

The role of attitudes, aspirations and behaviour in educational attainment: exploring causality

Deadline:

2.00pm on Wednesday 29 September 2010

Timescale:

Nine months

Budget:

£20, 000

Contacts:

For research queries:

Helen Barnard, Programme Manager, Policy and Research

For administrative queries:

Helen Robinson, Research Administrator, Policy and Research

The role of attitudes, aspirations and behaviour in educational attainment: exploring causality

Summary

This call is for a review of evidence regarding causal relationships between aspects of children and parents' attitudes, aspirations and behaviour, and children's educational attainment.

It builds on research published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in March 2010 which highlighted strong associations between a range of these factors and attainment.

Background

There is powerful evidence from the UK and elsewhere that children growing up in poorer families tend, as a group, to emerge from school with substantially lower levels of educational attainment than their more advantaged peers. This is a major contributing factor to patterns of restricted social mobility and the inter-generational transmission of poverty.

However, the precise mechanisms whereby affluence and disadvantage in children's backgrounds are translated into educational outcomes are complex and not yet fully understood. It seems likely that one important set of factors in this process are those that can be labelled with the umbrella term 'aspirations, attitudes and behaviours'. These encompass, for example, what children and young people aspire to, how they see themselves as learners, and how they conduct themselves in school and in their lives outside school. They also encompass how parents view themselves and their children, and the kinds of environments they create for their children in the home.

Evidence for the relationship between factors such as these and educational outcomes has recently been provided by an analysis undertaken by the Institute for Fiscal Studies and CMPO at Bristol University, supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation¹. IFS/CMPO drew upon a number of large-scale studies in the UK

¹ Goodman, A. and Gregg, P. (ed) (2010) Poorer children's educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviour? York: JRF

which make detailed observations of children and young people at various points as they pass through childhood and adolescence. These include the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) and the British Cohort Study (BCS).

Amongst the conclusions of the IFS/CMPO analysis were that:

1. The richness of the home learning environment is important for young children's educational development, but the experiences of children from poorer and more affluent backgrounds are very different in this respect.
2. The early home learning environment continues to be important during the primary years. Parental aspirations and attitudes to education, and children's attitudes and behaviours also become important at this stage. These factors vary to differing degrees by socio-economic position.
3. Although educational trajectories are set to a large extent by early adolescence, the attitudes and behaviours of teenagers and their parents still have a role to play. These factors are more likely to be negative for young people from poorer backgrounds than for their peers.
4. Over and above these variations, there are strong correlations between the cognitive abilities, attitudes and behaviours of one generation and the next.

These findings begin to indicate which factors might contribute to inequalities in educational outcomes, and where interventions might best be targeted in order to tackle those inequalities. However, at present the evidence they provide can be no more than indicative for two reasons:

1. It demonstrates relationships between factors and outcomes, but it cannot demonstrate that these relationships are causal. We know for instance that parental aspirations are related to children's educational outcomes, but we do not know whether these higher aspirations are responsible for better outcomes, nor indeed whether parents' aspirations themselves might not be raised as their children do better in school.

2. We cannot be sure whether aspirations, attitudes, and behaviours are able to be changed, or whether any such changes would result in better outcomes.

The next step in taking the IFS/CMPO findings forward, therefore, is to undertake two new studies to address these issues. One of these will focus on the evidence for causal relationships while the other will examine existing and possible interventions. This call is concerned primarily with the first of these – that is, with exploring the question of causality. A separate call will ask for proposals to address the question of what interventions might be possible.

Project aim

This project aims to identify and assess the available evidence for causal relationships between aspirations, attitudes, behaviours on the one hand, and educational outcomes on the other. In order to do so, it will review evidence relating to the factors identified in the IFS/CMPO study, in order to answer the following questions:

- Is there a causal link between this factor and educational outcomes? If so, what are the causal pathways and mediating factors?
- If this factor is changed does this improve outcomes?
- If so, what degree of change delivers what level of improvement in outcomes?
- Does the income or socio-economic background of the children involved affect the impact of changing this factor?
- Do age, gender and ethnicity affect this?
- How does the context in which the research took place affect the conclusions on causation?

