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CHOWBEY, Punita <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8400-468X> and BARLEY, Ruth <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0958-9619>

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Building resilience: young children from minority ethnic backgrounds starting school in a multi-ethnic society

Punita Chowbey[a] and Ruth Barley[b]

[a]Faculty of Health and Wellbeing, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK; [b]Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the experiences of twelve children and their parents from diverse minority ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds during their first school year. Drawing on sociological and educational conceptualisations of resilience, findings highlight protective factors for children's resilience at four levels, including family and school strengths in supporting the emotional wellbeing and self-regulation of children. However, with significant variation in children's educational and social/behavioural development the paper argues for a consideration of within school factors in promoting resilience, alongside individual, family and cultural factors as well as a consideration of the age of children starting school. It identifies a need to review school strategies to strengthen children's resilience on starting school within wider calls to decolonialise the curriculum. It also demonstrates the need for schools to build strategies to engage with parents from diverse backgrounds to support the Home Learning Environment.

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Introduction

Young children's experience of transition to school presents social, emotional and cognitive challenges, including finding a place in the peer culture and making sense of new, often more formalised approaches to learning, while removing children's control of learning environments (Brooker 2008). The Home Learning Environment, age of entry into primary school and the purpose of the entry class are all important factors that impact on children's transition to school and shape their identities as learners (Chowbey 2015). Disparities in the Home Learning Environment have been brought into full focus during the Covid-19 pandemic and related lockdowns which have included school closures (Anders et al. 2020).

Given the importance of this transition for children's developing dispositions towards learning (Brooker 2002), there is much at stake for children and national education systems. Consequently, the last decade has seen growing international focus in research, policy and practice on children's experiences of starting school (Brooker 2008; Margetts and Kienig 2013; Kumpulainen and Theron 2019). While researchers have examined many aspects of transition to school, Margetts and Kienig (2013, 154) argue that further examination of

CONTACT Punita Chowbey p.chowbey@shu.ac.uk

issues of 'exclusion, marginalisation and dissonance' is needed, particularly for children from minority ethnic groups. As Bhopal (2020) argues if ethnicity is overlooked within these, and other educational, discussions there is a danger of White privilege being perpetuated. Brooker's (2002) ethnographic study of starting school in a poor, inner-city neighbourhood is an important study of transition for children from Bangladeshi and White British backgrounds. However, there are few studies of young children from other minority ethnic groups or from Foundation 2 classes (also known as Reception) that are more diverse in terms of children's ethnic backgrounds (Barley 2014).

Furthermore, although Bradbury (2013, 17) claims that 'intersectional analysis is crucial to any attempt at understanding how inequalities in education are produced and maintained', there is limited qualitative research into interacting socioeconomic and ethnicity factors for children starting school in ethnically mixed communities. This gap in the literature is particularly significant given Lareau's (2011) findings that social class, including parenting values and styles, is more powerful in mediating educational outcomes for older US pupils than ethnicity. As Mu (2021, 22) highlights 'resilience can be understood through a Bourdieusian lens as a process of capital conversion and exchange.' In order to understand resilience structural factors relating to the acceptance (or lack of acceptance) of an individual's capital (or underlying currency or resource) needs to be taken into account. Within an educational context, Sammons et al. (2009) argue resilience can be an important explanatory concept for understanding children's early educational experiences. We, therefore, set out to explore an ethnic and classed understanding of resilience and how resilience can be built, while acknowledging the limitations of standard ethnic categories in representing a fluid and complex reality (Wimmer 2009; Ang 2010).

Policy context

Countries vary in the extent to which their educational policies and practice recognise the challenges that children and families face during transition to school. There is also great variance on the guidance given to support school strategies (Jensen, Henrick, and Broström 2013). There is no explicit policy focus on supporting children's experience of transition to school in England. Nevertheless, three broad aspects of English policy influence Foundation 2 class practice and thereby children's experience of transitions: age of entry to primary education; the policy framing of curriculum and pedagogy; and the statutory approach to assessment.

Within an international context, children in England enter primary education early (Brooker et al. 2010), making this a contested feature of English policy. Statutory schooling begins in the term following a child's fifth birthday but most children enter a Foundation 2 class earlier, at four to five years (Riggall and Sharp 2008). Although most children have some pre-school experience (Siraj-Blatchford 2010), transition to school presents discontinuities in experience (Brooker et al. 2010). These pose particular challenges for the youngest children (Riggall and Sharp 2008).

