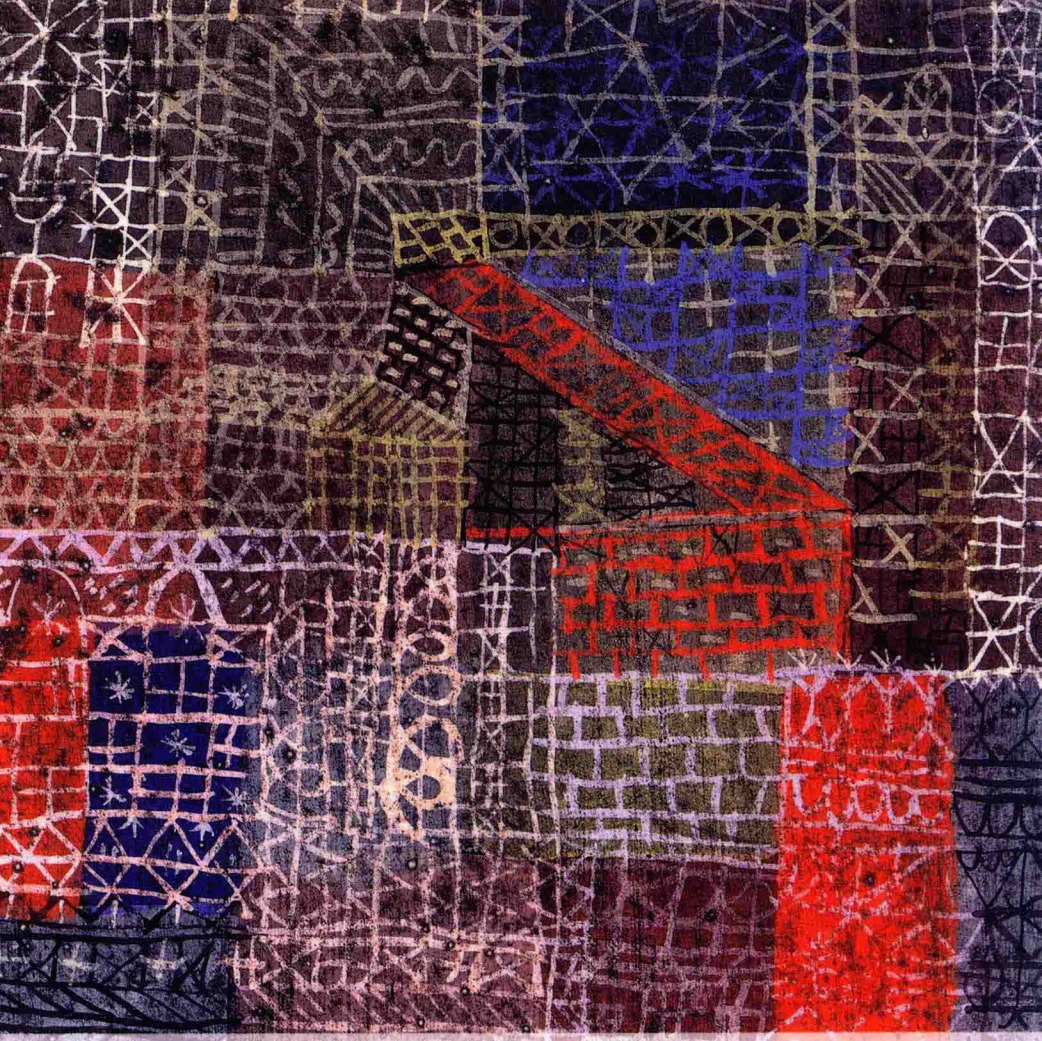

Social Class and Educational Inequality

The Impact of Parents and Schools

Iram Siraj and Aziza Mayo

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Social Class and Educational Inequality

Social class is often seen as an intractable barrier to success, yet a number of children from disadvantaged backgrounds still manage to show resilience and succeed against the odds. This book presents the findings from fifty Child and Family Case Studies (CFCS) conducted with 13–16 year olds. The authors look specifically at the roles that people and experiences – at home, in schools and in the wider community – have played in the learning life-courses of these children; how these factors have affected their achievement; and explanations and meanings given by respondents to the unique characteristics, experiences and events in their lives. Featuring the voices of real parents and children, and backed up by a decade of quantitative data, this is a compelling record that will help readers to understand the complex nature of social disadvantage and the interplay between risk and protective factors in homes and schools that can make for a transformational educational experience.

