

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

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*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

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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.

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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

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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

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children, as well as some children with few early risk factors from high-SES backgrounds who achieve high attainment levels at age 11, are regarded as the ‘academically successful’ children in our Case Studies. The ‘vulnerable’ children in this study are those children who reach attainment levels that are either below prediction or as low as predicted by disadvantageous personal or family characteristics. As Willis (1977) showed in his classic study of adolescent boys, throughout their learning life-course children adapt, either positively or negatively, to the physical and social environmental influences that they experience. He focused on the experiences of the sub-group of ‘lads’ who rejected education but he did not consider the lives of working-class boys who succeeded in education.

In this study we aim to increase our understanding and to explore, and explain, the pathways that lead to resilience or vulnerability. Every child’s learning life-course is determined by a unique combination of experiences and events. Some of these experiences and events have the potential of leading to underachievement (risk factors), while others provide resources and contribute to resilience (protective factors). Various risk and protective factors interact in complex ways so that very different life-courses may therefore lead to similar outcomes, yet life-courses that appear very similar may lead to different learning outcomes for different individuals (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1996). Life-experiences are interpreted according to, and in turn they contribute towards, the construction and reconstruction of the child’s personality traits and characteristics. Parents can also pass ‘risks’ and ‘resilience’ on to their children, creating inter-generational social and economic immobility or mobility (Feinstein et al., 2008; Schoon, 2006). Positive or negative adaptations that people make during their learning life-course affect their future learning, and the resulting learning outcomes in turn shape the future environments that they offer to their children. That is, the children’s own agency matters and interacts with others and their environment to shape them and their identities and futures.

We have key, targeted questions that will be addressed for the ‘resilient’ and ‘vulnerable’ children in our study. The general question addressed in this book is *when and why* do some ‘at-risk’ children ‘succeed against the odds’ while others make little progress or fall further behind? To answer this we will specifically look at the following research questions:

- What factors act as ‘protective’ influences in combating poor outcomes and what factors increase the ‘risk’ of poor outcomes? What are ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ influences for certain groups of children?



- What are the key factors within families that shape the educational and developmental outcomes of ‘resilient’ and ‘vulnerable’ children? How does this vary with ethnicity or gender differences?
- What is the role of pre-school, school and teachers in enhancing or constraining a child’s academic and social potential at different ages, i.e., leading to ‘resilience’ or ‘vulnerability’?
- What factors, external to school and family, influence children’s views of themselves as successful learners (e.g., community, computer use, extra-curricular activities, pursuit of hobbies/interests, family learning or similar activities)?
- What are the views of ‘vulnerable’ and ‘resilient’ children and their parents of the children’s educational experiences? How do they perceive the events and people that have shaped them and what explanations do they provide?

### Outline of the book

The first four chapters of this book describe the background of the fifty Child and Family Case Studies and the ideas and constructs upon which this book is based. In this first chapter we have introduced the Case Studies in the context of the EPPSE 3–16 research project 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. The second chapter provides an overview of the theoretical framework of the study based on some of the literature from the fields of (developmental) psychology, sociology and education. It proposes Bronfenbrenner’s ‘bioecological model of development’ (see for instance Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) as an overall framework for the Case Studies. It specifically discusses mechanisms of development at work on the different levels of this framework and describes our understanding of concepts relevant to developmental processes. Chapter 3 describes the mixed-methods approach as applied in the Case Studies, and provides arguments regarding the added value of the approach. The chapter also offers extensive descriptions of the way the sample of participants for the Case Studies was constructed, the way the Case Studies interviews were developed and analysed and a description of the trajectory analyses that were part of the Case Studies. Finally it is argued that the design and analyses of the Case Studies fit within the boundaries set for research in the tradition of the bioecological model of human development. Chapter 4 describes cultural repertoires and experiences that are typical in the learning life-courses of the four sub-groups of participants we identified in the Case Studies. Through use of extensive,

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in-depth case studies we describe the full, detailed, learning trajectories of two children from disadvantaged SES backgrounds and of two children from middle-class families. Steven Peterson and Tom White are both growing up in working-class families, but while Tom is doing fairly poorly in school, i.e., achieving academically as had been predicted, Steven is academically succeeding against the odds of disadvantage. Marcy Stewart and Imogene Woods are both growing up in middle-class homes, but while Imogene is among the top students of her school and of the EPPSE sample, Marcy is struggling academically, against the odds of advantage.

The following chapters share a focus on proximal process experiences that are related to children's expected or unexpected academic achievements. Throughout these chapters we integrate findings from the Case Studies interviews that were obtained through two procedures of data analysis. Participants' perceptions of reasons for academic success and failure were extracted from the child, parent and teacher interview data by applying bottom-up analysis. For this analysis, coding categories were created according to themes that emerged from the analysis of perceptions of the participants as expressed in the interviews. For the second set of analyses, a 'top down' approach was used to develop categories of 'protective' and 'risk' factors. Coding categories were created based on evidence from the quantitative and qualitative EPPSE project data and the literature review.

Chapter 5 of the book looks at the 'person' characteristics that might help explain expected and unexpected academic trajectories. This chapter describes findings on how children become, or fail to become, active agents of their academic success. It relates protective and risk factors based on the literature review to factors explicitly identified as having contributed to academic success or difficulties by the children that were identified for the sample and their parents and teachers.

Chapters 6 and 7 discuss aspects of the family microsystem, of parenting and family histories in their relation to children's academic achievements. Chapter 6 describes the parenting practices in our four samples and includes sections on the HLE through the early, primary and secondary years. Chapter 7 continues by describing practices of 'family involvement with school and learning'. It relates these practices to empirical evidence for educational success as well as to their educational effect as perceived by children and parents and parents' reasons for providing these parenting repertoires.

In Chapter 8 learning processes in the classroom microsystem and the school context are discussed. This chapter relates examples of how the school environment has contributed to the academic success of the