Secondly, there is an issue about the policy framing of curriculum and pedagogy. Linked to early entry, there are problematic ambiguities in the purposes of the Foundation 2 class (Moyles and Worthington 2011). The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework was first published in 2014. The latest revisions to this framework took place in 2021. The original framework, and all subsequent revisions, espouse play-based learning for children

from birth to five. However, the framework also promotes adult-led activities, including structured teaching of phonics, as part of a 'school readiness' agenda (Department for Education 2021a). Critics claim policy makers have prioritised early academic achievement, with a narrowing of the curriculum (Alexander and Cottle 2012). Resultant pressures restrict the more complex and challenging kinds of play that need space and time to flourish (Rose and Evans 2008). Whitebread and Bingham (2011, 4) conclude that a focus on early achievement militates against schools effectively meeting 'children's basic emotional and cognitive needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, and the opportunity to develop their metacognitive and self-regulation skills'.

Research also suggests that age is an important factor in successfully building resilience (Fabian 2013). The Schools Admissions Code recognises this and allows delayed entry for a full academic year for those children born in the summer months meaning that children born from 1 April to 31 August can go to school either in the September after they turn four or the September after they turn 5. Local Authorities, however, can decide if the child starts school in the Foundation 2 Class or in Year 1. This inconsistency in Local Authority rulings further increases transitional disparities (Abrahams and Cirin 2019). The newly revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework (Department for Education 2021b) does not refer to the possibility of deferred entry to Foundation Stage 2 for summer born children or offer support to staff in relation to this. This omission may add to the inconsistency in Local Authority practices to the detriment of summer born children. Data from the Local Authority[1] where this research was conducted reveals that consistently over the last seven years ethnic minority families are less likely to apply to defer their summer born child than their white British counterparts.

Assessment policy is a third contested aspect of English policy. Traditionally, early years practitioners used observational and formative assessment approaches (Brooker et al. 2010). However, such methods sit uneasily with statutory assessment against pre-defined Early Learning Goals (ELGs). Brooker et al. (2010, 10) argue statutory assessment 'generates a Profile (EYFSP) against which many children may be measured and found wanting'. Bradbury (2011, 655) also questions the unintended consequences of such assessment within a performative culture, identifying a resultant 'production of inequalities' that may not reflect the actuality of children's knowledge, understanding and skills. Finally, Thomas (2013, 481) presents a psychologically based critique of UK policy and argues it risks undermining 'identity, belonging and self-belief', thereby generating educational failure. These three contested areas of English education policy raise concerns about the potentially negative impact of transition to school for some young children and the need for school practices to support resilience.

Defining resilience

In the policy context outlined above, Jones and Schoon (2008) identify particular challenges for children from some minority ethnic groups starting school in England. In particular, they report Millennium Cohort findings of lower cognitive scores for Bangladeshi and Pakistani children at school entry than other groups and more parental reports of behavioural problems. In addressing such patterns of disadvantage, theories of resilience carry promise in explaining children's early educational experiences (Sammons et al. 2009).

However, Noltemeyer and Bush (2013) argue that researchers do not agree on a universal definition of resilience. In their definition, Noltemeyer and Bush (2013) specify four ecological levels in relation to resilience in an educational context: individual, school, family, and cultural levels. Reviewing research into individual factors, they note that researchers have identified some relevant individual characteristics as nonmalleable, as well as others that are more subject to change, these include social skills, emotional regulation, humour, persistence and work ethic.

At the family level, Noltemeyer and Bush (2013, 478) note several protective factors, with relevance across cultures, including 'family cohesion and adaptability, effective parental communication skills, stable marital/couple relationships, and responsive, nurturant, and consistent firm parenting practices'. They highlight parental responsiveness or support and parental monitoring as the factors that education professionals are most likely to influence.

At the cultural level, Noltemeyer and Bush (2013) identify potentially protective factors, providing different kinds of capital. The physical capital of communities includes adequate and safe housing, while financial capital offers a further protective factor. In terms of social capital, communities, including ethnic/cultural groups, schools and neighbourhoods, are important in offering young people protection against risk; they can provide a sense of belonging, including shared values or beliefs, and a sense of identity. While, Noltemeyer and Bush's review does not identify findings relating to the relevance of social capital for young children's resilience Dockett and Perry (2005) earlier work with ethnic minority families in Australia reported that parents themselves had identified a need to build stronger social networks to support their children's transition to school. Mu's (2020) definition of resilience also highlights the importance of capital and in particular capital conversion and exchange for successful resilience.

