Downward mobility, opportunity hoarding and the ‘glass floor’ - SMCPC report

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Summary

The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (SMCPC) has published a research report, Downward mobility, opportunity hoarding and the ‘glass floor’, which shows the existence of a ‘glass floor’ that protects less able, better-off children from falling down the social ladder as they become adults – inhibiting opportunities for more able children from less advantaged backgrounds. The report suggests a number of policy responses to improve the situation.

Overview

New research, conducted by Abigail McKnight of the London School of Economics for the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (SMCPC), shows that children from more advantaged social backgrounds who are assessed at age 5 as having low cognitive ability are significantly (35%) more likely to become high earners than their high ability peers from lower income households.

The report, Downward mobility, opportunity hoarding and the ‘glass floor’, examines evidence from the British birth cohort survey of children born in 1970 in terms of the relationship between family background, childhood cognitive skills and adult success in the labour market. It focuses on two groups of children: one with relatively low levels of cognitive skills at age 5 who, on that basis, are predicted to be less likely to have highly successful careers; the other with relatively high levels of cognitive skills at age 5, and thus, on average, more likely to have highly successful careers. Comparing actual outcomes, using a measure of high earnings and ‘top job’ status, the research finds social gradients in family background measured by family income and parental social class; it uses statistical models to seek to identify which variables account for these gradients – considering, in particular, the role of parental education, later childhood performance in reading and maths assessment, social and emotional skills in childhood (self-esteem, ‘locus of control’ and behaviour), types of secondary school attended and whether or not individuals go on to attain a degree qualification.

The raw data show that, on average, children from lower income families or those with less advantaged social class backgrounds do not perform as well in a series of cognitive tests taken at age 5 as children from higher income families or those from advantaged social class backgrounds. And children from more advantaged family backgrounds are more likely to have high earnings in later life, and to be in a ‘top job’. However, this is not simply due to different levels of cognitive ability, as it holds within attainment groups as well as over the complete distribution. The research
looks at the progress of a group of initially high attaining children and a group of initially low attaining children and follows their progress to labour market outcomes at age 42.

The report (which includes a lot of statistical data) outlines the main ‘ingredients’ of the research (summarised briefly below), then describes how income and social gradients are accounted for in predicting success before setting out its conclusions and a discussion of policy issues. This briefing focuses on the main findings, and their policy implications.

**Briefing in full**

**Introduction**

‘Success is considered to be just reward where it has been achieved on the basis of merit and effort but a social injustice where it has been gained as a result of parental wealth and status. A society in which the success or failure of children with equal ability rests on the social and economic status of their parents is not a fair one. Not only is it unfair but it is a waste of the talents of those from less advantaged backgrounds; damaging for the individuals, the economy and society.’

The report outlines ‘an extensive body of literature on social mobility, with many studies for the UK making use of the rich information available from a number of longitudinal birth cohort studies’; this shows that ‘social mobility on the UK is relatively low by international standards and has not increased over the last 40 years, and it is also suggested that a contributing factor is relatively high levels of income inequality’. It observes that ‘if social position is measured in terms of rank order in an income or earnings distribution, greater upward mobility needs a commensurate increase in downward mobility’, and that ‘a better understanding of the factors that help advantaged children succeed to a greater extent than their less advantaged peers can help to identify how policies can be shaped to ensure that opportunities are shared more equally’.

**The ‘ingredients’ of the research**

The raw data come from the British Cohort Study 1970, which has followed the lives of 17,000 people born in a single week in 1970, with the birth survey followed up by eight further surveys at ages 5, 10, 16, 26, 30, 34, 38 and 42. Family background is defined in terms of net family income (at age 10, adjusted for differences in family size) and social class (using the Registrar General’s Social Class classification of categories I to V, based on occupation), assigning the highest social class from the mother or father where both parents are present. A composite measure of cognitive skill at age 5 is based on five tests used to assess different aspects of cognitive ability, and the two groups used for the study are those with scores in the two lowest quintiles (low attainers) and in the two highest quintiles (high attainers).

A number of potentially explanatory variables are identified, which might account for the likelihood of achieving high adult earnings and labour market success: family background - a measure of parental educational attainment (in addition to income and social class) at the time their children started school; cognitive skill development – measures of cognitive skills at age 10 from assessments in maths and reading (to provide an indication of skill trajectories); non-cognitive/social and emotional (‘soft’) skills – based on assessments at age 10, three measures were used, of self-esteem, ‘locus of control’ (the extent to which individuals believe in their own ability to control events/their own destiny), and behaviour (using Rutter’s behaviour score, to measure...
behavioural difficulties); schooling and educational attainment – the type of secondary school attended at age 16 (comprehensive, grammar, secondary modern, private and other) and highest level of education reached (no qualifications, GCSE or less, A Levels or equivalent, further or higher vocational education and degree or above).

The report makes use of two indicators of labour market success: earnings and occupation. The preferred earnings measure is hourly earnings for employees combined with hourly labour income for the self-employed; individuals in the top quintile (the highest earning 20 per cent) are classified as high earners. Individuals in top ranking/high status jobs are defined as those who are large employers or working in higher managerial or higher professional occupations.

