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POVERTY AND LOW EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT IN WALES: STUDENT, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY INTERVENTIONS

David Egan

The Welsh Government is committed to reducing poverty and its effects, including the educational gap between children in low-income families and their better-off peers. This *Viewpoint* draws on recent evidence assembled by JRF to consider how student-, family- and community-focused interventions can best contribute to breaking the link between poverty and low educational achievement in Wales.

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Background

On average about 17 per cent of Welsh children live in relative poverty, using the percentage of children receiving free school meals (FSM) as an indicator. The educational performance of these children compared with those who come from more prosperous backgrounds provides clear evidence of the effect of poverty on educational achievement, a major issue for the Welsh Government.

Studies have found that under-achievement in children in Wales receiving FSM may be a significant problem from nursery class onwards. Of particular concern is the gap between the educational achievement at age 15 of students in receipt of FSM and those who are not, as measured by performance in GCSE examinations.

In fact there has always been a 'long-tail' of achievement in the education system in Wales. When in the past relatively low-skilled employment was plentiful in the coal, metal and manufacturing industries this might have been acceptable. In the current challenging economic environment this can no longer be the case.

As part of its Action Plan to improve educational performance, the Welsh Government has decided that reducing the impact of poverty on what children achieve in school is one of its three main priorities. The other two – improving standards of literacy and numeracy – are seen as being closely related to the priority on poverty (Andrews, 2011a and b).

Given this background, it is crucially important for the Welsh Government and the education system in Wales to decide what now needs to be done to improve the educational performance of children living in poverty in Wales.

Key points

- There is strong evidence that living in poverty has a major impact on levels of educational achievement for children in Wales. This is particularly troubling at a time of recession, when there is an increasing emphasis on educational outcomes, and when academic attainments at age 15 have become critical for entrance into the job market and further and higher education.
- Policy outlined in the Welsh Government's Tackling Poverty Action Plan and its Guidance for schools on the implementation of the Pupil Deprivation Grant has two main strategies for reducing poverty's impact on educational achievement: learning- and teaching-focused interventions on the one hand, and student-, family- and community-focused interventions on the other.
- Although some of these approaches, which include schemes to improve parenting and students' wellbeing, as well as extra-curricular and mentorship programmes, show benefits, there is no good evidence base for their impact on educational outcomes, as measured by academic attainment.
- Until recently, more research had been carried out on learning- and teaching-focused interventions (which address issues of teaching and leadership) than on student-, family- and community-focused interventions (characterised as 'AAB-type' strategies because they focus on the aspirations, attitudes and behaviours of disadvantaged children and their families).
- This *Viewpoint* recommends that future policy initiatives in the Welsh education system should combine both approaches, with a particular emphasis on programmes that focus on parental involvement, extra-curricular activities and mentoring.
- Whilst recent JRF studies show that some AAB-type interventions may contribute to improvements in educational achievement for children in poverty in Wales, they also show that there is still a need for more robust and detailed evidence on their impact, especially for Wales-specific programmes. Pre-trialling and evaluation should precede any future interventions in this area.

The link between poverty and low educational achievement

Living in poverty has a major impact upon levels of educational achievement in Wales. The most widely-used indicator of the number of children who live in relative poverty in Wales is the percentage receiving free school meals (FSM). On average this is about 17 per cent of children in Wales.

The educational performance of these children compared with those who come from more prosperous backgrounds, provides clear evidence of the effect of poverty on achievement.

Educational under-achievement by children living in poverty in Wales can be seen as early as the age of three, when they enter nursery. Here the scores in standardised tests for those on FSM can be up to a year behind those of children not receiving FSM. This gap is often closed in the early years of primary education, but it widens again by the age of eleven.

At ages 14 and 15/16, standardised tests and examination results reveal that on average there is a gap of 32 to 34 per cent between what children living in poverty achieve compared with other children (Egan, 2012b; Estyn, 2010).