At the school level, Noltemeyer and Bush (2013) report how relationships developed within settings can provide a potentially protective factor. For example, peer support is identified as important across cultures, while there are extensive research findings that caring adult-student relationships offer a protective factor across gender and age groups, as well as across cultural groups.

Taggart (2010) defines resilience in a way that has commonalities with these definitions but that differs in two important ways. Taking a quantitative approach, Taggart (2010) defines resilience as higher than expected scores for educational as well as social/behavioural development. She identifies four contributory factors at school entry: gender, Home Learning Environment, self-regulation and ethnicity, with self-regulation scores having the strongest effect. These factors link to the individual, home and cultural levels discussed in Noltemeyer and Bush (2013) review, as well as the importance of capital as highlighted by Mu (2021), but exclude school factors. Taggart's (2010, 185) definition of self-regulation, as an individual characteristic, includes items focused on independence: 'thinks things out before acting; can move to a new activity upon completion of task; can independently select and return equipment; …likes to work things out for self'. It also focuses on concentration: 'not easily distracted' and 'perseveres in the face of difficulty' (Taggart 2010, 185). Taggart's definition resonates with Claxton's (2002) theoretical account that identifies resilience as a set of learning dispositions, supported within families and shaped by culture.

The complementary definitions of resilience outlined above inform the current paper. Resilience is defined qualitatively as positive educational and social/behavioural development during children's first year at school, despite the existence of some risk factors and structural disadvantage as highlighted by Mu (2021).

This paper considers individual, school, family, and cultural level factors in examining the resilience of young children from minority ethnic backgrounds at school entry. While working with Mu's definition of resilience and the importance of capital we are mindful that there are additional challenges that pupils from ethnic minority background face due to their experiences of racism and marginalisation (Modood 2004; Archer 2011; Barley 2019). As Archer (2011, 45) has argued 'racist readings of minority ethnic identities' prevent recognition of belonging to a middle-class identity. This clearly has implications for both the possession and conversion of capital.

Researching children's experiences of starting school

Quantitative studies (Melhuish 2010; Taggart 2010) have informed understanding of significant aspects of resilience at school entry, highlighting gender, the Home Learning Environment, self-regulation and ethnicity as significant contributory factors. However, Dockett and Perry (2013) argue that, alongside such quantitative studies, small-scale qualitative studies are also required to understand the unique nature and rich detail of each child's experience of transition. We therefore designed a study to generate rich, qualitative data, foregrounding the experiences of children from minority ethnic families during their first year at school. Part of the study, not reported here, explored parental perspectives on wider aspects of family life and parenting. The personal and professional biographies of the researchers informed the study, including one researcher's experience as an early years teacher and the other as a migrant and minority ethnic parent. Personal and professional experiences informed a social constructionist approach whereby we actively collaborated with children and parents in the process of meaning-making (Savin-Baden and Major 2013).

The main research question explored here is,

> What risk and protective factors contribute to educational resilience for children from ethnic minority backgrounds starting school?

A related sub-question is,

> What risk and protective factors contribute to educational resilience at individual, family and school and cultural levels?

To explore these questions, we selected, as a case-study, a Foundation 2 class in an urban school in northern England, serving a socially and economically mixed community. The class of thirty children had a teacher and Teaching Assistant with white British backgrounds and included twelve children with minority ethnic backgrounds, including seven with Pakistani backgrounds. These children had mixed socioeconomic backgrounds, as indicated by parents' educational backgrounds and employment status as well as housing conditions. Several children had complex and/or challenging life circumstances; some lived in single parent families, some had unemployed parents, some experienced poverty and/or had complex family migration histories.