The methodology begins by examining the relationships between three variables: family background, low cognitive skills in early childhood and labour market success in adulthood. The independent influence of different factors that can contribute to any observed social gradient is estimated using regression models, and the results are used to assess evidence of a ‘glass floor’ and identify factors that account for any downward mobility among advantaged families or limited upward mobility for children from disadvantaged families based on what would be predicted from early cognitive assessments. (An account is given of steps taken to avoid ‘measurement error’ influencing the outcome.)

The relationship between family background, early cognitive skills and labour market success

One-third of children in the lowest family income quintile score in the lowest quintile of the cognitive tests and one-third of children in the highest family income quintile score in the highest quintile of cognitive test scores (but there is a sizeable minority of children from low income backgrounds with high cognitive test scores, and of children from high income backgrounds with low scores). More than one-third (37%) of children from Social Class I have test scores in the top quintile and more than one-third (36%) of children from Social Class V have scores in the bottom quintile, but again the results show that the relationship is not deterministic, with some high skill children from less advantaged backgrounds and some low skill children from advantaged backgrounds.

Very few (11%) individuals with the lowest test scores at age 5 make it into the top labour income group at age 42, and only a small minority (14%) of individuals with the highest test scores at age 5 are in the lowest hourly income quintile at age 42. However, 30% of children in the highest quintile for cognitive test scores have hourly labour income in the top quintile at age 42 (with over 50% in the highest two quintiles).

More than one-third (36%) of individuals from the highest family income quintile are in the top hourly labour income quintile at age 42, while 28% of individuals from the lowest family income quintile are in the lowest hourly earning quintile at age 42. And around 40% of children from Social Class I (professional class) are in the top hourly labour income quintile at age 42, compared with only 7% of children from Social Class V (unskilled class).

‘It is striking that the associations are very similar irrespective of which age parental social class or family income is measured. Children from advantaged social class backgrounds are four times more likely to be in a high hourly labour income group in adulthood than children from
disadvantaged social class backgrounds. For family income background the difference between being in the top or bottom income quintile is around three-fold. There is also a correlation evident between children’s grandfather’s social class background and their success as adults in the labour market, although the relationship appears to be attenuated over generations for children from less advantaged backgrounds, with a higher share of children with grandfathers in the lowest social class making it into the top hourly labour income quintile age 42 than children with parents in the lowest social class.’

Predicting success: accounting for income and social gradients

Using regression analysis, this section analyses the patterns of advantage and disadvantage highlighted in the preceding sections on the relationships between early cognitive skills, family background and later labour market success; again, the focus is on the low and high attaining groups, and their chances of being in higher earning or ‘top’ jobs.

Three models are estimated for the outcomes for the two groups (low and high attainers at age 5), progressively building up from the basic model 1, which includes only the family background variable and gender; model 2 adds parental education and age 10 cognitive and non-cognitive skills; model 3 adds secondary school type and education attainment. This allows identification of the key factors that contribute to labour market success for different groups of individuals, and helps to explain the raw differentials by social class and family income background.

Before reporting the regression results, there is an account of the how the two attainment groups vary by the characteristics used as explanatory variables in the statistical models:

‘The group with relatively low attainment in cognitive skill tests at age 5 are around half as likely to be in the top hourly labour income group compared to the higher attainers (14% relative to 27%).

‘The low attainers are more likely to be disadvantaged across the whole range of variables considered. They are more likely to be in a low income family (age 10); their parents are much more likely to have no qualifications (43% compared to 23%) and much less likely to be graduates (9% compared to 23%). They are found to perform less well in reading and maths assessments at age 10. In terms of social and emotional skills, early low attainers are found to have lower self-esteem and are less likely to have a sense that they are in control of their own destiny at age 10 (locus of control). These early low attainers are also more likely to have moderate or severe behavioural problems (measured at age 10). They are considerably more likely to attend a secondary modern school (22% relative to 12%) at age 16 and less likely to attend a private (2% compared to 8%) or a Grammar (3% compared to 7%) secondary school. Ultimately they are more likely to leave school without any qualifications (11% relative to 6%) or with low levels of qualifications and considerably less likely to gain a degree qualification (13% relative to 34%).’

The remainder of this section of the report largely comprises detailed statistical analysis, from which key findings are summarised briefly here.

The table below summarises the predicted probability of being in the top quintile of hourly earnings at age 42 associated with key characteristics from the statistical models. The figures in brackets are the predicted probabilities from the simple models.
The predictions are estimated for men and women separately as all of the models show that women have a lower likelihood of being in the top earning group than men.

While the independent effect of different variables is important, individuals have combinations of characteristics and circumstances. The paper describes fictional pen portraits of four very different individuals who were all low attaining at age 5, using the model estimates to predict the probability that children with these characteristics will make it into the top earnings group at age 42; the outcomes range from 7% to 73% - providing ‘a useful reminder that different combinations of circumstances and characteristics can result in very different outcomes’.

