Parental mediators of socio-economic achievement gap in early childhood: Simultaneous Investigation of Investment and Stress Models in Ireland

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Trinity College Dublin
Under the supervision of Siobhan Scarlett
• Persistent socioeconomic disparity in educational outcomes in Ireland and elsewhere (Chmielewski, 2019)

• Can be traced back to cognitive competencies in early childhood
  – Association between SES and cognitive abilities
  – As early as 2 years old (Noble et al., 2015)

• Role of family processes (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998)
  – Environmental factors
  – Deprivation (Sheridan & McLaughlin, 2016): absence of social and cognitively stimulating resources in low-income households
Background

Familial Sources of Socioeconomic Disparity

- Social Selection Argument
  - Genetic Factors

- Social Causation Argument
  - Environmental Factors
    - Deprivation
    - Threat
      - Parent Investment
      - Parenting Behaviour
Deprivation and models of mediation

1. **Family Investment Model**
   - due to insufficient economic resources, parents cannot sufficiently invest in their child’s social and cognitive development (Conger and Donnellan, 2007).

2. **Family Stress Model**
   - material hardship causes increased stress in parents, which in turn leads to family conflict and negative parenting behaviour, resulting in poor child outcomes (McLoyd, 1998).
• Intersecting pathways acknowledged in theory but rare in empirical research (for examples: see Gershoff, Aber, Raver and Lennon, 2007; Nievar, Moske, Johnson and Chen, 2014)

• Relevant research in the Irish context (Nixon, Layte and Thornton, 2019; Hoyne and Egan, 2018; Quigley & Nixon, 2016)
  – No simultaneous investigation
  – Over-emphasis on behavioural aspects

• No clear borders classifying the indicators of parenting practices and parent investment

• What parents can provide to their children, in terms of material resources vs. how they treat their children
  – conceptually sound
  – empirically distinct in their relation to child cognitive competence (Yeung, Linver and Brooks-Gunn, 2002; Gershoff, et al., 2007)
Theoretical Discussions & Policy Discourse

• Tendency to overemphasize the importance of behavioural aspects of social & cognitive stimulation (i.e.: parenting practices)

• Critical accounts
  – shift in policy → from welfare provisions to the micro-management encouraging parents to interact more positively and be more involved in their children’s learning
  – neoliberal discourse → “parental values” of the disadvantaged parents as the problem (La Placa and Corlyon, 2016).
  – not enough evidence to support the widespread claim that “parenting matters more than parents’ socioeconomic status” (Hartas, 2014:2)

• Important to conceptualise parenting behaviour not only as a potential factor of child cognitive outcomes but also as an outcome of a deprived and stressful environment
1. How do the proposed pathways of family stress and investment models intersect in the Irish context?

2. What are the relative impacts of income, material hardship, distal environmental stressors, parent investment and parenting behaviour on cognitive performance in 5-year-olds?

3. Does parenting stress affect how parents invest in learning materials & structured activities and their parenting behaviour across SES variations?

4. What are the roles of material hardship and distal environmental stressors (neighbourhood factors) in explaining parenting stress?
Data & Variables

- Infant cohort of GUI → Wave 3: 5 years (n = 9,001)

Primary Outcome Variables: Naming Vocabulary & Picture Similarities
Primary Predictor: Socioeconomic Status

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<td><strong>Material Hardship</strong></td>
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<td>Basic Deprivation Scale</td>
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<td><strong>Neighbourhood Factors</strong></td>
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<td>Learning Engagement</td>
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Hypothesised models

- Analysis: Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)
Results

- The model predicting Naming Vocabulary
Results

- The model predicting Picture Similarities
• Simultaneous investigation of Investment and Stress Models
  – Among various physical and psychosocial elements of the immediate environment, those that are more dependent on the material resources, parent investment, were found to mediate the relationship
  – Distinguishing the “cost-free” parenting behaviour from more income-dependent parental resources

• Parenting in context
  – SES becomes a potential risk factor for unfavourable parenting when coupled with parenting stress stemmed from financial strain.
  – inclusion of distal processes advanced our ability to unpack the complex environment of poverty through which the parenting stress was more clearly described.
Limitations

- Parental depression would be a more ideal measure
- Cross-sectional data → the temporal direction of the relationship could not be established
Thank you!

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References


References


