

Institution: University of Bristol
Unit of Assessment: 25 - Education
<p>Title of case study: Bristol Research demonstrates socioeconomic inequality in school readiness of British children, leading to new government priorities and programmes to support parents and promote achievement equity in the UK</p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) UK and international comparative research on socioeconomic inequality in early childhood, conducted by University of Bristol in conjunction with international colleagues, has profoundly influenced a variety of UK policy initiatives since 2010. Reliable evidence on the extent of learning deficits among recent cohorts of socio-economically disadvantaged children in early childhood has led to widespread acceptance in government that policy to promote equality of opportunity must begin in the preschool period. Analysis of the factors underpinning the disparities has led to and informed the development of official UK indicators to monitor progress in this area and specific policies to support parents, with outstanding potential to impact positively on the life chances of disadvantaged children. These include, for example, free childcare places for disadvantaged two-year-olds, an increased number of health visitors and the launch of telephone and online services for parents.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) The underpinning research is comprised of a series of studies on the magnitude, determinants and consequences of socioeconomic inequality in early childhood conducted by Bristol researchers, partly in collaboration with UK and international colleagues. One aim of the research was to provide quantitative evidence of the dramatic differences in the skills and abilities of children from different socioeconomic groups at the time of entry to school, and to place the patterns among British children in an international context. Washbrook (University of Bristol staff since 2001) led on the statistical analyses and collaborated equally with Professor Jane Waldfogel (Columbia University) to document these inequalities for two nationally representative recent birth cohorts of children from the US and the UK [1][6]. The research demonstrated that the high levels of inequality that exist in the US are also found in the UK. Subsequent work extended these findings to also include equivalent cohorts in Australia and Canada, resulting in a book chapter in a volume described by an anonymous reviewer as “a major contribution to the field” [3].</p> <p>A second key research finding concerned the persistence of these initial inequalities into adolescence. Washbrook and Gregg (University of Bristol staff 1997 to 2011) were major contributors to a project sponsored by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) that involved analysis of four British birth cohort studies by a team of researchers at the University of Bristol and Institute of Fiscal Studies. This study confirmed that children from disadvantaged backgrounds were not able to catch up with their more advantaged peers between the ages of 3 and 16, highlighting the importance of the early gaps for later life outcomes [4]. However, the research goes beyond the documentation of inequalities in childhood and investigates which factors associated with socioeconomic disadvantage appear to hinder children’s development. Washbrook, in conjunction with Gregg, developed a statistical method to break down the raw gaps in an outcome between groups into components associated with different environmental factors, such as parental health and well-being, the home learning environment, material hardship and child care experiences. The method has now been applied to numerous datasets [1][2][4][5][6] and has proved particularly useful for policymakers and practitioners as it provides a way of exploiting exceptionally rich birth cohort data and summarizing a multitude of complicated relationships in an intuitive and accessible way. Organisations that have commissioned analyses based on the initial work include The Sutton Trust [1][6], the Cabinet Office [2], the Resolution Foundation and the National Equalities Panel.</p> <p>Two aspects of the findings are particularly significant. First, it has demonstrated that the majority of the raw outcome gaps in early childhood can be explained by a set of indicators commonly measured in surveys of young families. Such indicators, if collected systematically, can be used to monitor societal progress in equality of opportunity in the first years of life. Second, it has provided evidence on which of the myriad factors associated with childhood poverty are most consequential for children’s cognitive and emotional development, and so which are potentially the targets of the</p>

most successful interventions [2][4][5]. In general the research finds that the pathways linking low parental income to poorer child development are many and diffuse – there is no single “magic bullet” that if targeted can be expected to dramatically reduce early inequality. However, a key finding is that parenting behaviours such as engagement in reading and learning activities with the child, and style of discipline, consistently emerge as important factors associated with the developmental gains of higher-income children.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- [1] Waldfogel, J. and E. Washbrook. (2011). Early Years Policy. *Child Development Research*, Vol.2011, Article ID 343016: 1-12. [Previously prepared as a 2008 report for The Sutton Trust.] DOI: 10.1155/2011/343016
- [2] Washbrook, E. (2010). *Early Environments and Child Outcomes: An Analysis Commission for the Frank Field MP Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances*. Cabinet Office. http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110120090128/http://povertyreview.independent.gov.uk/media/20792/early_environments_and_child_outcomes.pdf
- [3] Bradbury, B., M. Corak, J. Waldfogel and E. Washbrook. (2012). Inequality in Early Child Outcomes. In J. Ermisch, M. Jäntti, & T. Smeeding (eds) *From Parents to Children: The Intergenerational Transmission of Advantage*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. In REF2
- [4] Gregg, P. and Washbrook, E. (2011). The role of attitudes and behaviours in explaining socioeconomic differences in attainment at age 11. *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*, 2(1), 41-58. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14301/llcs.v2i1.142>
- [5] Washbrook, E., Gregg, P. and Propper, C. (2013). A decomposition analysis of the relationship between parental income and multiple child outcomes. CMPO Working Paper 13/313. [Updated version of CMPO Working Paper 08/193 Gregg et al (2008)] <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/cmppo/publications/papers/2013/wp313.pdf>
- [6] Waldfogel, J. and E. Washbrook. (2010). *Low income and early cognitive development in the UK*. A Report for the Sutton Trust. https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/pure/files/9907648/Waldfogel_Washbrook_Sutton_Trust.pdf