We drew on the mosaic approach (Clark and Moss 2011) to support participatory research with children, using complementary methods, that were negotiated with staff and developed in response to children's interests and the class programme. After an introductory visit to facilitate familiarisation with the children, staff and school (Barley and Bath 2014), we undertook research in the final half term of the school year. We introduced Persona Dolls (Brown 2008) to the class alongside a story about the five dolls (two Asian, two European and one African doll) starting school. Subsequently, we used the dolls in two circle-time activities with small groups of focus children. In the first session, we revisited the story about the dolls starting school, providing further details about the dolls' families and home life, while interspersing the story with invitations for children to share information about their own families and experience of starting school. In the second session we focused on children sharing with the dolls their subsequent school experiences as well as special family and home experiences. All twelve children participated in these group activities. Following the small group sessions, we invited children, individually or with a friend, to choose a doll for a classroom and school tour. Eleven children accepted, some providing verbal accounts of school life with others involving dolls and sometimes researchers in favourite activities. One child declined but interacted with a researcher during child-led play. We also undertook ten unstructured, non-participant observations of children during large group sessions, recording verbal contributions, and embodied and non-verbal performances (Simms 2008). The aim of these child-focussed methods was to build rapport and elicit the interest of the twelve focus children to enable sharing of their expert perspectives on home and school lives (Brooker 2011).

Additionally, we conducted informal observations at the start and end of the school day, and semi-structured interviews with parents of ten children, mainly mothers, exploring aspects of family lives, including perspectives on children's resilience. We interviewed parents in English or Urdu depending upon preferences. Lastly, we interviewed the class teacher, focusing on each child's school experience and EYFSP assessment information, and we gained wider feedback on findings at a staff meeting. Fieldwork took place over a three-month period. Participant triangulation enabled identification of similarities and differences in child, parent and teacher perspectives, while methodological triangulation supported representation of children's complex experiences (Savin-Baden and Major 2013).

During and following fieldwork, we carried out analysis of child data from group work, tours and classroom observations, as well as data from the interviews with adults, parents and the class teacher. As explained by Clark and Moss (2011), bringing together the data from observations and parental perspectives, alongside children's own talk, is important in building a detailed picture of important aspects of young children's experiences. We carried out the analysis at the four ecological levels of resilience identified by Noltemeyer and Bush (2013), individual, school, family, and cultural levels. This involved reading, and re-reading the data, for the children both as members of a class group and in the context of data from participating parents. The analysis drew on concepts from the wider literature on educational resilience, in particular the concepts of self-regulation and learning dispositions, as individual characteristics, developed within a wider ecological context. Following Coffey and Atkinson (1996), we coded the data to bring together fragments of data relating to key themes relevant to children's experiences of their home, family, community and school lives. This ensured the manageability of the dataset but also supported creative thinking about the interplay of factors supporting resilience.

We gained ethical approval from Sheffield Hallam University's Ethics Committee and considered ethical issues at each stage (Alderson and Morrow 2011). After gaining informed consent from managers and the class teacher, we provided written information and explained the study verbally to parents, gaining consent to undertake research with twelve children and interviews with ten parents. We also talked to the class and left an information card, including pictures of the dolls and researchers to allow the children to become familiarised with the project. Additionally, we checked children's consent as an ongoing process, giving attention to potential power issues in the researcher-child relationship (Harcourt and Conroy 2011). In reporting, we have considered issues of confidentiality and anonymity, using pseudonyms and changing some biographical details.

The sections below present findings relating to three key challenges children faced during their transition to school: finding a place in the peer culture of school; being approved and recognised within the adult domain of school; and becoming an engaged, persistent and successful learner. The data included in this paper are illustrative examples relating to each of these themes.

Finding a place in the peer culture of school

There was positive evidence of resilience for eleven of the twelve children in the face of the challenge of starting school and securing a place in the new peer culture (Corsaro 2011). The scene described below exemplifies the nature of this challenge for one child, Hora (5 years 2 months), and her resilient response.

> Three classes were out on the yard. Children played with bats, balls and hoops, they climbed and swung from climbing frames, played games of tag, strolled in small groups and chatted to friends on the bench by trees. Three staff walked around the yard but did not notice Hora crying loudly or three friends comforting her. Hora explained her upset through tears: *Sara says she hates me……Sara says she's not going to play with me. She doesn't love me.* Sara, close by, said sorry repeatedly but no-one heard. However, Hora calmed down quickly and at the end of playtime walked back into school, smiling and holding Sara's hand.

Although popular, Hora experienced regular threats to her sense of belonging within the peer group, and her experience of making, falling out and making up with friends was relatively common. Most children demonstrated resilience in the face of such emotionally challenging experiences, and this is reflected in Soha's (5 years 2 months) pragmatic advice to her doll.

> Researcher: So is there anything that will make her cry? Soha: Only if somebody hits her. Researcher: What will she do then? Soha: She can stop crying and play outside

Some children, however, were more troubled by rejection. For example, Ameena (4 years 10 months), with close girlfriends from across ethnic groups, struggled with repeated rejection by two boys:

> Karim and Nadir are very mean to me. They don't let me play with their games. They don't let me play football.

