gender, birth weight, early developmental problems, parent education, social class and family income (Melhuish et al., 2008). Three performance groups were created based on these residuals: 'succeeding against the odds', 'performing as predicted', and 'unexpected underachievers'

Family socio-economic status (SES) was then used to create the four groups of interest: two groups with low SES children performing either above prediction (Group 1, n=20 'succeeding against the odds') or as predicted (Group 2, n=15 'expected low achievers') and two groups of high SES children performing below prediction (Group 3, n=9; 'unexpected underachievers') or as predicted (Group 4, n=6 'expected high achievers'). The sample consists of 24 girls and 26 boys; 23 of the children come from families with Indian, Pakistani, Black African, Black Caribbean, White European and mixed heritage backgrounds, the remaining 27 have a White UK heritage. These children, their families and some of their teachers were interviewed.

A review of the literature from the fields of psychology, sociology and education, was conducted to identify general themes and focus areas for the in-depth qualitative interviews with parents, children and teachers (See Siraj-Blatchford and Mayo, 2014, forthcoming). We used Bronfenbrenner's 'bioecological model of development' as the overall framework for the Case Studies. This bioecological model of human development, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner and colleagues (see for instance Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), in particular has played a pivotal role in shaping our understanding of children's developmental processes.

In the bioecological model, development is defined as the phenomenon of continuity and change in the biopsychological characteristics of human beings, both as individuals and as groups. The phenomenon extends over the life course, across successive generations, and through historical time, both past and future (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, op cit p. 793).

It specifically discusses mechanisms of development at work on the different levels of this framework and describes proximal and distal experiences relevant to developmental processes. In this study we are more concerned to understand processes and the role of parents and schools than the role of society. Our view of development and educational success as an outcome of reciprocal proximal processes between a child, people, events and objects that operate within, and are influenced by the processes and characteristics of the wider developmental context, has several implications for research trying to answer the question of why some children 'succeed against the odds' of disadvantage while others do not. It makes it necessary to identify the characteristics that facilitate 'resilience' ('protective' factors) or vulnerability ('risk' factors) with regard to achievement. We need to understand which 'protective' and 'risk' factors or behaviours and beliefs develop for children who manage to overcome disadvantages, and how they differ from those of children who do not.

Our data consisted of existing information which included trajectory analyses, survey and questionnaire data available from EPPSE project, and findings from the pilot study, which were used to create 'case specific' interview questions and individual retrographs (their educational and developmental history) which were used as memory aids during these interviews. We used the analysis of the trajectories to specifically determine when the children from the four groups in our sample started to show differentiation in their learning life-courses. The analyses of the qualitative interviews were used to determine why certain children succeeded academically (especially those who were disadvantaged) while others did not. Through the top-down analysis based on the literature review, we analysed the occurrence of well-established risk and protective factors and the specific interplay and constellation of these factors in the learning life-courses of the children (see Siraj-Blatchford and Mayo, 2014, forthcoming for more details). Through the bottom-up analysis we investigated the perceptions of our participants taking into account the people, events and circumstances these children, parents and teachers themselves identified as having had a positive or negative influence on the child's academic achievement over the years.

We looked at the learning trajectories for English and Maths for each child. Assessments spanning age 3 to 14 were ranked according to their relative position to the full EPPSE sample. We also used NVivo software, interviews with 50 parents and students and 28 teachers were coded and analysed through an iterative process. Codes continued to be readjusted and redefined as we moved back and forth between the qualitative interview data, quantitative EPPSE data and relevant (inter)national literature on protective and risk factors.

The interviews were coded and analysed in two ways: bottom up and top-down. For the bottom-up analysis coding categories were according to themes that emerged from the analysis of perceptions of the participants as expressed in the interviews. A subsample of children with 'ideal types' of trajectories was used to generate initial coding categories; these were subsequently reassessed using the full sample. For the top-down analysis coding categories were based on evidence from the EPPSE project and the literature review.

## **SOME KEY FINDINGS**

The analysis identified protective and risk factors that influenced children's academic trajectories. Child-related factors included perceived cognitive ability, self-regulation, psychological resilience, problem-solving strategies, intrinsic motivation, goal orientation, and relationships with parents, teachers and peers. These positive and negative factors were associated with children adapting more or less successfully to school and learning. We will explain how the positive perception of the child as a learner was reinforced by parents, family, teachers, peers and the extended social environment. In contrast, negative factors

appeared to interfere with learning processes and contributed to and reinforced a sense of helplessness in children and (often) parents (Siraj-Blatchford et al 2011).