IRAM SIRAJ is Professor of Education in the Department of Early Years and Primary Education in the Institute of Education, University of London. She is also Visiting Professor at the Universities of Melbourne and Waikato, with some part-time secondment to the University of Wollongong, Australia.

AZIZA MAYO completed a doctorate at the Department for Social and Behavioural Sciences at the University of Amsterdam, and is currently Professor of Education at the University of Applied Sciences Leiden, Netherlands.

'This book is a stupendous achievement and deserves to be very widely read. The authors' large-scale longitudinal research into why some children succeed "against the odds" and others do worse than expected given their relatively privileged start in life is already widely known. This book puts "flesh" onto the bones of the data, providing case studies of fifty children (those who succeed and those who don't from both working-class and middle-class backgrounds) that exemplify their findings in a truly marvellous way. Equally impressive, Siraj and Mayo illustrate the power and importance of a solid theoretical foundation. They draw on scholars such as Urie Bronfenbrenner to show that the everyday activities and interactions that occur between children and their parents, their teachers, and people in the wider community have profound effects on academic performance from early childhood through adolescence. The authors also do a wonderful job revealing the way that these interactions also influence, and are influenced by, personal characteristics of the children themselves and of the various people with whom the children interact. The book's combination of intellectual rigour and ease of reading makes it a resource that will serve equally for undergraduates interested in understanding development and scholars working in the area of risk, resilience, parenting practices, and school achievement.'

Professor Jonathan Tudge
Human Development and Family Studies,
the University of North Carolina at Greensboro

'The child and family case studies presented in this important book add considerable value to the large-scale longitudinal study from which they are drawn. In studying children who succeeded against the odds or did not fulfil expectations, the authors lay bare the human stories that, in particular cases, confirm or interrupt the prevailing link between social background and educational achievement. By identifying what – in the home, the school and the community – can make a difference one way or the other, the message is ultimately an optimistic, though realistic, one.'

Professor Geoff Whitty
Director Emeritus, Institute of Education,
University of London and Research Professor in Education,
Bath Spa University

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The research would not be possible without the support and co-operation of the six local authorities (LAs) and the many pre-school centres, primary schools, children and parents participating in the research. We would like to give special thanks to the children, parents and teachers who met with us to discuss their experiences and thoughts on school and learning. Their welcoming enthusiasm to meet with us face to face and their ongoing loyalty to EPPSE were heartwarming and extremely valuable. We are particularly grateful for the support and guidance we have had from John Blatchford in the early stages of this sub-study and for the training and expertise he provided in the NVivo software, and thanks to Edward Melhuish who helped us with the attainment models to extract our sample. We would also like to thank Kit Endean and Rachel Whitehead for their diligent transcribing and Wesley Welcomme for his contribution in preparing this book.

The biggest thanks go to our colleagues the Principal Investigators (PIs) of the EPPSE project. Iram Siraj, one of the authors of this book, is a PI, and the other four are Brenda Taggart and Professors Edward Melhuish, Pam Sammons and Kathy Sylva. The study rests on their collaboration and fifteen years of sustained data collection and intellectual rigour in the interpretation of results. We draw heavily on all these data to make sense of our fifty sub-study, in-depth Case Studies. We would like to thank all the researchers on the EPPSE project over the years and our fifty families in particular.

Abbreviations

BAS II	British Ability Scales, Second Edition (Elliot et al., 1996)
CFCS	Child and Family Case Studies (also referred to as 'Case Studies')
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families (now Department for Education)
ECERS-E	Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales – Extension (Sylva et al., 2003, 2006)
ECERS-R	Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales – Revised (Harms et al., 1998)
EPPE	Effective Provision of Pre-School Education project
EPPE 3–11	Effective Pre-School and Primary Education project (1997–2008)
EPPSE 3–14; 3–16	Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education project (1997–2014)
EPPSEM	Effective Primary Pedagogical Strategies in English and Maths study
EYTSEN	Early Years Transition and Special Educational Needs project
FSM	free school meals
HLE	home learning environment
LA	local authority
PI	Principal Investigator (EPPSE project)
sd	standard deviation
SEN	special educational needs
SES	socio-economic status

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1 Child and Family Case Studies in the context of the EPPSE study

In this first chapter we introduce the Case Studies in the context of the Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3–16) research study from which our fifty in-depth Case Studies originated. It also describes the aims of the study and the research questions that will be addressed.