Ameena's mother confirmed her distress:

> Actually she was crying the other night because a couple of the boys had been calling her names.

Similar to findings in other studies (Davies 2003; Ryan 2005; Barley 2014) Ameena faced rejection because she resisted the gendered play choices prevalent in the classroom. However, Sam (5 years), despite his gendered play choices and desire to be accepted by a group of popular boys, experienced difficulties within the male peer group:

> Sam found a bat and ball and started to talk to some boys from different ethnic backgrounds who were playing cricket. James explained the rules but Sam struggled to do what was expected. After a few minutes he skipped off but stayed close to the game.

Unlike Ameena, Sam had no close friendships to moderate what at times appeared to be the painful experience of exclusion from the peer group.

Some parents explained the strategies that they used to support children in dealing with the challenges of the peer group. However, as in other studies such as Lareau (2011) and Coleman (1994), parents varied in terms of their cultural, economic and social capital and so in the resources that they possessed to support children's resilience in terms of peer relationships. Ameena's well-educated parents explained how they encouraged her use of verbal assertiveness to counter rejection. Several children from relatively large and/or extended families benefited from wide peer experience and/or support from siblings and cousins at school. Parveen's mum explained how sibling intervention strengthened her daughter's position within the peer group:

> So Karim went to the girl and said, 'Did you pull my sister's cheeks? Go and apologise'. So that girl went, 'So sorry, I'm really sorry if I hurt you'.

In terms of peer relationships, pre-school attendance can be another potential source of support (Margetts 2002). However, children had attended diverse pre-school settings and none started school with established friendships. While six parents identified pre-school as a supportive factor, Sam's mother noted the potentially detrimental implications for resilience of negative pre-school experience:

> They kind of mocked him and taunted him a bit really. He used to come home in tears.

Some children benefited from opportunities to develop and consolidate peer relationships through play-dates, sleepovers and/or birthday parties, organised by parents. Hora (5 years 2 months), talking to the researcher about the visiting doll, Isabel, indicated the significance of such experiences for children:

Maybe Isabel can have sleepover. I'll ask my mum. My mum will text you.

The mothers of Haya (5 years 2 months) and Ameena (4 years 10 months), both from middle class backgrounds, were proactive in extending invitations to social events to children from varied backgrounds. However, not all parents wanted or felt able to make such arrangements. Several were deterred by factors relating to socio-economic disadvantage, for example poor housing, while some prioritised social arrangements within extended family members. Several Pakistani families were busy organising daily mosque attendance, mainly for older children.

In conclusion, most children gained acceptance within the peer culture of school and were resilient in the face of common difficulties. Sam (5 years), however, despite his mother's sustained efforts to bolster his resilience, experienced an ongoing sense of exclusion:

> …he's never had an invitation round to anyone's house. But he knows that people are invited. He's actually very, very aware of it, because he always points out who's going to whose house.

While some children played predominantly with children from their own minority ethnic background, both at school and at home, children from relatively advantaged backgrounds mixed more widely. Such differences in social experience within the peer group could have implications for children's social capital (Coleman 1994; Archer 2011; Mu 2021) as they move through school.

Being approved and recognised within the adult domain of school

Most children strived for a sense of belonging and status within the adult structured domain of school as well as within its peer culture. They enjoyed approval gained through helping school staff and following rules. Although Sam struggled with the social and emotional challenges of the peer culture, gaining recognition within this adult domain appeared to strengthen his social and emotional resilience. Sam's mother explained,

> He's always proud if he's helped… he's been a special helper or given a responsibility, he comes home very proud and tells about that.

Many children were keen to show off their knowledge of class rules, such as rules about snatching, fighting, hanging up coats and returning library books, including Eaymon (4 years 10 months):

> You have to write your name before you go on the computer. You have to wait… and then when they've finished you have to go on it.

Other children, like Soha (5 years 2 months), sought adult recognition and a special status within the class by trying to enforce class rules as well as by taking up opportunities to act as a helper.

> Children sat in the snack-time circle. Miss Edwards asked who would like to take the colander of apples around while children drank milk. Soha volunteered but reaching Thomas, she pulled the colander away: *No, you've had one….Stop pushing!*

However, several children were repeatedly disappointed in attempts to gain such social esteem in the public arena of large group time where there were up to thirty children.