Approach and methods

The project will need to undertake three main tasks:

- identify and access research evidence that is relevant to the review questions;
- assess the quality of the evidence and the weight to be placed on it; and
- synthesise the evidence into a set of findings that might be used to inform policy, practice and research.

It will be essential that the project seeks robust evidence of causality. It will therefore need to sift such evidence from what is likely to be a large number of studies which simply demonstrate the existence of relationships, or which base their findings on commonsense assumptions about how outcomes are produced. It will therefore need to be based on a rigorous methodology with clear criteria for identifying robust and appropriate evidence. This methodology is likely to learn to some extent from the practice of systematic reviewing in order to ensure a comprehensive search and transparent procedures. However, the project is located in a complex field. It is likely, in particular, that causal pathways will prove to be multiple, convoluted, and highly context-dependent. It is also likely that many kinds of evidence, with different degrees of robustness will need to be accessed, reviewed, and synthesised. In this situation, a decision will therefore have to be made as to whether a fully systematic review is either possible or desirable. A more flexible or multi-strand approach may be necessary, and the key will be to combine this flexibility with the necessary rigour.

There are three main challenges in undertaking this review:

Identification and access

This project needs to survey a very broad field, yet is searching only for very specific kinds of evidence. An early task, therefore, will be to establish the scope of the review and devise a search strategy. This will mean considering, amongst other things:

- Whether the review questions currently formulated are adequate to guide the project, or whether different questions with the same overall aims are needed.
- Whether evidence should be sought in relation to all of the factors as they are identified in the IFS/CMPO study, or whether some should be prioritised or combined.
- Whether the focus should be on the relationship between these outcomes and attainment outcomes alone, or whether other kinds of educational outcomes can be included without compromising the feasibility of the review.
- We anticipate that the review will look for evidence outside as well as within the UK. However, it will be necessary to consider whether there should be any historical limits to this and what kinds of international evidence should be considered.

- What kinds of evidence should be sought and/or prioritised? For instance, should certain kinds of studies (such as randomised controlled trials) be regarded as the ‘gold standard’ and other kinds be excluded, or should the net be cast widely in the expectation that usable evidence will emerge from many kinds of studies.
- How the search will be conducted. Will it, for instance, rely on standard bibliographic search methods, or will these need to be supplemented (or replaced) by other methods – for instance, the use of expert informants? Will the ‘grey’ literature be included (and, if so, and how will it be accessed), or will peer review be considered an essential part of guaranteeing robustness?

Assessing the evidence

The project is searching for robust evidence of causality, yet it is likely to identify evidence of very different kinds, on which very different levels of reliance can be placed. It will therefore need to have some method of assessing the weight to be attached to evidence in relation to the review questions. To some extent, this is a matter of assessing the quality of individual studies, and the project will need to establish some transparent means of doing this. However, the overall quality of studies is less important than the strength of the evidence it provides specifically in relation to causality. Whilst it is unlikely that weak studies will provide good evidence, it is entirely possible that high-quality studies of attitudes, aspirations, behaviours and outcomes will, do little to demonstrate or explicate causality. It will therefore be necessary to devise a methodology for extracting evidence relating to causality *per se* from the studies it reviews.

It will also be necessary to devise a transparent means of weighting that evidence. This might involve establishing a hierarchy of study designs, but, if so, this is likely to be combined with weighting criteria that can be applied across designs, and also with an assessment of the distinctive features of individual studies. As a result of this, the project should be able to report not just on what is known about causality, but on how reliably it is known. It is particularly important that the project is able to indicate how sound a basis for action the strength of evidence on any relationship provides. It may also be necessary to establish a cut-off point in relation to robustness,

beyond which evidence is excluded as potentially more misleading than illuminating.

Assessing the evidence from studies will also involve considering the context and population-specificity of that evidence. It seems likely that aspirations, attitudes and behaviours vary across different sub-populations in the UK – for instance, by social background, gender, ethnicity and age. It also seems likely that their impacts on educational outcomes will be different for different groups. It will be important, therefore, to identify evidence for such differences, and to assess the extent to which research studies have taken these differences into account. Similarly, it will be important to identify evidence relating to the impact of contextual variables in the UK (e.g. inner city versus peripheral social housing estate versus market town) and the extent to which these have been addressed by studies. Finally, for studies from beyond the UK, it will be important to assess how far findings can be transferred straightforwardly to UK contexts. The project will need to be explicit about how it handles these issues.