The percentage of 15 year olds achieve the equivalent of five or more higher-grade GCSEs, including English (or Welsh) and Mathematics is increasingly regarded as a key indicator of educational attainment. This is because having literacy and numeracy skills at this level is critically important for progression to further study and into employment. Here, too, there is a significant gap in achievement. In 2011, for example, 21 per cent of young people receiving FSM in Wales achieved this outcome compared with 55 per cent not receiving FSM.

Findings for 15 year olds in Wales participating in the OECD's (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) PISA programme (Programme for International Assessment) point to broadly similar trends (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2007 and 2010).

Welsh Government current policy

Faced by the high levels of poverty and child poverty that are being experienced in Wales (Parekh and Kenway, 2011) the Welsh Government is strongly committed to reducing the extent of poverty and its impact on families and children. To this end it has developed a Tackling Poverty Action Plan (Welsh Government, 2012b), setting out how it intends to help people currently facing poverty, both to mitigate its effects and to prevent future poverty. This work has been praised by the

Economic and Social Research Council as a model of the type of broad strategy required to address child poverty in the United Kingdom (ESRC, 2011).

In 2011 a Pupil Deprivation Grant was introduced, providing per-head funding to schools for each child over the age of five who receives free school meals. It will be provided up to 2014, and is intended to support schools in introducing additional interventions to improve the achievement of disadvantaged children. Guidance has been provided for schools on how best to use this grant (Welsh Government, 2012a).

This Guidance and the Action Plan focus on two types of strategy for reducing poverty's impact on educational achievement. The first can be described as learning- and teaching-focused, and the second as student-, family- and community-focused.

Learning- and teaching-focused policies are designed to improve the quality of teaching and leadership, seeing these as the most important influences on student achievement in all schools, including schools with relatively high numbers of FSM students. These policies draw upon a large body of research and practice on what leads to improvements in classrooms and schools and how schools can become highly effective (Egan, 2012a). They also draw on recent research on the most effective methods of learning and teaching for helping improve the outcomes of disadvantaged children (Sutton Trust, 2011).

Until recently far less research has been done on student-, family- and community-focused interventions. As reported below, recent JRF studies have characterised some of these as 'AAB' approaches – seeking to impact positively on the aspirations, attitudes and behaviours of disadvantaged children and their families.

At family and community level, the main Welsh Government policies that seek to reduce poverty and its effects have been the pre-school programme Flying Start, the families programme Families First (previously Cymorth) and the community-based programme Communities First (Egan, 2012b). These programmes have incorporated many examples of AAB-type approaches, including parenting strategies and attempts to raise the aspirations and change the attitudes of children, their families and communities.

The Welsh Government's education department has also developed a wide range of AAB-type initiatives (Egan, 2007). These include: Reaching Higher and First Campus, designed to encourage disadvantaged young people to aspire to higher education; the extensively funded RAISE programme (Raising Attainment and Educational Standards in Education, 2006–10), targeted at the most disadvantaged schools; Learning Coach, providing mentoring support for 14 to 19 year olds; and the

Community Focused Schools programme, which aims to encourage schools to provide or become the location for extra-curricular activities.

In addition to these, funding from the European Social Fund (ESF) has been used to support similar interventions in some of the most disadvantaged communities of Wales, with a focus on raising aspirations, improving attitudes and wellbeing, developing basic skills and extending curriculum activities. Examples are the PREVENT and Building the Future Together programmes, targeted at disengaged young people in the post-industrial South Wales Valleys.

Improving student wellbeing has been a focus for many of these interventions, including RAISE, those funded by the European Social Fund and a range of the Welsh Government education department's programmes, with policies designed to improve student behaviour, inclusion, self-esteem, emotional intelligence and more general social and personal skills (Welsh Government, 2011).

There have also been increasing efforts in Wales to develop the involvement and engagement of parents and families in their children's education (Egan, 2012b). Families First and Communities First have promoted such approaches and many schools and local authorities have undertaken similar work, including family learning programmes. Save the Children has introduced its FAST (Families and Schools Together) programme into a number of areas in Wales, working with targeted schools to improve the engagement in education of groups of disadvantaged children and families.