Related research grants supporting and evidencing quality of publications

- Goodman, A. and Gregg, P (2006-2008). *Children in poverty: aspirations, expectations, and attitudes to education* Joseph Rowntree Foundation: £280,000
- Washbrook, E (2007) *International Visiting Scholarship*. (Columbia University; 3 months). ESRC/SSRC: \$10,000.
- Washbrook, E (2007-2009). *Poverty and Child Development in the US and the UK*. Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship.
- Gregg, P (2007-2012). *An examination of the impact of family socio-economic status on outcomes in late childhood and adolescence*. ESRC: £4.5 million.
- Hills, J, Waldfogel, J and Washbrook, E (2008-2009) *Income-Related Gaps in School Readiness*. Sutton Trust: £15,000
- Bradbury, B, Corak, M, Waldfogel, J and Washbrook, E (2009-10). *A Cross-Country Study of the Effect of Family Resources and Public Policies on Inequality in Early Child Outcomes*. Russell Sage Foundation: \$71,360.
- Washbrook, E (2010). *Early Environments and Child Outcomes: An Analysis Commission*. Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances, UK Government Cabinet Office: £2,300.
- Washbrook, E (2011). *Early child outcomes in low to middle income families*. Resolution Foundation: £3,000.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The research conducted by Washbrook and colleagues was a key influence on the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances commissioned by the Prime Minister and conducted by Frank Field MP in 2010[a]. The impact of this work is illustrated by the fact the Review team approached Washbrook in autumn 2010 in order to commission further analyses specifically to inform and support the recommendations of the Review [2]. The remit was to test the extent to which the key drivers identified from previous work (including [1][4][5]) explained the gap in children’s outcomes between those from low income households and the average at age five; and to model the extent to which varying the key drivers narrowed these gaps. The results showed that each of the factors had a small but cumulative role in explaining the gap, and that in total they could account for virtually all the gaps between low-income children and average children. The importance of a broad range of parental behaviours and home investments was again confirmed. The significance of research

impact is demonstrated by the Review concluding with three major recommendations: that parenting education be provided in schools to ensure that society consistently develops knowledge on the importance of the early years of life; that indicators be constructed to measure the life chances of children based on what the evidence says drives good outcomes in the early years; and, that the 'Foundation Years' be established to coordinate all services for the under 5s – ranging from midwifery to pre-school services. Field has commented on “how important [Washbrook’s] analysis of the correlation between the indicators and the income based gap at age five was to the work of the Review” [h].

The conclusions of the Review itself, as well as Washbrook’s earlier research, have figured prominently in a range of government strategy documents relating to Social Justice, Child Poverty, the Foundation Years and Social Mobility, while the notion that the 'Foundation Years' (a term coined by the Field Review) are a critical period in the emergence of social inequality has been widely accepted in government [b][c][d][e][i]. The Deputy Prime Minister, author of the Social Mobility Strategy cited work by Washbrook and Waldfogel as among the “evidence for the impact of pre-school learning on life chances [that] has become unanswerable” [f]. In 2012, Washbrook gave one of three invited presentations at a seminar for Elizabeth Truss MP at the Palace of Westminster, hosted by the Foundation Years Action Group. Elizabeth Truss has responsibility for childcare and early learning within the Department for Education. Also attending were the Director of the Early Years and Special Needs Group, and the DfE’s Chief Research Officer. Frank Field, who chairs the Group, has since noted the “very high quality of [that] presentation” and has used it in lobbying conversations with the Education Minister [h].

The research impact has outstanding reach in UK, but also very strong potential for future international impact, given one identifiable area of impact relates closely to global priorities and lies in the development of indicators of early child development that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, monitor progress in this area and hold the government accountable. The Foundation Trust, which Field chairs, has commissioned academics at the Centre for Family Studies to operationalize the factors identified by Washbrook’s research [2] as driving good outcomes in early childhood via a set of indicators measured at ages 0, 3 and 5. Trials of the indicators will take place in Autumn 2013 in Birkenhead schools and will be used to evaluate the Springboard parenting project (see below) and other initiatives designed to narrow the attainment gap between poor and richer children [g]. In 2011 the Social Mobility Strategy developed by the Deputy Prime Minister accepted the recommendation that key life chances indicators be collected by government and used to assess the impact of policy [e]. It set out plans to develop a measure of school readiness and development up to age 5 that would form one of seven official key lifetime indicators. An update on the Social Mobility Strategy published one year later gave details of three selected indicators relating to the Foundation Years, two of which were in operation by that date [i]. The crucial importance of monitoring outcomes was also recognised in the 2012 Social Justice Strategy, which cited the Field Review as motivation for policy to strengthen the evidence base on the costs and benefits of early interventions. In this strategy the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions set out plans to establish an Early Intervention Foundation that will collate evidence on early intervention, provide an overview of “what works” to local authorities and commissioners, signpost them to the best sources of evidence, and act as a hub for existing expertise and services in the field, commissioning work to fill gaps in knowledge [c].

