Response to 'Analysing Family Circumstances and Education' Government Consultation

July 2017

Introduction

The work that the Department for Education has undertaken to link parental income and pupil information is helpful in furthering our understanding of outcomes for pupils beyond the binary comparison of those who are eligible for the Pupil Premium and those who are not, and of the extent to which these current categories are effective in identifying the most educationally disadvantaged pupils.

Purpose

The EPI therefore welcomes the use of this approach for monitoring purposes. However, it is not clear if the government intends to use the dataset for other functions. The consultation did not establish any clear purpose for undertaking this study besides a general statement about seeking to learn more about the experience of 'families with modest incomes' to 'ensure we have the necessary insight to better inform policy making'.[1] While linking pupil information to parental income is useful and yields important information, no further detail is given about how this information will be used, and whether there are any specific problems the government is trying to address with it.

We would not recommend using the current study to re-distribute the balance of resources between different groups of pupils. The findings indicate that although correlations remain between household income and attainment and progress for non-disadvantaged pupils, outcomes for non-disadvantaged pupils are nevertheless above the national average. The FSM and Pupil Premium categories are currently effectively identifying pupils who face the greatest educational disadvantage, which is substantially higher than that of non-disadvantaged pupils even in the lowest income decile. While these categories may have been introduced because they were conveniently available from existing administrative data, this analysis shows that they perform well against more nuanced income data and thus should remain a prominent focus for policies aimed at enhancing social mobility. Given these findings, the approach should simply be used to monitor the extent to which FSM/PP categories continue to identify pupils experiencing the greatest barriers to educational achievement, and any changes over time in the correlation between income and outcomes for non-disadvantaged pupils.

Terminology

We do not recommend creating a statistical category for OWFs, but if the government decides to do so, there are important considerations to be made. 'Ordinary Working Families' is not an appropriate term for use in national statistics as the expression is both ambiguous and politicised. The word 'ordinary' is a subjective term, and 'working' is not exclusive to families in this category – some of the families in the pupil premium and current FSM categories are also working, so it is misleading to contrast them with 'working' families. Instead, the group identified should be referred to in more neutral, objective, and descriptive terms. A title derived from factual description is therefore more appropriate, such as 'middle-income families'.

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[1] Department for Education, April 2017, 'Analysing family circumstances and education'

Methodology

EPI would recommend continued reporting on outcomes by income decile, rather than grouping 'OWFs' together. Firstly, the methodology in identifying OWFs lacks a clear, guiding principle. While defining the lower limit of OWFs as those that do not receive the pupil premium is reasonable, using the income median as the upper limit of the group seems more arbitrary. Based on the data provided in the document, there appears to be no reason to distinguish between those below and above the median income. Again, children of all income groups that are not considered disadvantaged have above average educational achievement and progress. And while attainment and progress do increase with family income, the median is not an important point in the distribution.

Secondly, using the median to define what is 'below average' fails to consider the full context of how income is distributed in society. Due to how income generally rises with age, younger households with school-aged children will generally have lower incomes than older households.[2] Thus, while households currently identified as OWFs might have below median income for all households, they do not necessarily have below average incomes for households with school-aged children.

Government Approach

In order to raise outcomes for this group and for children and young people more generally, the government should adopt a more consistent, cross-departmental approach. Focusing on the potential needs of OWFs exemplifies an inconsistent outlook on the relative importance of income on student outcomes.

For instance, over the past few years, the Department for Work and Pensions has identified tackling social issues – such as drug abuse or relationship stress – over income in addressing children's chances of success. This is most evident in their 'Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families' paper published in April 2017, which, despite its accompanying evidence indicating that income is more important for educational outcomes than social issues, has chosen to prioritise the latter in its policy conclusions.[3] The two approaches – one emphasising income and the other, social issues – together reveal an inconsistency in the government's overall priorities in addressing gaps in pupil outcomes.

Moreover, if the government were to focus on what is known to be most predictive of children's educational outcomes, then income would be prioritised over social issues. But higher still would be parental education and occupation: Prior research commissioned by the Department for Education on different predictors of attainment at key stage 2 and key stage 4 has revealed that besides prior attainment, pupils' parental occupation and education were stronger predictors of educational attainment than parental income.[4] But such information is not currently collected by government, and it would also rely on self-declaration thus being subject to bias and unreliability. Further, while there are clear and simple potential policy levers for increasing the income of the poorest families, there are no fast-acting solutions for low parental education and occupation. Nevertheless, these factors should still be incorporated into the analysis of family circumstances and education so as to

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[2] HM Revenue and Customs, March 2017, 'Distribution of median and mean income by age range and gender': https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/distribution-of-median-and-mean-income-and-tax-by-age-range-and-gender-2010-to-2011#history

[3] Department for Work and Pensions, April 2017, 'Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families': https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-lives-helping-workless-families

[4] Department for Education, November 2015, 'Factors associated with achievement: key stages 2 and 4': https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/factors-associated-with-achievement-key-stages-2-and-4

understand the issue more fully and enable the development of a cohesive and effective governmental approach.

Further areas of research

The analyses revealed in the consultation document should be extended to further areas of research for monitoring purposes.

The data on disadvantaged students should be studied in further detail. Pupils eligible for free school meals and others receiving the pupil premium should be grouped according to the number of years for which they have been eligible for a free school meal in order to identify the attainment and progress of the most acutely disadvantaged pupils. EPI's 'Education in England: Annual Report 2016' included such analysis, which revealed that despite the overall attainment gap for all disadvantaged pupils having narrowed in recent years, it had narrowed more slowly for the most persistently disadvantaged pupils.[5] This should be further studied and monitored to design more nuanced interventions, as the average picture of disadvantage masks important differences between pupils.

Further, the consultation document's approach to linking family income and pupil outcomes should be extended to early years data on the one hand and to destinations data on the other. This can be used to track a cohort through time, from their first appearance in administrative datasets to the point of entry into the labour market. This data would be helpful in understanding the correlations between income and pupil outcomes at different points in the education system and can survey changes in educational attainment, from broader correlation changes over time to more specific issues such as university admissions. Other intermediate outcomes such as school absence and exclusions, and rates of identification with different types of special educational need or disability, may also reveal different patterns of association with income.

Finally, making this data available as a resource for outside researchers should also be prioritised.

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[5] Education Policy Institute, April 2016, 'Education in England: Annual Report 2016': https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/factors-associated-with-achievement-key-stages-2-and-4