> Saadiq (5 years 1 month) listened attentively as a visitor explained imminent building work at school. He raised his hand to answer several questions but was not chosen. For example, keen to read out a poster, he leaned forward, stretching his hand high. Another child was chosen and he looked disappointed.

Saadiq was persistent and sometimes achieved recognition as a 'good learner' (Bradbury 2013, 95). However, the children invited to answer questions, contribute ideas or show work were often the older, more articulate and assertive class members. Haya (5 years 2 months), with highly educated parents, was the only child with a minority ethnic background who gained regular recognition.

> Haya had just written a full page of writing about The Little Red Hen which Miss Edwards showed the class: *Well done Haya. This is absolutely beautiful. Let's give Haya a big thumbs up.*

Haya's mother understood how adult recognition boosted her resilience as a learner and she encouraged Haya to initiate daily interactions with her teacher, securing approval for books to read at home:

> But she loves her books …so and I think for her she's already developed this thinking, oh yeah …this is a dialogue I can create with Miss Edwards.

Resilience can therefore be viewed as a dialogic process between the child and the socio-cultural context (Kumpulainen and Theron 2019). This behaviour mirrors strategies used by Lareau's (2011, 22) middle-class, black parents in the US, who achieved long term educational advantages by fostering their children's 'sense of entitlement'. However, as in Bradbury's (2013) study, it was relatively uncommon for young children from minority ethnic backgrounds to be recognised publicly in this class. Some children appeared satisfied with less public or individualised approval, for example a group point for 'sitting smartly'. However, unequal recognition is significant because public questioning and evaluative feedback shapes children's identities as learners (Gipps 2002). The observed inequalities in access to public recognition appear to be important for social, emotional and educational resilience at school entry.

Becoming an engaged, persistent and successful learner

Play experiences

Engaging with new learning experiences, including child-led play, presented a third challenge for children at school entry. The classroom, with varied areas of play provision and extended periods for child-led play, offered an important arena for children's engagement in learning. This was an aspect of school life that Saadiq (5 years 1 month) actively engaged in.

> Saadiq collected strips of paper from the 'making table' and a square shaped card. He started a construction, adding layers of paper and straws. *This is very sticky.* He added net. *It's an aeroplane…. Need a string….Needs to be long.* Saadiq got more sellotape and stuck wool to the aeroplane, wrapping it around the aeroplane several times.

Saadiq's play at the 'making table' demonstrates a strong sense of purpose, independence and persistence, matching Taggart's (2010) definition of self-regulation as a key aspect of educational resilience. Several children displayed similar levels of self-regulation during child-led play in favourite areas of provision. However, Eaymon (4 years 10 months) and Sam (5 years) struggled with expected levels of self-direction. Eaymon participated in a narrow range of activities, spending much time waiting for his turn on the computer, while Sam's mum reported Sam's difficulties with self-directed play:

> I think when he is left to do his thing too much those are the days he'll come home and say he's bored, because he almost likes to be told what to do and what his aim is. Then he'll get stuck into it.

She explained further how this contrasted with his enjoyment of creative projects with her at home. The responses of Eaymon and Sam provide some support for Brooker's (2011) critique of play-based pedagogies for children growing up in cultures valuing more formalised or adult structured approaches to learning. They suggest a need for more proactive

teacher scaffolding of play-based learning to support some young children from minority ethnic backgrounds. However, increased teacher scaffolding of play has implications for adult priorities in the use of time.

Large group times

Regular adult-led, large group sessions alternated with play sessions and offered a contrasting context for children's engagement in learning. Daily sessions focused on literacy and phonics. Children demonstrated high levels of engagement during singing activities but most focus children struggled to sustain attention during other large group times. Such contexts seemed more likely to undermine than promote developing self-regulation as an aspect of educational resilience (Taggart 2010). The observation of Parveen (4 years 8 months) below exemplifies this.

> Parveen (4 years 8 months) listened attentively to talk about experiments with seeds grown in different conditions. After a while, she began playing with her hands, appearing distracted. Asked to discuss ideas with a partner, Parveen picked up a feather and waved it over another child's face.

Other children sought sensory distractions as involvement levels dipped; they played with hair bobbles, prodded other children and kicked their feet. Nadir (5 years 5 months) and Karim (5 years 3 months) sometimes shuffled to the back of the group, playing briefly with their favourite construction toys before being called back.