Within these various policy areas and associated interventions emphasis has been placed on providing mentoring support for students, and enriching their experiences through extra-curricular activities, in the belief that these are not available to disadvantaged young people as they are to their more privileged peers. For example, mentoring support has been offered through the Learner Coach initiative and First Campus, with the objective of encouraging young people to progress through 14–19 education and proceed into higher education. Extra-curricular opportunities have been provided through the Community Focused Schools programme, from RAISE funding and through local initiatives such as the E3 programme in Rhondda Cynon Taff. Many of these interventions have been supported through European Social Fund funding and have been targeted at NEETs reduction (helping those not in education, employment or training).

What evidence is there for the impact of these various student-, family- and community-focused interventions in Wales? In many cases they can be seen to have led to improvements in the participation and engagement of young people in education and training. However, evidence on the extent to which these

interventions lead to measurable improvements in the achievement of children and young people living in poverty is more limited and generally far less positive.

Independent evaluations of the RAISE, Cymorth and Communities First programmes all point to strengths and weaknesses in the AAB-type educational interventions undertaken, but these do not include evidence of improved educational outcomes. Ongoing evaluations of the Flying Start programme point to variable impacts upon parents of parenting and language-and-play interventions. An important evaluation on the impact of Flying Start on the levels of achievement of three year olds on entering school is due for publication in the near future (Egan, 2012b).

Her Majesty's Inspectorate in Wales has recently reported on family learning programmes funded by the Welsh Government and generally targeted at the parents of early years children (Estyn, 2012). Whilst it found much of interest and value in these programmes, it also noted very little tracking of the impact they have on standards achieved by children.

The work of FAST in Wales has also been evaluated. Whilst this showed qualitative improvements in the behaviour and attitudes of the children and families involved in the programme, evidence on any impact upon the children's achievement was not identified (McDonald and Fitzroy, 2010).

It can be concluded, therefore, that whilst student-, family- and community-focused approaches to reducing the impact of poverty on education in Wales may have merit for improving student wellbeing and the participation of disadvantaged children and their families in education, there is limited evidence of their impact on improving achievement. Part of the problem is a lack of robust evidence on impact drawn from rigorous research and evaluation, including evidence on the scale of effectiveness of different interventions.

Recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation research

It is, therefore, timely that over the last two years JRF has produced a number of studies about the impact of AAB-type interventions – raising aspirations, changing attitudes to schooling and tackling behaviour – on the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children (Kintrea *et al.*, 2011; Cummings *et al.*, 2012; Gorard *et al.*, 2012 and Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012). These include pre-school parenting programmes, attempts to raise the aspirations of secondary school children, extra-curricular activities, mentoring, improving behaviour, reducing truancy and a range of initiatives designed to improve student wellbeing.

What the JRF research has shown is that whilst there is an overall problem in the quantity and quality of robust research evidence that is available on these interventions, there are also doubts about 'whether the initiatives introduced so far have actually been successful in improving outcomes' (Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012: p.3).

This emphasis on 'outcomes' demands evidence of actual improvements in the educational achievement of poorer children, though of course these interventions may have other impacts and may be important in their own right. Nonetheless, given the current emphasis in education policy on improving what these young people achieve in terms of literacy, numeracy and other skills and qualifications and the need in difficult economic times to achieve value for money, the significant lack of evidence of improvements being made in these areas is a cause for concern.

Whilst this research challenges the widespread assumptions of policy-makers and practitioners that AAB-type interventions will automatically lead to improvements in educational standards, it does point to two areas where the evidence is much more positive. These are:

- parental involvement in education;
- participation in extra-curricular activities and mentoring.

Parental involvement

JRF research has found that there was a reasonable case to be made for parental (family) involvement in their children's education having 'a causal influence on children's school readiness and subsequent attainment' (Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012: p.5), compared with all the other interventions it reviewed.