#### *Characteristics of parents enhancing or constraining 'active cultivation'*

The parents of low SES children succeeding against the odds, set and reinforced high standards of behaviour and academic aspirations for the child. They explicitly expressed their high esteem and aspirations, expectations for education. Although these parents acknowledged limits to their social, cultural and economic resources, this did not stop them from helping their child to succeed in school. They used their own experiences as positive or negative examples for the child and their exhibited resilience and perseverance in dealing with disadvantages often provided another positive role model. Despite some limitations to their cultural and economic capital these parents had a strong sense of self-efficacy regarding their ability to support their child's learning life-course. Their positive attitude towards the ability of schooling and learning to be transformational as well as their positive perception of the contribution they could make towards their child's academic success, was continuously present as children progressed from pre-school to primary school and on to secondary school. Parental beliefs or cognitions refer to parents' understandings related to child development and parenting. They include the developmental goals and aims parents aspire to for their child, behaviours they consider appropriate and parenting strategies they believe effective and appropriate. They also include their perception of their ability to influence their children's development; cultural tools they believe will contribute to children's development, or developmental timetables for children's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development (Harkness and Super 1992; cf., Harkness & Super, 1999).

For children from low SES homes who did not succeed against the odds, the home environment and attitude of parents were often less obviously targeting the development of educational skills. Particularly for vulnerable boys, the aspect of enjoyment seemed to be missing from many HLE experiences. For children from low SES families who were doing as predicted, continuity of emotional and practical support for learning and education was uncommon. Often their parents expressed and displayed helplessness in their parenting. Many of them felt unable to provide support with school and learning or even to encourage their child to do well in school. This often left the children to sort out difficulties they encountered with school and learning. The cultural logic of childrearing experienced by children in these low SES families in many ways is similar to what Lareau (2003) has described as facilitating the 'accomplishment of natural growth'.

#### *Early distinctions in the development of academic life-course trajectories*

Attending pre-school was something parents and children regarded as an important step towards children's later success in school.

##### *Why is it good for them to start at an early age?*

(This is the first of a number of questions from the interviews with parents and children which appear in the text.)

Because they learn more. In school they go straight onto hard things, when they're in nursery they colours, rhymes...letters...you know, they know the basics don't they? You get me, they're, they know the basics from there they can... get on. **Mother of Fareeda, Group 3.**

##### *Do you remember what kind of things Mark would learn there?*

Er, they used to take him down to the library, once a week, they used to go in school, swap their books every week, go back up and paint and learn, stuff like that. Revise some shapes. This is one of them ... Playgroup. They did it [later] at the school, yeah, in the playgroup so, familiar idea there. **Father of Mark, Group 1.**

According to the parents it was the playful nature in the pre-school settings that made it a positive learning experience for their child.

They would let them bring the pictures home and they would say if they done something really good or something like that. But a lot of it they learned through playing, you know they would always do things? So they were learning sort of in that way. It isn't put on them in the nursery. Nothing is actually done to let them learn. **Mother of Peter, Group 1.**

Parents perceived pre-school as a way to prepare the child for the social demands they face in school when surrounded by unfamiliar children. Pre-school offered the child the opportunity to develop the appropriate social skills to interact with other children and to become accustomed to being in school.

*What made you decide that she would attend the pre-school?*

Umm...I've always been of the opinion that children cannot learn everything from home, so they have to mix with other children, especially for the first one, she was the first child and it was only me and dad and we wouldn't necessarily have the kind of vocabulary to speak with her, you know, talk like that...all her peers will have in school. She needed that social interaction. **Mother of Ife, Group 1.**

*Why did you think it was important for her to go [to play group]?*

To get on with other children. I think in, in preschool, in that school, she learnt, how to get on with everybody there they got to know other children. Do you get me? Yeah. You need to mix in..... with everybody. **Mother of Fareeda, Group 3.**

Parents described pre-school as an important context for children to develop basic cognitive skills.

