



Improving education for children living in poverty

Scotland Policy Brief 2010

Key Points

- 1. Low income in a family is a strong predictor of poor educational achievement.**
- 2. Parental engagement in a child's learning and development is the single biggest factor that can help determine how well a child will do at school.**
- 3. For families living in poverty, parents face more barriers that might prevent them from supporting their children in the way they want to.**
- 4. Save the Children believes there needs to be a re-appraisal of political and government focus on education policy to take account of the fact that parents are a key influence on children's learning outcomes.**
- 5. Save the Children recommends four key areas for action to help improve the situation for children in poverty:**
 - Raising the educational outcomes of the poorest children should become a national priority.
 - Support parents of children living in poverty to engage in their children's learning.
 - Make nurseries and schools accountable for their role in the achievement of children living in poverty.
 - Make sure school funding targets children living in poverty.

Introduction

The Scottish Government is committed to ending child poverty by 2020 but currently there are 240,000 children in Scotland living in poverty. In order to bring about an end to child poverty that can be sustained, it is essential that addressing educational inequalities is a main priority for national and local government.

Children growing up in poverty are less likely to do well at school. Low income in a family is a strong predictor of poor educational achievement¹.

Even by six years of age, initially low-achieving children from more advantaged homes will tend to out-perform initially high-achieving children from less advantaged homes². However such trends do not need to be set in stone. Studies have shown³ that what takes place in the home can be more influential in producing education improvements for children than socio-economic status.⁴

The problem

The gap in attainment between children living in the least deprived and most deprived areas is stark. The 2007/8 tariff performance scores of S4 pupils in public exams showed a large difference

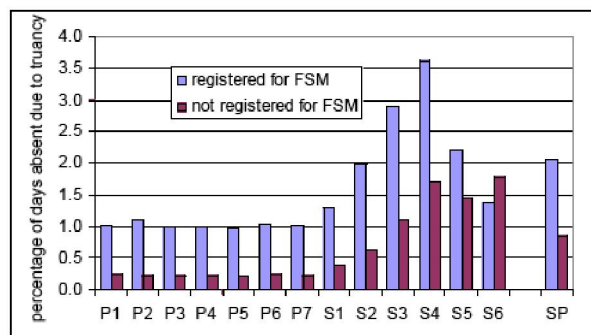
between children living in the least deprived areas (227) in comparison with those living in the most deprived areas (121)⁵. Tariff scores increase as deprivation decreases⁶. In the last six years there has been no reduction in this gap.

In deprived areas of Scotland:

- 11% of pupils leave school without any qualifications as against 3% for the rest of Scotland⁷
- 8% of pupils had no exam entries as against 4% for the rest of Scotland.⁸

While attention is often focused on the most deprived neighbourhoods it is also important to recognise that a significant proportion of poor families (30%+)⁹ live outside these recognised centres of deprivation.

The links between poverty and poor engagement with school are also clear. The chart below¹⁰ shows the connection between truancy and entitlement to free school meals throughout Primary and Secondary school life.



In 2007 the Scottish Government commissioned the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to review Scottish education¹¹. Although the report recorded the many strengths and high standard of performance in Scottish education, it also noted serious inequalities associated with socio-economic status, poverty and deprivation¹². Inequality starts in the early years and widens thereafter.¹³

Role of school v role of parents

There are a number of school and non-school factors that impact on a child's educational outcomes. The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) study concludes that:

"in order to help reduce the achievement gap for multiple disadvantaged groups, concerted and complementary actions to strengthen the home learning environment and ensure good quality pre-school and primary experience will be needed since improvements to any one in isolation would be insufficient to boost outcomes" ¹⁴

A considerable body of research also suggests school quality can have an impact on around 14% on a pupils' performance¹⁵. Save the Children believes there needs to be a re-appraisal of political and government focus on changes to school, nurseries and curriculum to take account of this knowledge with greater emphasis on one of the other key influences - parents.

The *Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006* addresses some aspects of parental involvement in schools but, as yet, Scottish society has not sufficiently rethought the relationship that school has with the child's parents. The EPPE study¹⁶ found that:

“The importance of the home learning environment indicates that what parents do is more important than who parents are.”

It went on to explain:

“Higher home learning environment scores were associated with increased cooperation conformity, peer sociability and confidence, lower anti-social and worried/upset behaviour and higher cognitive development scores. The effect on cognitive development was particularly pronounced. After age, it was the variable with the strongest effect on cognitive development. Its effect was stronger than both social class and parental education, which have often been found to be amongst the strongest predictors of children’s cognitive development in previous studies.”