Given the significance of sustained concentration for children's educational resilience, it is useful to consider the relevance of classroom topics to the interests and existing knowledge of children from minority ethnic backgrounds. Over the half-term of the study, class themes included 'growing seeds,' 'the seaside' and 'looking after pets' but, for cultural and/or economic reasons, few children in the group could link these themes to existing 'funds of knowledge' (Hedges, Cullen, and Jordan 2011) resulting in their cultural capital not being recognised by the school staff (Archer 2011; Mu 2021). Most children in the group mentioned either amongst themselves or in research activities that they had yards but not gardens, rarely visited the seaside, and had no pets. Additionally, several children expressed strong interests in and knowledge about ethnic, cultural and/or religious experiences not reflected in observed provision or group times. For example, Hasanat (4 years 9 months) shared important memories from his country of birth with friends and a visiting doll:

> And they put some special Arabic music and we do that, we dance……and then we have to listen very carefully what they say….And the girls on Eid have to decorate their hands and go to a special place.

These findings raise questions about the consequences for educational resilience for children from minority ethnic backgrounds arising from first, a bias in the selection of curriculum content, as discussed by Barron (2007); and second, a 'school readiness' agenda (Department for Education 2021b), prioritising large group teaching of subject knowledge unrelated to children's interests and cultural capital (Archer 2011; Mu 2021). As O'Connor (2017) highlights these cultural biases may be subtle rather than obvious. To guard against this and ensure that the curriculum is decolonialised, schools need to engage more fully

with families and community leaders to ensure that the curriculum is accessible to all both in terms of relevance to children's home situations and in terms of celebrating a diverse range of cultural practices. School staff need both support and resources to ensure that appropriate curriculum content is selected. Unfortunately, this point has been argued for a long time (Woods and Grugeon 1990) without any meaningful progress being made. The Black Lives Matter movement is currently raising this issue more widely in the public domain with the hope of effecting both policy and practice change. It is not enough to be non-racist rather educational policy and practice needs to take an active anti-racist stance to ensure that the curriculum, and consequently learning, is accessible to all (Barley 2019).

Home experiences

For several children, the school library offered a more supportive context for the development of educational resilience than large group times. Abdul (4 years 9 months), sitting in and talking about the school library, explained the library's positive impact on his engagement with books:

> I like coming here. Reading books at home. I borrow books from here and bring them back. I read at night-time… My favourite book is hospitals.

Abdul's mother had limited financial resources as a separated, unemployed mother, bringing up two children within the Pakistani community, but the library allowed her to provide wide literacy experiences at home linked to his interests.

Alongside library use, most children or their parents described enjoyment of wider home and family experiences, including play with toys, board and computer games, cooking, gardening, drawing and painting, visits to parks, swimming pools, fairs and play centres. Taggart (2010) identifies such experiences as comprising the Home Learning Environment and making a significant contribution to educational resilience at school entry. However, 'only children', children from small families and children with more highly educated or economically advantaged backgrounds seemed to enjoy the widest range of such activities. Ameena, an 'only child' with university educated parents explained:

> I am good at reading. I read at home. Painting, making rainbows and reading….I cook with my mum and dad and my doggy (toy)….My daddy helped me make these photos… My daddy and my mummy take me to park…

In contrast, Eaymon (4 years 10 months), with six siblings, lacked adult support for his literacy interests:

> I like doing, going downstairs and watching TV, and reading books, and reading Spiderman book. …. I read all by myself, nobody reads with me.

Alongside the Home Learning Environment inequalities identified above, five children also experienced challenging family circumstances (Ribbens-McCarthy, Gillies, and Hooper 2013), affecting their emotional well-being to varying degrees. Tatlow-Golden et al. (2016) similarly found that children from families with a lower socio-economic status were often lacking the socio-emotional skills needed to transition successfully to starting school.

Conclusion: resilience at the start of school

The study set out to explore to what extent and how resilience understood as a 'process of capital conversion and exchange' (Mu 2020, 22) might work as an explanatory concept in relation to the experiences of young children from minority ethnic groups starting school. Resilience thus understood lays bare not only inequalities in possession of capitals but also the structural disadvantages including racial marginalisation that presents particular challenges (Mu 2020; Archer 2011; Modood 2004). Findings demonstrate children's experience of three interlinked challenges: finding a place in the peer culture of school; gaining approval and recognition within the adult domain of school; and becoming engaged and successful learners.