Evidence on the importance of parenting, picked up in the Field review recommendations, has led to a host of new initiatives. The findings of the research in [6], for example, are cited in the 2011 Child Poverty Strategy as motivation for the “Government’s drive to make our society more family-friendly” and the development of strategies to “enhance relationship and parenting support” [b]. As one example, the Foundation Trust commissioned the Springboard project in Birkenhead, which aims to develop a blueprint model of how to support parents with children under five [g]. As part of a two-year pilot, Springboard is currently recruiting and training volunteers to work with 130 families, with the aims of improving their parenting capacity, guiding parents through the range of services available to them, and monitoring the forms of support parents receive. Also building on the Review, a curriculum of lesson plans and project days has been developed, aimed at educating teenagers on the roles of parents. The curriculum is being piloted in fifteen schools around the country, with the plan to roll out the programme in 2014. At the national level, parenting initiatives

developed as part of the Social Mobility Strategy include: the provision of £11 million of funding for national online and telephone helpline guidance and intensive support on a wide range of topics; the launch of a new digital NHS information service for parents; the trialling of free parenting classes in three local areas to test ways of establishing a market for universal parenting classes; the provision of a single point of access for information to support families with children under the age of five via the Families in the Foundation Years website; and the dedication of £30 million funding available for relationship support over the Spending Review period, including encouraging parents to take up support as a preventative measure and providing support to parents who are experiencing difficulties in their relationship [i]. Reforms to funding structures designed to address the priorities laid out in the Field Review include the establishment of the Fairness Premium (£7.2 billion directed towards disadvantaged children at key life stages including age 2) and the Early Intervention Grant, which brings together the funding for early intervention and preventative services for the most vulnerable children, young people and families [b]. Investments in free early education and childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds will total £760 million per year by 2014–15 which will benefit up to 260,000 two-year-olds [i]. The need to promote early language development in disadvantaged children highlighted by Washbrook and Waldfogel in [6] was linked to the role of health visitors in the Foundation Years Strategy [d]. Commitments to increase the health visitor workforce and the capacity of the Family Nurse Partnership (FNP) programme have since led to a tripling of the number of health visitors beginning training and an additional 3000 FNP places [i].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- [a] Field, F (2010). *The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults*. The report of the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances *Corroborates claims of impact on the findings of the Field review, in terms of commissioned analyses [2] (p.75) and references to prior research projects, [1] (p.29, 38), [4] (p.33, 38, 42,43,46-48), [5] (p.43, 47)*
- [b] HM Government (2011). *A New Approach to Child Poverty: Tackling the Causes of Disadvantage and Transforming Families' Lives*. Child Poverty Strategy presented to Parliament by the Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions and Education. *Corroborates claims of impact on the priority given to the Foundation Years in government generally, the importance of the Field recommendations for the development of policy and reforms to funding structures, and the influence of research such as [6] on policies around parenting.*
- [c] HM Government (2012) *Social Justice: transforming lives*. Social Justice Strategy presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. *Corroborates the research impact on the strengthening of the government's evidence base and the establishment of the Early Intervention Foundation, via the Field review.*
- [d] Department of Education (2011). *Supporting Families in the Early Years*. Government plans for reform to services for children under five. *Corroborates claims of research impact on the priority given to the Foundation Years in government, the importance of the Field review for the development of policy, and the influence of [6] on policy to increase the number of health visitors.*
- [e] HM Government (2011). *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: A Strategy for Social Mobility*. *Corroborates claims of research impact on overall government policy directly and via the Field review, on the development of life chances indicators to evaluate and monitor progress, and on the thinking of the Deputy Prime Minister.*
- [f] Speech by the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg MP, delivered on 22 May 2012. *Corroborates claims of impact on the priority given to the Foundation Years in government generally, and on the knowledge base of the Deputy Prime Minister, author of the Social Mobility Strategy [e].*
- [g] Field, F (2013). *The Foundation Years Trust*. *Corroborates research impact on the activities of the Foundation Years Trust: piloting of a curriculum of parenting for teenagers, the Springboard parenting project and the development of life chances indicators for project evaluation.*
- [h] Factual statement from the Senior Parliamentary Researcher to the Rt Hon Frank Field MP, House of Commons. *Corroborates claims of Washbrook's impact on the findings of the Field review [a] and the influence of her presentation to the Education Minister.*
- [i] HM Government (2012). *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: A Strategy for Social Mobility Update on progress since April 2011*. *Corroborates claims of research impact on the introduction of a range of policies around parenting, child care for two-year-olds and the development of official life chances indicators.*