*When did she start to talk?*

Ooh, she must've been about eighteen months - two years, because she was the first one just, it was just me and dad talking to her it would've obviously taken longer time but she, she caught on to it pretty quickly and she's, she's quite, you know, quick, un, grasping un talking about things. School and nursery did help obviously because obviously she'd been going for some time and she would, you know, talk to people in school and things like that, yeah... **Mother of Ife, Group 1.**

*Did she learn to count at an early age?*

Nursery. All the, what she learnt was at the nursery. **Mother of Fareeda, Group 3.**

The children themselves usually remembered few specific examples of what they might have learned in pre-school but they recognized the pre-school as a place where children could develop basic skills that would benefit them during their further learning processes.

Despite similarities in background, the children who succeeded against the odds started their academic trajectories with higher rankings for early literacy skills than their low SES peers, while vulnerable high SES children started with lower early numeracy rankings.

Once in pre-school, the trajectories of successful low SES children often showed substantial improvement, suggesting they were able to gain greater benefits from the learning experiences these settings offered. The slower pace of development we found for the academically less successful children seemed to indicate a poor fit between the specific needs of these children for learning and the ability of schools, teachers and parents to tailor interactions and resources to these needs. Interestingly, these same children quite regularly

showed substantial improvement during the early secondary years. This improvement was attributed to maturation but also to the reinforcement of the curriculum and concepts addressed at the end of primary school during these initial secondary years. A change in attitude towards school and learning in combination with repetition of the curriculum seems to provide some of those who previously struggled with a chance to fill in certain gaps in their existing skills and knowledge, at least for Maths and English.

#### *Supporting children to become active agents of academic success*

We found distinctive combinations of cognitive and socio-behavioural characteristics in our children that seemed to facilitate or constrain their adaptation to school and learning. Children who were seen as clever, with a positive attitude towards homework and an internal locus of control had this positive image continually reinforced by people at home and in school. This helped them to establish and strengthen a positive self-image. They developed a strong sense of self-efficacy with regard to school and learning which in turn encouraged them to stretch their learning beyond what might be expected. As a result of these experiences these children became active agents of their academic success.

In contrast, children who experienced learning difficulties or were not seen as particularly clever often developed a negative self-image, resulting in or reinforcing ineffective problem-solving strategies, diminished motivation for school and learning and a sense of helplessness. This negative perception of children's ability was reinforced by the perception of parents and children that 'ability to learn' was 'a given' rather than something that could be shaped. This resulted in parents and schools making little effort to remedy the difficulties children experienced.

#### *Foundations for academic success in the Early Years and School*

Most parents, regardless of their SES, were motivated to send their child to pre-school because they believed that pre-schools offered children opportunities to learn to socialize with other children, a skill they believed would help the child later on in school. Parents with academically successful children additionally believed that pre-school would provide an opportunity to get accustomed to school routines and rules, and to develop basic literacy and numeracy skills and would reinforce the child's positive attitude to school and learning. Parents of children succeeding against the odds in particular believed that pre-schools would offer their child something in addition to what they were able to offer at home and carefully evaluated the suitability of the setting for their child.

EPPSE has previously shown that pre-school education can help to alleviate the effects of social disadvantage and can provide children with a better start to school, particularly when pre-school settings are highly effective and of high quality. In our small subsample the effect of high vs. low quality pre-school settings seemed particularly important for low SES boys. First of all, these boys were more likely to have been enrolled in a low quality pre-school than boys from high SES families, but also than girls from equally disadvantaged backgrounds. Secondly, when boys from disadvantaged families did find themselves in an excellent pre-school setting they seemed to experience long-term benefits as all these boys went on to succeed against the odds.

Few children from low SES homes in this study had the combined benefit of high early HLE and excellent pre-school education. However, the relatively frequent occurrence of medium or high quality HLE with good pre-school experiences among the children succeeding against the odds, underlines the significance of this combination of experiences early on in children's learning life-course.

The transition into a formal learning environment was not always an easy process. According to parents, teachers are aware of this and children who were having difficulties with their work in Primary school were offered special tuition. These extra learning experiences offered them the opportunity to strengthen their skills and knowledge and by doing so parents and students felt they had acquired the chance to catch up with their peers

and had become equipped with basic skills that facilitated further (cognitive) skill development. Steven's mother described how Steven was offered special tuition after he struggled with his KS1 (age 7) national assessments in England. After just nine weeks of special tuition his performance started to improve and has continued to improve ever since. According to Steven the special tuition offered him the opportunity to grasp the basics, which previously had not been clear to him.