This research points to four areas of parental involvement which have had success:

- improving at-home parenting;
- involving parents in school;
- engaging parents in their children's learning and in their own learning;
- aligning school–home expectations.

Whilst the research identifies the key features of successful interventions in these areas, it could not isolate which of these, singly or in combination, actually led to improved educational outcomes for young people. They suggest, however, that providing parents with better information and access to appropriate support and advice appears to have the greatest effect. This enables them to conclude that interventions that simply raise parents' aspirations for their children to succeed are likely to be unsuccessful, whereas those which 'enable and encourage parents

actively to engage with their child's learning and the education system more generally' are usually successful (Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012: p.6).

Extra-curricular activities and mentoring

Whilst recognising that robust evidence for the impact of extra-curricular activities and mentoring on students' achievements is lacking, the JRF research suggests that these kinds of intervention offer much promise.

Part of the difficulty in judging the effectiveness of extra-curricular interventions is that many of them have been targeted at reducing truancy and bad behaviour, with the implicit assumption that this would lead to improved outcomes. In the main, these approaches have either turned out to be ineffective or the evaluations undertaken did not include attempts to judge if they led to improved educational outcomes.

JRF research pointed to practices which led to successful mentoring of young people. Whilst there is some evidence that this results in improved achievement, explanations of how or why the improvement occurred are not apparent in the evaluations carried out.

The JRF studies propose that if AAB-type strategies are to be cost-effective in future, then carefully designed and robustly evaluated funding should be concentrated on parental involvement, extra-curricular provision and mentoring. However, they do not preclude other innovative approaches. What they argue is that such interventions should have a strong evidence base, with in-built robust evaluations of student achievement, and that they should be trialled at a small-scale level before a decision is taken on whether they should be scaled up.

Conclusions

- In developing its work on how education can contribute to reducing the impact of poverty on educational achievement, the education system in Wales should combine learning- and teaching-focused and student-, family- and community-focused policies.
- Student, family and community approaches should focus on parental involvement, extra-curricular activities and mentoring as being the most cost-effective and having the best evidence base.
- The evidence base for interventions in these areas, especially in Wales-specific programmes, needs to be strengthened, as currently there is little robust evidence on impact.

- Interventions focused on parental involvement, extra-curricular activities and mentoring should be prioritised within the Flying Start, Families First and Communities First programmes. They should also be prioritised in any future initiatives, including ESF-funded projects. Future spending by schools of the Pupil Deprivation Grant should prioritise these interventions as well as those which are learning- and teaching-focused. These priority areas should also be reflected in the strategies in the Welsh Government's Tackling Poverty Action Plan.
- Any other interventions to be used in Wales in future (including any funded by the ESF) should be pre-trialled and rigorously evaluated before a decision is taken on wider implementation. The main criterion for deciding on scaling up such approaches should be the impact on improved educational achievement by poorer children.

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About this paper

This paper has considered the findings of important research published by JRF on how certain types of intervention have the potential to contribute to improving the achievement of disadvantaged children in education. These interventions attempt to impact upon the aspirations, attitudes and behaviour (AAB) of disadvantaged children and their families.

JRF research has found that there are difficulties with identifying robust evidence on how far these types of intervention lead to improvements in achievement. Evidence is strongest for those approaches focused on parental involvement, extra-curricular activities and mentoring.

The paper has related these findings to the current situation in Wales, where there is a very strong focus on reducing the impact of poverty on educational achievement. It recommends that JRF findings on AAB interventions should be factored into how the education system in Wales takes forward its work in this important area.

About the author

David Egan is Emeritus Professor of Education at Cardiff Metropolitan University and a Visiting Professor at the University of Glamorgan. He is chair of the Welsh Government's Tackling Poverty External Advisory Group, but writes here in a personal capacity.

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Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead
40 Water End
York YO30 6WP
Tel: 01904 615905

email: publications@jrf.org.uk
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