

The effects of economic, social and cultural capital at home and in the neighbourhood on young people's educational attainment

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Abstract:

There continues to be large social class inequalities in educational attainment in England. At the same time, child poverty rates in England have risen (Family Resources Survey, 2018) which is likely to lead to worsening inequalities. This thesis aims to understand how different resources at the family and neighbourhood levels impact on young people's Key Stage 2 attainment using the English sub-sample of the Millennium Cohort Study linked with neighbourhood and education data (N=6445), thus providing important evidence for tackling existing inequalities.

Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of economic, social and cultural capital are used as a theoretical lens to capture both the material and non-material resources available to the family. The thesis also draws upon the work of Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2001) to study the role of social capital within the home and neighbourhood respectively, and the neighbourhood effects literature, in particular the social neighbourhood mechanisms of relative deprivation versus competition and social contagion versus collective socialisation (Galster, 2012). The literature reviewed draws from both quantitative and qualitative studies to give a broad understanding of the various forms of capital and mechanisms which are behind the reproduction of inequalities in education. Improving upon previous quantitative studies which have tended to focus on individual capitals, this thesis models all three capitals (cultural, social and economic) together to provide a better understanding of how multiple resources impact on young people's attainment and to assess the extent of their influence. Exploratory factor analysis was used to create continuous measures of each capital for parents and children and cross-classified multilevel models were employed to analyse variation in attainment at family, neighbourhood, school and Local Education Authority levels. Additionally, the thesis analyses interaction effects between capitals within and between the two contexts of interest, family and neighbourhood.

As expected, individual level characteristics explain the largest proportion of the variation in attainment. Parental cultural capital, in particular, and economic capital have a larger positive relationship to attainment when compared to the other capitals. Interesting results also emerge in relation to the ethnicity. Bonding social capital (Putnam, 2001) is found to have a small positive relationship to attainment for Pakistani and Bangladeshi young people, while bridging social capital is has a small positive effect for Indian individuals. Finally, economic and cultural capital present in the neighbourhood are found to provide an additional advantage for individuals who have higher economic and cultural capital at home, suggesting a relative deprivation effect at work (Galster, 2010).

One significant conclusion is that parent capitals are found to have a larger impact on attainment than capitals associated with young people's own cultural attitudes and practices. Additionally, it is established that without access to parent cultural capital, child cultural capital is less effective at increasing attainment. These findings suggest that policies directed at improving parent capital, either economic or cultural, or at providing additional support within and outside schools to deprived children to compensate for the lack of resources at home, are likely to have important effects on attainment and in turn on other life course outcomes.