I think ... ehm ... I'm not sure if it was right at the start I didn't understand the basics so when I got into year two and year three and ... it started becoming harder ... I sort of, cause I didn't know the basics I couldn't learn more advanced stuff.

*And then they gave you some extra tuition and some extra classes and you really went up after that. Do you remember what it was about those classes that helped you?*

Ehm ... no I think it was just ... when I got in there ... I mean ... she did the basics which I didn't understand and once I got those ... then I think it was easy. **Steven, 15 year old boy, Group 1.**

The only subject that I ever really struggled with was maths that is like my weak point, but going to the booster classes it really made me enthusiastic about maths, more, so the more I did it, the more I got used to it and now it's like a routine, if I find something difficult, like in maths, I'll look it up, and then I'll, read over it again until I understand it.

*Would they teach things differently in the booster classes?*

It's more erm, one on one like the classes were much smaller, like five or six students instead of like ten, fifteen like much smaller classes, so it made it easier for the teacher to like pinpoint which student was lagging behind, which student needed more help, then it was easier to learn, if there's less people in the class asking for help. **Anjali, 16 year old girl, Group 1.**

The school were quite good at picking up where he left school with fairly high SAT's results [after Key Stage 2, age 11 in England], he wasn't then performing according to that. So they were really good and put in place extra classes and things to try and get him back up to level which succeeded and he was fine. **Mother of Shaquille, Group 1.**

Additional incidental support outside of the regular school hours remained important during Secondary school. The fact that they were offered extra classes made them feel supported and increased their motivation. Although some of these classes were remedial, others would simply offer extra work to students who could handle that.

Umm, like now for half term, my school wants to give us extra... erm... classes in the half term, like, at least four times a week, so that might, that helps extra for the people that want it, but if, if your... when you see that your school or teachers are willing to do it, then you're willing to do it, because they... it motivates you because you think people care about your education so it makes you should care about it. Whereas if you want, it's all about the image that you have in your mind for yourself, 'cause if you don't have a good one then you're not gonna get there really 'cause you would just think I'm gonna work in, I don't know, wherever. But...if you think I wanna become that then that's the only goal you're working towards so. **Fareeda, 16 year old girl, Group 3.**

*Which people do you feel have given you the most help with school and learning so far?*

Erm, teachers. When it was coming near a test I would do some after school sessions. **Leanna, 15 year old girl, Group 1.**

When children were encountering social-behavioural or socio-emotional difficulties this was dealt with through interventions that provided students with positive support and helped them cope with school and learning.

You got some school support to help you improve your behaviour and getting on with others when you were in year nine (age 14 in English education system)...  
A mentor.

*How did that help you?*

Erm, we just had like a little group that we used to go to, and miss lessons and go to it and work with other students that do like same things like me, like answer back the teacher and stuff like that.

*What did you learn from it?*

Erm, like how to calm down and just not to answer teachers and stuff like that.

*How do you calm down?*

Erm, just erm, I did not listen...but like count down from ten...

*Does that help?*

Yeah.

*So now you don't talk back to teachers?*

Yeah. **Sharlene, 15 year old girl, Group 1.**

Actually he had a lot of support, he had a lot of support from the teachers from what was happening, the bullying, they'd always talk to the boys, erm, sort of have mediation... I was concerned, about it so the teachers always tried to help and it came to a head in Year Nine, where then he was doing things to wind children up... Yeah...so then I said, erm he needs, he needs some help...

*Is that when he got the a pupil mentor?*

Yeah. Erm, it did help, he said he enjoyed it, it wasn't, it was every so often as...it did help...I think it did help... Yeah, it cleared the air...it cleared the air perhaps and how he was feeling...and he's just done exceptional work... **Mother of Jarell, Group 1.**

GCSEs were regarded as a motivator by children. Taking their GCSEs was regarded as an important step towards their future and their motivation increased once they chose their GCSE subjects. It seemed easier for them to take responsibility for their learning process because they had had some control over the kind of lesson they would participate in.