**Conclusion and policy discussion**

‘Within high and low attainment groups, children from families with higher incomes or more advantaged social class backgrounds have a greater chance of being highly successful in the labour market than their less advantaged peers. Children showing early signs of low ability from better-off families largely avoid downward mobility. The factors that appear to limit this possibility are: higher parental education, high maths aptitude by age 10, enrolment in a Grammar or Private secondary school, attainment of a degree. Social and emotional skills also play a role. Initially low attaining children with a relatively high sense of control over their own destiny are more likely to be highly successful in the labour market. Childhood behavioural problems are also negatively associated with good outcomes and such problems are less likely to be observed among children from more advantaged background. Children with relatively high levels of ability, measured in cognitive tests taken at age 5, also have an unequal chance of later labour market success and this too is shaped by the socio-economic position of their parents. High attaining children from less advantaged family backgrounds (income or social class) are less likely to be in a high earning or top job as an adult.

The social gradient cannot be fully accounted for by the full range of explanatory variables considered (parental education, attainment in reading and maths (age 10), social and emotional skills (age 10), type of secondary school attended and highest level of education attained). This suggests that high attaining children from less advantaged family backgrounds are less able to, or at least less successful, at converting this early high potential into later labour market success. Parents with relatively high income or social class position are more successful at ensuring that
their early high attaining children in cognitive tests translate these cognitive skills into labour market success; at least they have more of the resources at their disposal that are linked to later labour market success. Women in both the attainment groups are considerably less likely to be in high paid work or a “top job” than their male peers.’

The report suggests a number of areas in which policy might be directed at trying to compensate children who are deprived of the benefits that children with better educated parents receive: the setting of homework, fostering and nurturing aspiration, high quality and age appropriate education and careers advice, inspirational high calibre teachers deployed where they can have greatest impact, encouraging successful alumni to return and talk about their experiences, and avoiding practices that damage non-cognitive skill development.

It also comments that focusing on choice in the selection of primary and secondary schools ‘can simply result in parents who are in a better position to make informed choices and able to exercise that choice sending their children to the best performing schools, thereby hoarding these school places at the expense of less-advantaged children’.

On the advantage shown for children who attend a grammar or private secondary school, the report suggests that, whilst this could reflect higher cognitive and non-cognitive skills gained by pupils attending these schools which are not fully captured by the researchers’ controls, ‘there could also be an unmeritocratic element to this premium’. It refers to previous research which showed that for given A-level grades, private school educated graduates perform less well in their degrees, but went on to earn a wage premium compared with their peers educated in the state sector; it also lists a number of ways in which recruitment into high earning occupations may be biased towards people educated in private schools, and suggests that 11+ entry exams used to select pupils for grammar schools favour children from more advantaged families (since initially low attaining children from these families are more likely to attend grammar schools).

A large gap in attainment by family background also exists within the broader state school system, where ‘not only are less advantaged children more likely to attend poorer performing schools but, on average, they are found to perform well below their advantaged peers in schools rated by Ofsted as outstanding’.

The report concludes by observing that it is difficult to legislate against discrimination on socio-economic grounds – though the Equality Act (2010) includes a provision for a public sector duty regarding socio-economic inequalities (which has not been brought into force) – but that ‘ruling out certain practices such as informal and unpaid internships helps a bit’.

‘In this paper we have shown evidence consistent with opportunity hoarding and identified limited downward mobility among advantaged children irrespective of their early cognitive ability. We have discussed ways in which parents act to increase the chance of their children achieving well in their education and succeeding in the labour market but of course it is not simply what parents do that matter as certain recruitment practices, some aspects of school systems and processes, and higher education practices have all been shown to exacerbate socio-economic inequalities. If politicians are serious about their expressed desire to increase social mobility in the UK they will need to address barriers that are preventing less advantaged children from reaching their full potential and remove barriers that block downward mobility.’
Comment

This report adds the concept of a ‘glass floor’ – preventing less able children from advantaged backgrounds suffering downward social mobility – to the already well-known ‘glass ceiling’ which inhibits the upward mobility of able children from disadvantaged backgrounds. It makes clear that ‘where “room at the top” is increasing only slowly it is simply not possible to increase any form of upward mobility without a commensurate rise in downward mobility’. This suggests that we are dealing with a ‘zero sum game’ – in which attempts to redress the present imbalance are likely to be resisted by those who benefit from it; and the history of education politics would suggest that this is indeed the case.

But if more attention were paid to the damage done by the current waste of talent not only to the individuals concerned but to the economy and society, then perhaps it would be better recognised that there are broader gains to be made by tackling seriously the UK’s long-standing social injustice and inequality – and that continues to dog the education system, which should be a major force in redressing the imbalance.

External links

SMCPC [Downward mobility, opportunity hoarding and the ‘glass floor’](#)

Related briefings


[Child Poverty Strategy 2014-17 – HMG](#) (July 2014)

For further information, please visit [www.lgiu.org.uk](http://www.lgiu.org.uk) or email john.fowler@lgiu.org.uk