In terms of finding a place in the peer culture of school this study has shown that parents' cultural, economic and social capital influenced the support that they were able to offer their child in terms of resilience when negotiating peer relationships. Children from families who were able to support peer relationships outside of school demonstrated levels of resilience that wasn't observed for children from families who suffered from socioeconomic deprivation.

Adult recognition was shown in this study to boost children's resilience as a learners though younger children from minority ethnic groups in the class were less likely to receive this external recognition than their elder peers. As resilience can be viewed as a dialogic process between a child and their socio-cultural context this lack of recognition had a direct impact on children's levels of resilience.

A number of factors were found to be influential in ensuring that a child became an engaged and successful learner. These included cultural understandings and values surrounding play, bias in curriculum content and varied Home Learning Environments.

This study revisits the ground of prior studies of children from minority ethnic groups starting school. However, the sample, drawn from a socially as well as ethnically diverse urban school, alongside methodological foregrounding of children's experiences, supports enhanced understanding of the intersectional aspects of ethnicity and socio- economic background and their relationship with resilience in relation to the challenges of school life. Findings highlight family and school strengths in supporting the emotional wellbeing and self-regulation aspects of resilience for most children. However, with wide variation in children's developing learner identities at the end of their first year, we highlight how school factors, partly linked to national policy, compound interacting risks to resilience linked to socio-economic and ethnic background. Transition to school extends over the child's first year and arguably there is a need for a similar longitudinal study, that foregrounds children's experiences, to explore the long-term impacts of building resilience.

Age is also an important factor particularly for the younger children in the class. As a result of this finding, this research supports the aims of the Campaign for Flexible School Admissions for Summer Born Children which calls for all Local Authorities to fully implement the Schools Admissions Code and allow summer born children to start school in the Foundation 2 Class after their fifth birthday and in doing so help to decrease the transitional disparities that currently exists as Local Authorities are inconsistent in their implementation of this code of practice (Abrahams and Cirin 2019). While the School Admissions Code (Department for Education 2021b) clearly mentions this right to defer summer born children the newly revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework (Department for Education 2021b) does not refer to this possibility of deferred entry to Foundation Stage 2

or offer support to staff in relation to this. This omission may add to the inconsistency in Local Authority practices to the detriment of summer born children.

We also support the findings by the Race Equality Foundation that calls for educational policy makers to review the age of entry into primary schools and purpose of the entry class alongside diverse Home Learning Environments to challenge educational inequalities and related health outcomes (Chowbey 2015). The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, including school closures, has deepened educational inequalities, increased 'learning loss' and brought the disparities in Home Learning Environments, including access to technology and other resources, into full focus (Anders et al. 2020). The long-term educational impact on children from ethnic minority and low-income families, like those in this study, is unknown though available analysis suggests that the pandemic could increase educational inequalities for these families due to differences in Home Learning Environments (Bayrakdar and Guveli 2020).

We conclude schools should prioritise dialogue and collaborative planning with parents, many of whom are not educated in the British education system, to strengthen resilience at the start of school. Teachers and parents working collaboratively could support identification of potential bias in the curriculum and pedagogy and in doing so guard against the negative experiences highlighted in this paper that were due to pedagogical choices. As Mu (2020, 26) argues when outlining his definition of resilience, biases such as the curriculum biases outlined in this study can be seen as a form of symbolic violence that 'produces and reproduces structural inequalities as a form of latent adversity' entrenching structural inequalities within the system. While researchers have called for schools to reflect on their practice in relation to wider structural inequalities and move beyond a non-racist to an anti-racist stance for a number of decades (Woods and Grugeon 1990; Modood 2004; Brown 2007; Au 2009; Archer 2011; Barley 2018, 2019) there is still a need to decolonialise the curriculum. The recent Black Lives Matter movement is raising awareness more widely of these issues and bringing the call to decolonialise the curriculum into the public domain.

There is, however, a concurrent need to move beyond child, family and school factors (and associated issues of capital) in conceptualising resilience, to acknowledge educational policy as an additional factor shaping resilience during children's first year at school. These factors are all important to realising the EYFS (Department for Education 2021b, 5) aim of providing 'equality of opportunity and anti-discriminatory practice' for young children from minority ethnic backgrounds. Like educational practice, educational policies also need to be decolonialised to ensure that this aim is met.

Note

1. To protect the identity of participants the data source for this information has not been given.

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ORCID

Ruth Barley http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0958-9619

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