I was really naughty in year seven. Year 9, year 8 I like calmed down, because I got used to it and stuff, year 9 was a big change for me 'cos I knew my GCSEs were coming, so I knew it was serious mode again. **Fareeda, 16 year old girl, Group 3.**

Like now I am doing the lessons I enjoy the lessons that I wanna do, so like I think, "Oh yeah I wanna go to that" 'cause I picked to do it, its' not what I'm being made to do. **Charley, 14 year old girl, Group 1.**

Children and parents specifically mentioned that practical work during lessons helped their understanding of the subject matter. The practical work also made the lessons more



enjoyable and increased their motivation to participate, or as they often put it, made learning "less boring".

Yeah [I enjoy science]. It's just like...it's got...it's like, it's not as boring as maths and English, it's like you got...you can do more practicals like, er...more experiments and all that...so...it's not just sitting down writing all the time, you can like get up and like...so different things and all that...

*Does that help you to learn?*

Yeah... 'cos like writing or...for an hour, it's just like...you just get bored of it and you like forget it all, but when you're like...like doing different things with it, it's like...you can remember it.... **Jarell, 14 year old boy, Group 1.**

*And the practice things make it less boring?*

Yeah, definitely, if you do, even in science, like, the practical, the experiments and stuff, just like, using the Bunsen burners and things, that kind of stuff, it gives, I don't know, I just learn more, even though I don't learn a lot in science, I just learn more doing practical than the other side of things . Because I did it, do you know what I mean? Like, I, I'm the one that performed it so I know exactly how everything works, yeah, that kind of thing. Yeah I can go back through every single thing that happened during the experiment and know about that. **Shaquille, 15 year old boy, Group 1.**

*What do you feel that his Primary school offered him that helped him to learn?*

Er, the participation really I think, just the... you know, being involved with doing the, you know, not just writing and stuff, actually doing physical, physical learning with one of them, the practical things.

*Why do you think that helps him, the practical things?*

Er, because his mind was always occupied like that, you know he had a very active mind, and that's what, that's what he wanted, to, to project it like that. **Father of Mark, Group 1.**

Students and parents from low SES families succeeding against the odds as well as from successful high SES families attributed part of their success to the quality of their teachers. To them, good quality teaching meant that teachers were able to explain topics and lessons clearly, were enthusiastic about the subject they taught, were approachable when things were difficult to understand, were friendly, had control over the class and clearly communicated their expectations and boundaries. They bonded with these teachers; although they enjoyed the classes, more important was their feeling of being encouraged to work to achieve beyond their predicted attainment.

The vulnerable children in particular mentioned that the high numbers of supply teachers and the disorganized lessons that came with this contributed significantly to their low attainment.

The one school-level factor that seemed to most clearly set apart the children who succeeded against the odds from those who did not was their perception of the help they received from school when they were experiencing difficulties with academic work or behaviour. They felt schools had effectively helped them to deal with these difficulties through booster, remedial, homework, revision or behavioural classes. This helped children to catch up, (re)establish and reinforce a positive perception of school and learning and improved self-efficacy.

In contrast, vulnerable children and their parents felt let down by schools and teachers. Some of these parents, particularly those from high SES families, had organised additional help for the child after school, many felt frustrated and even angry with school policies and

head teachers for not dealing effectively with their child. Some of these negative perceptions were transmitted to children and might have reinforced a negative attitude to school and learning.

#### *Empowering relationships with peers and friends*

For the successful children, peers, especially their friends, offered practical and emotional support with school and learning that benefited their attainment. The emotional support helped them to enjoy school and to deal with any difficulties they encountered. Practical support was often reciprocal as children helped each other out during lessons and with homework and revision. Not only did this offer children opportunities to take on the role of peer tutor, it also helped them to deepen their understanding of subjects either by rephrasing the teacher's explanations to clarify things for their friends or by receiving alternative explanations from their friends. These experiences appeared to contribute to children's positive self-perception, sense of self-efficacy and use of effective learning strategies. Friends also further reinforced favourable attitudes towards school and learning of these children through their positive perception of education. This in turn stimulated them to be "the best they could" by providing positive role models and friendly competition.

Although some of the vulnerable children also experienced positive peer influences, these students more often had friends and peers with negative attitudes to school and learning and it was often felt by them as well as by parents and teachers that their problematic or less effective behaviour and negative attitudes towards school and learning were reinforced by such friends.