Introduction

Our research, and much other educational research, is driven by one deceptively simple research question: why do some children succeed academically while others fail? For decades this particular question has been the focus of political, social and scientific debates and has led to an ongoing stream of reforms in the educational system since the last century. The political and social debates about educational inequalities and ways to improve children's chances of academic success that were prevalent in the 1990s in the United Kingdom and many other European countries made it possible for rigorous, longitudinal scientific studies to be conducted. These studies provided an empirical and scientific basis for educational reforms and aimed to improve in particular the chances of children who were found to be most vulnerable in the educational system. Although some reforms, such as the nationwide availability of pre-school education, have gone some way towards helping reduce educational inequality, other measures, such as the Key Stage 3 national assessments (at age 14) have been abandoned due to lack of visible effect.

In part this ongoing and widespread concern with educational inequality reflects the beliefs of society about fairness and equality: all children deserve good education and academic success. Therefore, as long as educational inequality continues to exist we need to aim our efforts towards improving the educational system. But the strong appeal that comes from the question of why we find such marked differences in academic success also has a personal side to it. After all, all of us are field-experts when it comes to education. At some stage in our lives we have participated in the great educational experiment. For some of us

this experiment has been successful and for some of us not so much, and once we left the experiment, each one of us has experienced at first hand the significant and continuing impact of academic success or failure on our life-course. But perhaps the urgency of the question becomes even greater when it is no longer we who are part of the experiment, but when it concerns 'our' children.

Through our personal roles and positions in society, irrespective of whether we are educators, parents, family members, friends, neighbours, researchers, politicians, policymakers, etc., or a number of these personas at the same time, we feel a responsibility towards our children and their academic successes or failures. So we keep attempting to answer the question as well as a question that almost automatically follows: how can we help more children to become academically successful and fulfil their potential in life? This introductory chapter provides a description of the context of our book which is based on fifty in-depth case studies of children from a much bigger study. It provides a summary of key findings from this bigger study, the Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3–16) study (itself a series of sub-studies following the same children) and describes our understanding of concepts of 'risk' and 'resilience' in the learning life-course for our fifty children.

Background to the Child and Family Case Studies

The EPPSE 3–16 research project is a large-scale, longitudinal, mixed-methods research study (see Sammons et al., 2005; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2006) that since 1997 has been following the progress of over 3,000 children aged 3–16 (Sylva et al., 2010). It started out as the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education study (EPPE) following our children from age 3 to age 7, and was further funded to become the Effective Pre-School and Primary Education (EPPE 3–11) study, following our children from ages 7–11. EPPSE was the continuation of the project through to the end of secondary schooling.

A continuing question for EPPSE was whether pre-school, primary and secondary schools and children's home learning or other experiences could help either to promote or to reduce inequality. As with other studies, the EPPSE study found that parents' socio-economic status (SES) and levels of education were significantly related to child outcomes. However, it also found that the child's early home learning environment (HLE) was important and showed that school influences (pre-school and primary school quality and effectiveness) shaped children's educational outcomes as well. What is more, the EPPE 3–11 research project (1997–2008) found that what parents did with their

children was important in terms of the children's outcomes, rather than simply who they were (Melhuish et al., 2001, 2008; Sammons et al., 2002a).

In 2008 an extension, funded by the Cabinet Office for the Equalities Review, provided a pilot study for the Child and Family Case Studies presented in this book (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2007; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010a). 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 (2003) as 'concerted cultivation' (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010a). In 2009, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF; now the Department for Education) funded a further extension of the mixed methodology EPPSE research to follow the students to the end of their compulsory schooling.

This book is largely about one aspect of the study, which has been to conduct fifty in-depth, mixed-methods Child and Family Case Studies (CFCS, further referred to as Case Studies; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2011a). The Case Studies have been carefully sampled to show different learner trajectories in an attempt to probe further and understand why these trajectories differ and what influences a learner's learning life-course. In conducting the Case Studies we aimed to provide further information and explanations which might help us understand more fully the statistical patterns that have been found through quantitative analyses of the EPPSE sample, for instance on the effects of early HLEs and why some parents provide these while others do not. These Case Studies are the main topic of this book. Further details of the methods of our Case Studies and the wider EPPSE study are given in Chapter 3 of the book.

