

Improving educational outcomes for children living in poverty

Summary

One of the starkest inequalities in our society is the extremely different educational experiences that children in poverty have, compared to children from more affluent backgrounds. The effect of living in poverty on children's education is bleak. Pupils from the most deprived areas account for higher levels of absence, lower levels of attainment and are more likely to leave school without qualifications. Thus, while the Scottish education system caters well for the majority, it is failing to deliver for the poorest children in our society. Save the Children believes that narrowing the widening gap in educational outcomes for children living in poverty and children from more affluent backgrounds should become a key priority of education policy in Scotland. Save the Children wants every child to have access to a quality education and learning opportunities that support them to reach their 'full potential'.¹

Concerns - the links between poverty and limited educational outcomes

A substantial body of evidence suggests that poverty correlates highly with limited educational opportunities/outcomes. Research also suggests that this link, if anything, is strengthening.

In relation to educational outcomes, children living in poverty are identified in two ways - registration of free school meals (FSM) and those living in the most deprived areas²

1. **Amongst the lowest-attaining 20% of pupils there are over twice the proportion of pupils registered to take Free School Meals (FSM).**
2. **The highest proportion of low attaining pupils live in the most deprived areas of Scotland.**
3. **The attainment of the lowest performing 20% of pupils has not improved at all in recent years.**
4. **The gap (inequality) in educational outcomes between the lowest performing 20% and the remaining 80% is widening.** Since 1999 the average tariff score for the lowest attaining 20% of S4 pupils has remained around 53, while the average tariff score of the remaining 80% has increased year on year from 190 to 202. The gap in tariff scores has risen year on year from 136 in 1998/99 to 149 in 2005/06.
5. **In the 15% most deprived areas, 11% of pupils leave school with no qualifications, compared to 3% for the rest of Scotland.**
6. **26% of all school absences take place in the 15% most deprived areas.**³
7. **Educational disadvantage begins at an early age.** Children from more deprived backgrounds are more likely to experience lower attainment at primary 5 and beyond and less likely to continue their education beyond school.⁴
8. **Educational underachievement contributes to social exclusion in later life.** Young people with poor educational outcomes are at an increased risk of unemployment and low pay, poorer health and a general lower standard of living. The Scottish Executive's *Futures Project* suggests that continuing inequalities in education outcomes, could lead to the continued existence of an 'underclass' of poorly educated people. Such a group will have difficulty in achieving even basic skills.
9. **Children who leave school at 16 or have no educational qualifications are highly likely to end up in low-income households and raising their children in poverty.** Analysis of the 2006 Family Resources Survey shows that, where mothers in Scotland have no educational qualifications, 77% of their children are living in poverty, 45% of whom are in severe poverty. Only 3% of children in severe poverty have a mother with a degree level or above qualification, compared to more than 22% of children who are not in poverty.⁵

¹ All children aged 5-16 have a right to an education that develops their 'full potential' as set out in the in the *Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000* and article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

² As defined in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation.

³ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2005/09/21115341>

⁴ *Futures Project Analysis Papers*, Scottish Executive (2006)

⁵ *Measuring severe poverty in the UK*, Save the Children (2007)

Key Issues

1. Lack of progress in raising educational outcomes for children living in poverty

Despite noteworthy Government efforts to increase the attainment of the lowest performing 20% of pupils there has been no positive trend in this measure in recent years.⁶ Save the Children is concerned that actions are not making a difference for the poorest children. One of the aims of the previous administrations social justice strategy, *Closing the Opportunity Gap*, was to improve the skills of the most disadvantaged young people. This included a target to increase the attainment of the lowest performing 20% of pupils by 5% by 2008. This aim was also supported by a number of other policies – either directly or indirectly - including:

- Re-balancing the curriculum away from knowledge to skills and wider achievement through *A Curriculum for Excellence*
- An extra £62 million was announced in December 2005 to provide extra teachers in deprived areas over two years. (Funds were allocated to take account of the impact of deprivation on attainment for the first time)
- One of the *National Priorities in Education* is to promote equality and help every pupil benefit from education
- Introduction of the Education (Additional support for Learning) Act 2006 that provides for any child or young person who, for whatever reason, requires additional support for learning.
- Reducing class sizes in primary 1-3

Save the Children welcomes these initiatives but is disappointed at the lack of evaluation of whether these policies are making a difference for the poorest children. There is a lack of an overall strategy designed to improve the educational experiences of children and young people living in poverty and how this links to the Scottish Government's long-term aim of eradicating child poverty by 2020. There is also an absence of incentives that would focus the attention of the key actors on improving educational outcomes for the poorest children. For example, there is evidence that HMIE does not prioritise schools and local authorities performance in supporting the poorest children. A recent report from HMIE, *Missing Out*, outlined what works in relation to children at risk of missing out on educational opportunities. The report states that we should 'focus more on the extent to which schools can improve the achievement of particular groups'.