#### *Additional gateways to social and cultural capital*

Practical learning experiences did not always take place inside the classroom. Extending learning experiences to contexts outside of the classroom setting was perceived to provide learning opportunities in the 'real world' that helped the child to develop an appreciation for school subjects, provided them with experiences that helped during their further learning processes in class and gave them a sense of what their future life as adults might look like.

Like when you go to the zoo, and when you go to, like, we went to Think Tank at the end of like Year Six, but that kind of showed me more and kind of made me realise about school, what, like, everyone in the school likes science, art. 'Cos when you like, a kid, and you've just got to read books and books, even though the teacher like says some stuff, it's kind of like, boring, but when you've experienced it, so then you can put your input onto the activity as well. I suppose the way that they give you opportunities to do things in the classroom would be like, if they've got something from the week before, like, I don't know, a picture or a poster, but I suppose, when you go on your trip, it's your experiencing what you've got from the experience, you can put in, into your work and then like, say what you felt, what you saw, what you wanted, and what you gained out of the experience, instead of just, it's not bad that they do it, it's just when you do it yourself, you can like, explain it more and like, visualise it more. **Reanna, 14 year old girl, Group 1.**

I think you can't just learn everything in the classroom ... I think, that was one thing Friar Preston did that Tuttons didn't but maybe because Friar Preston was where it's, it's centred. Ehm ... they could take the children to the Barbican and let watch the orchestra, just like that. And he came back and loved it, he thought it was wonderful. They went to the Globe to, and he got on the stage and did Shakespeare. I mean, he thought that was brilliant. I mean they love Shakespeare, it, it, both of them, that's, Prior Weston's that way, that's unusual, yeah. I mean they must have done Shakespeare sort of three times now since the beginning ... so I think that's important, I think it's good to have experiences out ... it, it, it just broadens your minds ... so when you're asked to write a story you can ... you've got experience in this, you've something to write about... **Mother of Steven, Group 1.**

The low SES children who succeeded against the odds and the successful high SES children made good use of resources that helped with school work (such as written materials and computers) but also of peers, siblings and other adults. Their positive attitude towards books and computers and frequent use of these tools for school or as hobbies facilitated learning throughout their life-course and will stand them in good stead in the future.

Families with academically successful children perceived and valued extra-curricular activities as experiences that contributed to their child's development and school achievement. Low SES parents with children who did not succeed against the odds usually regarded the activities as fun and relaxing, but did not consider any educational aspects or benefits that might follow. As a result vulnerable children were less likely to be encouraged to persevere with extra-curricular activities.

Support networks of extended family, family friends and religious communities played an important role in supporting parents as they could offer additional social and cultural capital. A positive contribution from support networks was particularly felt when this support went beyond practical help and offered parents a chance to develop further their parenting knowledge and skills and reinforced their sense of self-efficacy with regard to the child's academic success. This particular type of support was mentioned more often by the low SES families with children succeeding against the odds and by high SES families in general.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The trajectories showed apparent differences between children before they started school. The succeeding children's initial rankings were relatively high and their trajectories were characterised by improvement. The general pattern of decline observed for more vulnerable children suggested a poor goodness-of-fit between their specific needs and the ability of schools, teachers and parents to tailor to these needs.

The systematic qualitative analysis identified protective and risk factors that influenced children's academic trajectories. Child-related factors included perceived cognitive ability, self-regulation, psychological resilience, problem-solving strategies, intrinsic motivation, goal orientation and relationships with parents, teachers and peers. Positive attribution was associated with more successful adaptation to school and learning. The positive perception of the child as a learner was reinforced by parents, family, teachers, peers and the extended social environment. In contrast, negative attribution appeared to interfere with learning processes and contributed to and reinforced a sense of helplessness in children and (often) parents.

Parenting in families with children succeeding against the odds was characterised as 'active cultivation'. In these families parents provided rich (early) HLE experiences and went to great lengths to provide a broad range of (extra-curricular) learning experiences, often by enlisting their social network. These parents provided abundant practical, emotional and relational support for learning. They emphasized the importance of education, expressed consistent and high expectations regarding behaviour and (future) achievement and facilitated development of self-regulation skills, particularly for girls. From pre-school onwards, parents made it clear to their children that school and teachers were to be respected and perceived as important sources of learning.