The aim of the Case Studies is to extend our understanding of how child, family, community, pre-school and school factors and experiences interact and contribute to the achievement or underachievement of children in school. Given the presence or absence of particular risk factors associated both with the child and the family (such as low birth weight, the occurrence of early developmental problems, limited educational experience of parents or low family income), predictions were made for children's attainment levels in English and Maths at the end of Primary School (i.e., Key stage 2 at age 11). Over time, the majority of the 3,000 plus EPPSE children have developed their academic skills according to the predictions that were made for each of them at the age of 3. Unfortunately this meant that for most children who were identified as being at risk, these predictions of low achievement proved to be correct.

Thus, many of the children identified as being 'at risk' actually turned out to have poor educational trajectories and to be 'vulnerable' with respect to their academic attainment in English and Maths. On the other hand, the children who were predicted to do well in fact generally did so. But there have been exceptions among both groups, and these children have developed academic trajectories that diverged significantly from their predicted pathways. Some of the children identified as 'at-risk' have excelled unexpectedly. They obtained results for English and Maths that were substantially higher than predicted. These children's developmental trajectories display what we will refer to as 'resilience'. On the other hand, some of children who were not considered at-risk have unexpectedly struggled and failed to meet their predicted attainment, despite favourable and promising characteristics and circumstances at a young age. So what sets apart these unexpected high or low achievers from each other, and from their peers who are performing according to prediction?

Quantitative analyses have already identified a range of factors that affect 'risk' and 'resilience' for children in the EPPSE sample, for instance low social class, poor maternal education, a low HLE in the first five years of life, developmental problems or poor quality pre-school (see Sammons et al., 2003; Anders et al., 2010; Hall et al., 2009; Taggart et al., 2006). However, such quantitative research cannot provide the explanations, illumination and insights that rigorous in-depth Case Studies can, through their focus on the authentic voices of individual children, families and teachers. By combining the results of quantitative and qualitative components in the EPPSE Case Studies research, new contributions to theoretical understanding and information of value to practitioners and policymakers can be generated. Each voice of a child, parent or teacher has something important to tell us about a learning life-course. Some are happy stories that tell us about successful academic careers, others are stories of struggles and worries and academic difficulties. But either way they contain information about perceptions, experiences, contexts, beliefs and values in the lives of children that might help us understand why their learning life-courses have proceeded in a particular way. Each child in our study is unique, but in many ways they are just ordinary children. If you saw one of our fifty young people on the street, you would probably not find them particularly remarkable. In many ways they are just regular adolescents, ages 13–16. But if you did notice them, what would you think? You might be able to identify their family background through the way they dress, the way they talk, the way they carry themselves. But would one be able to tell which of them are academically successful and which are not?

What might someone think of Charley, one of our Case Studies girls, and her friends, if one saw them hanging about in the town square after school? They all wear their hair straight, long and blond. Their earrings are big, their jeans are tight and their t-shirts are tiny. They are ostentatiously ignoring the pack of boys that is circling them. The girls talk about the baby doll each of them will be bringing home from school for the weekend. These are 'practice babies' that will need nappies and feeds and midnight soothing. The girls giggle when they talk about cuddling and bottle-feeding the baby. But they all complain at the top of their voices at the prospect of being woken by the baby's cries during the night and at having to change a diaper. Charley confidently says her boyfriend will definitely help out with the baby and if it keeps crying she will just hand it over to her mum.

What if you came across Shaquille rushing home after school? Despite his 15 years you might take this boy for a grown man. 'Tall, dark and handsome', is how his mother describes him. But this 'tall, dark and handsome' young man often stoops a bit and casts his eyes downwards. Shaquille says people often cross the street and clutch their bags when they see him walking home from school by himself, so he can imagine what they are thinking. The last thing he wants to do is to scare someone, because he knows too well what fear feels like. All he wants is to get home as soon as he can without running into the gang of boys and young men that rule the streets of the inner-city estate he lives on.

What might you think if you met Fareeda walking the short route to school surrounded by half a dozen of her closest girl friends? An endless stream of words passes between them. These days they only ever talk about GCSEs. Unless of course they are talking about clothes or handbags, or about the cute singers and actors they saw on the television the night before. You might notice Fareeda's beautiful dark eyes that sparkle with enjoyment or her warm laughter that follows every other sentence she speaks or hears. But you would not be able to see her smile or her fashionable clothes because they are discreetly covered by a shoulder-length black veil.

