

Home is where the heart is: the home learning environment, place-based education and access to green space

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ABSTRACT

The home learning environment (HLE) has been shown to be a significant predictor of subsequent attainment at school. This article considers a number of studies in this area and puts forward the possibility of enhancing the HLE through techniques associated with place-based education and the use of the 'local'. Barriers to such an approach are explored as are a number of factors which would facilitate this way forward.

INTRODUCTION

The exploration of factors that might explain differences in educational outcome forms the basis for a number of studies (eg Burger 2010; Hartas 2012; Sammons et al. 2014). The rationale for such investigations often implies that they will inform policy and practice in order to reduce these differences. This paper gives consideration to some of these studies, but focuses on one factor, the home learning environment (HLE), which seems to have been marginalised in policy and practice terms. Some suggestions are made about how this might be rectified.

The longitudinal study of a sample of about three thousand children aged from 3+ to 16 is the basis of the Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) project. The rich data gathered in

this study has enabled the project team to identify a number of factors which are predictive of the academic attainment, developmental and socio-behavioural outcomes for the cohort under consideration (Sammons et al. 2014; Sylva et al. 2014). This project has made it possible to begin to make links between early experiences and later outcomes, with the nature of the analysis enabling some untangling of confounding factors. Thus while there are a number of predictive factors (Dearden et al. 2010) of differences in children's outcomes, the EPPSE study (Sylva et al. 2008) has shown that the HLE accounts for around a quarter of the difference in cognitive gap between children from different socio-economic groups. Subsequent work has shown that 'early years HLE remained a significant predictor of better GCSE results. Home learning

in adolescence is also important. Experiencing a more academically enriching HLE in Key Stage 3 predicted better GCSE attainment and progress' (Sammons et al. 2014: 5).

THE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Exploring the reasons for the effect of HLE, Connor et al. (2005) reported on a scale which defined the HLE through, among other things, the quantity of learning materials and the variety of experiences that children have at home. This material support is echoed by Lee & Bowen (2006) who saw access to education resources and services as one of the ways in which parents influence the HLE. Hartas (2012) points out the multidimensional nature of the HLE, characterising it both in terms of support directly related to school activities and those

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activities which aim to provide learning enrichment. There is scope here to propose a distinction between formal and informal education. Melhuish et al. (2008) are clear that this is not a simple case of extending the work of the school into the home, but is about the recognition and internalisation of the value of learning, while within Hartas' characterisation the importance of the quality of the parent/child interaction is given some prominence, with parental dispositions potentially offering a counterbalance in situations where physical resource is lacking. However, it is also possible that, as De Civita et al. (2004) point out, the material disadvantage may affect access to educational resources available in the community and the educational expectations that parents hold.

The value of the HLE is clear, the mechanism through which it operates less so and the way in which it might be impacted upon very difficult to see at all. It is likely, however, that without intervention this aspect of a child's experience will continue to be a significant factor in the reproduction of disadvantage. Hartas (2012) is clear that any such intervention should be parent-driven and should allow access to bridging forms of cultural and social capital. However, commentators are less forthcoming about how one goes about securing these opportunities, especially for those who don't have access to the resources that might underpin an effective HLE.

An area worth exploring is the way in which the home learning environment could be supplemented and enriched through the local environment of that home, using techniques associated with place-based education.

PLACE-BASED EDUCATION

Waite (2013) views a place-based education approach as one which enables place to be a partner in education. This is in line with a range of alternative educational initiatives emerging from the realisation

that communities can come together to learn and the idea that the structure of the institution is less important than the individual behaviour, social relationships, physical environments and economic status of neighbourhoods (McKnight 2003). Such educational organising (Anyon 2009) aims to create social capital in communities, to give parents a base for advocacy and to help to shape attachment to place (Humphreys 2007). In this conceptualisation the place is the educational resource for a curriculum that 'is experiential and cross-disciplinary in its pedagogical approach involving repeated visits to local sites [which] is intended to increase the pupils' sensitivity to their own locale and environmental awareness' (Waite 2013: 415) 'through ecology, cultural history, geology, geography, place-names, story, interactions with local community' (Harrison 2010: 7).

While 'place' is a free resource, its availability and the perception of its suitability as a learning resource are barriers to engagement. An example of the latter difficulty was provided by Thomas and Thompson (2004) who demonstrated the beliefs about the inherent hostility of public space among young people, with danger being the 'first thing children mentioned when talking about being outside the home' (p. 8). If such perceptions dominate it is unlikely that free-flowing interaction with this public space will be encouraged. In this context it is interesting to note the finding that 'living in a neighbourhood perceived as "unsafe" predicted lower grades in GCSE English and maths, and also poorer progress in maths' (Sammons et al. 2014: 5). This seems to be a clear point for intervention, with place-based education being used to disrupt these perceptions and, through engaging with place, to change not only the perception but also the reality of that place.

As well as these issues of perception there are potentially more fundamental problems such as the availability of 'green space' to be used as a resource. Thomas

and Thompson (2004) draw attention to the 'gap in equality of access to high quality natural environments between children from rural backgrounds and children from urban backgrounds' (p. 3). These inequalities are not just structured along urban/rural lines. For example, Hunt et al. (2015) show clearly, through the use of the Greenspace Index, that some east London boroughs have more access to green space than others and that this is an indicator of the frequency of visits that people make to the natural environment. The Hunt et al. report also found some interesting correlations between access to green space and physical activity and noted the positive influence children had on the number of visits that were undertaken.

The recognition of the influence of children in a household on that household's engagement with the local is indicative of the 'interactions between children and parents [which] are reciprocal and symbiotic in that they are influenced by each others' behaviour and practices' (Hartas 2012: 874). This may well act as a magnifier for positive effects from any interventions designed to use the local to enhance the HLE. A case can be made for the positive effect that such an approach would have on the activity level of adults and on, among other things, the engagement of individuals with their immediate communities.

CONCLUSION

The fact that there are demonstrable benefits arising from the HLE which children experience means that this is an area that is worth further study. It is not the same as centre-based programmes such as Surestart, but rather is about the type of experience and the resources that can be drawn upon in informal settings, and mediated by parents or carers. Some of the variation in HLE might be laid at the door of material disadvantage, a charge that might also be levelled at the use of green space. Access is important but so is the knowledge of that access and of how to engage with that space. Subsequent

work needs to look at the way in which access to green space is viewed as a learning resource (and thus its possible enhancement of the HLE) and whether the use of green-space/outdoor activities impacts on the HLE. Taken together the findings confirm that 'place poverty' can also shape attainment over and above individual and family characteristics (Sammons et al. 2014; Sylva et al. 2014).

There are clearly issues here, not least the differential access that families might have to appropriate space. Other issues include the confidence that parents and carers might possess about their ability to construct 'meaningful' experiences for their children, this in turn affecting the status of these activities in terms of a learning hierarchy. Schools may be thought of as appropriate starting points

to engage in this area of work; it might be that their engagement does not impact on the early HLE of a particular family, but might be a powerful influence on subsequent children and continue to be of importance into adolescence. However, the willingness of schools to do this will depend on the way in which schools see themselves in terms of their place within their communities (Herrington 2013). ■

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