Other research¹⁷ shows that we must define parental involvement – if we want to improve poor children’s performance we must engage parents in their learning - attending school meetings or adult literacy classes does not make the difference for children.

Scottish government, local authorities and schools need to find ways of ‘bridging the gap’ between children’s informal and formal learning opportunities and work with parents to enhance the child’s achievement.

Current Scottish education plans

The implementation of the *Early Years Framework* and *Curriculum for Excellence* are an acknowledgement of the need to change current delivery and achievement methods to improve outcomes for children.

Save the Children believes that the education sector must focus on what is not being achieved with the poorest families and set clear targets for reducing the attainment gap over the next ten years. We are concerned that the current approach for tackling child poverty in Scotland does not explicitly prioritise tackling educational inequalities. In order to meet the Government’s commitment to eradicating child poverty by 2020 and the goals of ‘*Achieving our Potential*’, the ‘*Early Years Framework*’ and ‘*Equally Well*’, education services will need to prioritise the ‘under-achievers’ within the current system.

This is an issue that needs to form a core part of the Scottish Government’s Child Poverty Strategy that will be developed as part of the implementation of the Child Poverty Bill.

The 2007 OECD report commented:

“The Scottish Government does not have reliable information on the extent to which educational standards are being reached in each of the 32 local authorities. Information that is available points to very wide national variations in test scores and exam results.”¹⁸

It went on to say:

“The formula allocation of block grants—whose obscurity is not without attracting a certain pride—is weighted for deprivation, but this is an input-driven approach whose impact on differences in student achievement is unknown.”¹⁹

The recent analysis of the Literacy Commission²⁰ which estimated 13,000 (18.5%) Scottish children leave primary school without being functionally literate highlighted the need to focus on

how the poorest 20% of pupils are performing. Their recommendations include focus on 'early years' and systematic support for parents.

Priority for the next 10 years

Save the Children believes that to address education inequalities for children living in poverty requires attention for longer than the lifetime of one Parliament. Despite regular increases in the national expenditure on education, children from poor families continue to not realise their 'full potential'.

If the goals of '*Achieving our Potential*', '*Early Years Framework*' and '*Equally Well*', are to be delivered then education services will need to prioritise the 'under-achievers' within the current system. The level of disadvantage that children bring to their first nursery school should not be underestimated.

It is generally recognised that there is no one 'magic bullet' to resolve the systemic nature of educational underachievement. However, we now know that school settings, combined with parental influence, between 3 -11 years of age can play a significant role in reducing current inequalities.

A way forward

We recommend four key areas for action to help improve the situation for children in poverty:

- Raising the educational outcomes of the poorest children should become a national priority in order to break the link between living in poverty and educational achievement.
- Support parents of children living in the most severe poverty to engage in their children's learning.
- Make nurseries and schools accountable for their role in the achievement of children living in poverty.
- Make sure school funding targets children living in poverty.

Further Information

Save the Children is currently working in partnership with West Dunbartonshire Council and Strathclyde University to implement systematic change within the area to improve educational outcomes for the poorest children.

For further information on this programme or any aspect of our education work please contact:

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References

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² Feinstein, L. (2003), Inequality in the Early Cognitive Development of British Children in the 1970 Cohort, *Economica*, 70, 277, pp. 73-98

³ Effective Pre-School and Primary Education 3-11 Project Feb 2007

⁴ Figure 3.2, EPPE (2007) Promoting equality in the early years: Report to the Equalities Review www.equalitiesreview.org.uk

⁵ Table 6 Scottish Government SQA attainment and school leaver qualifications in Scotland 2007/8

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Page 1, Scottish Government Social focus on deprived areas 2005

⁸ Table 5.14 *ibid*

⁹ Hirsch D., Estimating the cost of child poverty in Scotland- Approaches and Evidence, Scottish Government Social research, 2008

¹⁰ Table 2, p37 O.E.C.D., Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland December 2007

¹¹ O.E.C.D., Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland December 2007

¹² Page 14-15, Executive summary, O.E.C.D., Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland December 2007

¹³ Croxford, L. Social Inequalities in Scottish Schooling, Centre for Educational Sociology, University of Edinburgh 2009

¹⁴ Effective Pre-School and Primary Education 3-11 Project Feb 2007

¹⁵ Page 1, Experiences of poverty and educational disadvantage, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Sep 2007 Donald Hirsch

¹⁶ Sylva, K. et al, The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project 1997-2004

¹⁷ Harris, A., Goodall J., Supporting families to impact on their children's education, Save the Children, Aug 2009 unpublished

¹⁸ Page 18, Executive Summary, Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2007

¹⁹ Page 18, Executive Summary, Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2007

²⁰ Literacy Commission, '*A vision for Scotland*', Dec 2009