What about if you overheard a conversation between Steven and his best friend Ethan walking to school in the morning? Steven is skinny and tall with long limbs that move in every direction. As he talks he illustrates his words with elaborate hand-gestures. Steven enthusiastically explains in minute detail how he nearly managed to get his home-made rocket to fly. He readjusted the weight of this model by adding some additional fuel. He proudly says that this time he actually managed lift-off. Then he sheepishly admits that he also almost burned down the back yard in the

process, as the rocket crashed into a heap of dry leaves which he was supposed to have cleared away as part of his chores.

Would you be surprised to learn that Charley, Shaquille, Fareeda and Steven are all at the top of their class? If you went only by their family backgrounds and the circumstances in which they live, they would typically be perceived as disadvantaged. Most of their parents left school at a young age with no formal qualifications to speak of; some have little command of the English language; if they have a job it often involves unskilled or semi-skilled labour; and family income leaves little room for luxuries after the necessary bills are paid at the end of each month. Sometimes their parents are still together, but often they live in single parent households; they share bedrooms with siblings in small flats in large council estates or in monotone streets with small, run-down terraced houses; a dozen different languages can be heard on their neighbourhood streets and in the local shops. In their school playgrounds, students from different ethnic-cultural backgrounds huddle together in separate groups; and while options to take vocational classes are often plentiful, chances of finding a way to take triple science are slim at their schools. But there is something about these children, about their homes, their parents, their friends, teachers and their support network that makes them defy these disadvantages and gears them on to exceed predictions and expectations. There is something that helps them become academically resilient.

'Working definitions' of resilience and vulnerability

To date, a broad literature on resilience exists, with many different perceptions and definitions of resilience, referring, for instance, to either an individual trait or a process (Luthar et al., 2000). Following Rutter (1987, 2007), we take 'resilience' to refer to outcomes of dynamic developmental processes rather than to an observable personality trait of an individual. Resilience is not something a child has or does not have. Rather it is the outcome of a continuing process of adaptation to adversity. As such, resilience is the capacity to cope with life's setbacks and challenges (Moen & Erickson, 1995). Resilience follows when the cumulative effects of 'protective' factors in the child, and in the life and environment in which the child develops, outweigh the negative effects of 'risk' factors in that child or in their socio-cultural context. The outcome of this process is expressed in the adaptive behaviour a person shows when dealing with the demands of his or her life. What these demands are and what qualifies as adaptive behaviour will unavoidably vary between cultures and contexts (Rogoff, 2003).

To take into account the cultural and contextual differences in how people express resilience, Ungar (2004) proposes a constructionist interpretation and refers to resilience as the outcome from negotiations with environment for resources to define oneself as successful amidst adversity. According to this approach risk factors are contextually specific, constructed and indefinite across populations. The impact of negative experiences also varies according to the individual child's perception of their experience, their social support networks and the cognitive and affective resources that they draw upon in facing these experiences (cf. Rutter, 2007). Risk factors can function on any level of a developing person's life. They can for instance be part of personal characteristics of a developing person, such as the presence of socio-emotional or behavioural problems; they can be psychological characteristics of the social environment in which the child develops, such as maternal depression; they can be negative life-events that affect the well-being of the developing person, such as the loss of a parent; they can be structural characteristics of the environment in which the child develops, such as poverty. Following this approach, protective factors are also multidimensional. They are unique to each developmental context and predict the successful outcomes as defined by individuals or their social reference group.

Protective factors are *psychosocial resources*, in the sense that they include both social and personal resources that help promote resilience in the face of adversity (Rutter, 1987; cf. Moen & Erickson, 1995). Social resources refer to a person's connectedness to the broader community in which he or she lives and develops; this connectedness enables individuals to withstand adversity. Social resources are ties that bind a person to his or her social environment. These ties are reflected in the many roles a person occupies in society, for instance their role as parent, child, employee, student, churchgoer or volunteer. They are reflected in the presence of close and confiding relationships with, for instance, spouses, friends or relatives; in the quality of their relationships with families and friends. But they are also reflected in a person's access to support networks in their immediate environment as well as in the wider community or at the level of society. Personal resources reflect a person's sense of competency and effectiveness. They include perceptions of subjective characteristics such as self-reliance, self-understanding, empathy, altruism, maturity, and a person's basic values and priorities.

In this book 'resilience' for us refers to 'achievement beyond expectation'. It is shown by those children in the EPPSE sample who managed to reach high attainment levels at age 11, despite the presence of numerous 'risk' factors early on in their learning life-courses. These