2. Lack of support for parents of children living in severe poverty to be involved in their children's learning

There are a number of school and non-school factors that impact on educational outcomes for children living in poverty. One of the most significant factors is the home learning environment. Pre-school education, parenting help, income support, and everything which improves the home learning environment have major parts to play in reducing later low achievement.⁷ There is substantial research evidence to show that parental involvement in children's learning is one of the most influential factors in determining educational outcomes. Parents can, and do, make a difference to their children's learning. A growing body of literature on home-school relations shows that parents from lower income groups are amongst those who find it most difficult to be involved in their children's education. Factors linked to poverty, such as crowded housing, unemployment, limited access to transport and cultural resources, illness and isolation, make parenting far harder and more stressful and affect considerably the parent-child interaction and children's chances of exclusion. Parents' own experience of schooling and cultural capital also conditions their involvement in children's learning.⁸

The Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 recognised the importance of parental involvement in children's education. Save the Children is concerned that current policy and initiatives to involve parents in children's learning are not reaching the children and parents living in the most acute poverty. Further, we are concerned that current policy focuses on parental representation in

⁶ A report on implementation of the UNCRC in Scotland 1999-2007 para. 470, Scottish Executive (2007)

⁷ *Tackling low educational achievement*, JRF (2007).

⁸ *Improving educational outcomes for children living in poverty through parental involvement in primary schools*, Save the Children (2007).

schools and not home-school links and learning at home – the two areas that could better support children. The HMIE report stated that more needs to be done to support children at the earliest stages of schooling and in terms of implementing home-school links and family initiatives for the most deprived families. In addition, Save the Children's research suggests that priority should be given to bridging the gap between formal and informal learning through parental involvement in primary schools. Local authorities are now required to develop strategies for parental involvement to support the meaningful engagement of parents and carers in children's learning and education. Provision across local authorities differs and there are many examples of good practice. For example, the role of home school link workers has been identified as '*the engine of parental involvement with the most deprived families*'.⁹ However, to date there has been limited evaluation of existing initiatives designed to support parents. We are particularly concerned that consultation on what works with parents and children living in poverty is almost non-existent.

Policy recommendations

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has stated that the UK should take *all necessary measures to eliminate the inequalities in educational achievement and in exclusion rates between children from different groups and to guarantee all children an appropriate quality education*.¹⁰ It is clear that 'more of the same' is not an option. There is no one solution. The challenge ahead should not be underestimated. It will require a sustained effort. HMIE recommended approaches should continue to target resources where needed.¹¹ Save the Children believes the following could make a real and lasting difference to children's lives.

1. Make improving the educational outcomes for children living in poverty a national priority. This would focus the attention of key actors, research, policy development and implementation and target resources.

2. Implement a co-ordinated and joined up strategy aimed at dramatically improving the educational outcomes for children living in poverty

The strategy should include:

- Mapping current initiatives currently aimed at this group and identify gaps
- Monitoring/ evaluating the impact of policies/ spending to find out if they are reaching and supporting the poorest children in their education for example Education (Additional Support for Learning) Act 2005
- Incentives for and inspection of schools and local authorities progress in improving educational outcomes for the poorest children
- Taking forward the findings of the HMIE report, *Missing Out*, which states that we should 'focus more on the extent to which schools can improve the achievement of particular groups'.
- Links with broader anti-poverty measures, for example the Working for Families Fund.

3. Increased support for parents of children living in poverty to enable them to engage in their children's learning. This could include support for parents to develop the necessary skills in order to be able to engage in children's learning; introducing initiatives to bridge the gap between formal and informal learning practices; concentrating on the early years and transition from primary to secondary school; increasing support for the role of home-school link workers to provide one-to-one support for families and moral support for engagement; involve parents and children living in severe poverty in the design and evaluation of initiatives.

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⁹ *Improving educational outcomes for children living in poverty through parental involvement in primary schools*, Save the Children (2007).

¹⁰ *Concluding observations 2002*, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

¹¹ HMIE (2006) *Children at risk of missing out on educational opportunities*