In addition to assessing the strength of the evidence, the project will also need to assess what the evidence says about the strength of the causal relationships to which it relates. It is not necessarily the case that factors which are equally strongly associated with outcomes are also equally responsible for producing those outcomes. Disentangling strength of association from strength of causation will therefore be a key, if difficult, challenge, and the project will need to be clear about how it will meet that challenge.

Synthesis

The project will need to bring together a wide range of different kinds of evidence into some coherent form. In doing so, it will need to be clear about where the gaps and ambiguities in the evidence base are. It is therefore likely to have something to say about what further research is now needed. It will also need to set out what is known with more or less confidence, and what the implications are for efforts to improve educational outcomes, particularly for children and young people who currently do badly. It will not be expected to identify specific interventions that might be undertaken, but it should be able to point to promising domains where such interventions might be targeted.

There will need, therefore, to be an explicit and transparent methodology for synthesising evidence. This will certainly include a technical component, but there may also be advantages in including user representatives in the process. In any case, the relevance of the findings of the review to action tackling educational inequalities will need to be borne in mind.

Depending on the decisions that have been made about other aspects of the review, synthesis might turn out to be a relatively straightforward matter. If all the evidence is of a similar kind, direct syntheses may be possible, perhaps even with some quantification of the strength of causal relationships. However, it seems more likely that a more discursive synthesis will be necessary, given that very different kinds of evidence, with very different levels of robustness, will need to be brought together in some coherent way. If this is the case, it will be particularly important that the synthesising process is transparent. So, for instance, it will be important to know how contradictory evidence is handled, or how more and less robust evidence is combined.

Further information

We may ask the successful research teams to attend programme days with other teams carrying out work within this programme to support learning across the projects commissioned.

As is usual for JRF projects we will be setting up an advisory group to help to guide and inform the projects in this programme. This will include people from academic, policy and practice backgrounds. The group is likely to meet twice during the life of the project. The research team will be expected to plan, attend, minute and follow up any actions from these meetings.

Budget

A budget of up to **£20 000** has been allocated for this work. Funding is expected to cover both research and associated project expenses (including VAT if applicable).

Timescale

Projects will be expected to begin by 1 October **2010** and to be conducted over a period of no longer than **9 months**.

Expected outputs

The standard expected outputs are at least one accessible short report and a 2,000 word summary.

Submitting a proposal

Applicants are advised to read the **How to apply for funding** section of our website before submitting a proposal. The **Application guidelines** contain the necessary forms for completing a proposal.

Copies of Proposals

*Please note we only require an electronic copy of full proposals to be submitted to us as outlined below.

Electronic Copies:

Please email a *Word* version of the complete proposal, summary and an *Excel* version of the budget forms to:

helen.robinson@jrf.org.uk

Timetable for submitting proposals

The deadline for receipt of full proposals is **2.00 pm on Wednesday 29 September 2010**

Unfortunately, late submissions cannot be accepted.

Proposers should expect to hear whether their proposal has been successful within one month of the deadline.

How the funding decision will be made

Following review by JRF staff and external advisers, a proposal will be recommended for funding. The following key criteria will be taken into account when considering proposals:

- Demonstration of robust, good quality research methods and theory

- Understanding of education and poverty issues, and the ways in which these are linked
- Familiarity with the relevant evidence base, key issues and policy and practice context
- Capacity to deliver a high quality output to meet the programme's needs
- The proposed team's experience and credentials in relation to the area of work

Where partnership bids are proposed, we will also be looking for clarity on the roles and responsibilities of each party and clear arrangements for coordination and project management.

Judgments about proposals are made on the basis of what is written down and proposals are most often rejected because insufficient information has been provided about key aspects of the research methods, there is a lack of clarity about what is planned or there is a mismatch between aims and methods. Applicants are advised to be clear about their proposed approach and to ensure that they respond fully to the criteria.

Key contacts

For queries about the research, including the methods, please contact:

Helen Barnard, Programme Manager Policy and Research
helen.barnard@jrf.org.uk

For queries about the application process, deadlines etc., please contact:

Helen Robinson, Research Administrator
01904 615946
helen.robinson@jrf.org.uk