High-quality teaching (as perceived by children) helped students bond with teachers and encouraged them to achieve beyond their predicted attainment. How well schools were perceived to deal with children's specific educational needs reinforced positive or negative attitudes towards school and learning, both for students and parents. For vulnerable children, reports of high numbers of supply teachers and disorganized lessons were seen to have contributed to lower attainment.

Positive peer relationships and friendships facilitated academic success through emotional and practical support for children succeeding against the odds, while for others different forms of peer group/friendship relationships could reinforce negative attitudes to school and learning for academically less successful children.

The CFCS provide information that can be of use to both policymakers and practitioners. It has implications for parenting and home-school relations 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 who are academically and socially advantaged and disadvantaged. The implications include:

- Implications of 'active cultivation' for parenting programmes/initiatives are substantial as our study shows that in these cases the home as an institution is a very powerful "proximal" context. It helps children to establish masterful learning dispositions towards school and learning and stimulates the development of self-efficacy.
- Parents who show active cultivation provide strong, child-centred emotional support that is sensitive to the child's developing needs. They do so, even in the face of difficulties, by being encouraging, persistent and consistent.
- As children who succeed start school with a better grasp of school-relevant skills and knowledge there are implications for the early assessment of children entering school or pre-school in order that appropriate curriculum and pedagogy is personalised and adopted.
- The importance of teachers in supporting and encouraging vulnerable children and avoiding negative expectations and stereotypes has implications for recruiting the best teachers into schools in disadvantaged communities.
- The importance of relationships with peers and friends has implications for teachers in promoting the 'communities of learning' in classrooms in which students can take some responsibility for their own and others learning and work towards shared goals.
- The importance of additional support classes has implications for early diagnostic assessment and individualised support and interventions in Key Stage 1.
- The importance of social and cultural capital has implications for schools and communities in fostering 'learning to learn' dispositions by providing support with educational experiences especially for vulnerable children.

Our data does not allow inferences about causality or generalization to the overall population, however the findings will be illuminative for both policy and research. The quantitative data available through the EPPSE project does seem to confirm that differences in agency, as for instance captured in the early years home learning environment or the social/behavioural child measures, are not just apparent and influential when children start their academic careers, but the effect carries on and is compounded as they progress through their academic learning life-course and create an enduring impact on the future lives of these citizens and their children.

Our analyses confirm the premises of the theoretical model we applied, i.e. that it is never 'just' the one factor of child, family or school or broader social context that brings about success or failure in a learning life-course. Rather, it appears to be the particular ecological niches that arise through the active reciprocal and iterative interactions between these factors that determine the parameters for children's pathways to academic success. In other words, the real world context of development is complex but while characteristics at broader levels, such as school policies and curriculum or parental jobs, exert some influence on children's day-to-day learning experiences, the best opportunities to help children are within reach right there on the near, every day, proximal levels. What becomes evident from our

case studies is that unexpected academic success that defies the odds of disadvantage, requires effort and determination from the children as 'active agents' as well as from the people around them. By having people around them that believe in them, encourage them, challenge them and support them, children develop a strong sense of self-efficacy with regard to academic and social success. Through their interactions with these people, children learn to build and sustain relationships (i.e. develop social and cultural capital) that support and facilitate academic success.

Parents in particular have the opportunity to play the key role in facilitating academic success. Parenting in families with children 'succeeding against the odds' of disadvantage show that they encourage and facilitate academic success more directly through proximal learning processes they choose to offer their children, but also more indirectly through the opportunities they create for their children to engage in learning processes with others, and through the example they set their children through their own behaviour and modelling. They offer their personal economic, cultural and social capital to their children. These parents develop and foster meaningful relationships with their children through the support and guidance they offer. Through a process of 'active cultivation' they teach their children to develop and sustain meaningful relationships with the people around them and with learning and education.

That is not to say that there is not more that could be done. Schools could play a much more active role in 'supplementing' the cultural and social capital that is available to these children and to their families. For instance, although most schools provide information about GCSE choices, and some schools provide information or even educational excursions to universities, many children and parents are not aware of the often implicit expectations that these institutions have that need to be met before children can become part of their culture. By starting to offer such information before children choose their GCSE subjects or even before they start secondary school might offer all children better chances of continuing their academic success beyond their compulsory schooling, so that it becomes 'expected' rather than 'unexpected' success..

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