Young people from St Rose of Lima Primary School

Poverty, attainment and wellbeing:
Making a difference to the lives of children and young people

Children's Services Focus
Key Messages & Implications
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Setting the Context

In Scotland, 2018 was designated the Year of Young People. Yet, we know that for many children living in poverty their life chances are significantly reduced, reflected in poorer mental health and wellbeing [1] and academic outcomes [2]. Focussing on attainment alone will not solve the problem: an holistic focus upon children and their wellbeing within the contexts of public policy, families, schools and communities is essential [3]. We have chosen to focus on early adolescence as this represents a critical stage in children's development [4, 5] when peer victimization [6] and mental health issues [7] often come to the fore, impacted by adverse childhood experiences [8, 9].

This is a complex international problem [10-12], articulated within the United Nation's global goals for sustainability [13], requiring a multi-disciplinary focus. The seminar series focussed on one of the Scottish Government's key policies – the Scottish Attainment Challenge, addressed through a wide range of legislation and initiatives [14, 15].

Through hosting a series of three international seminars (one held over two days) and working with children and young people in St Rose of Lima Primary School, Glasgow City Council and Inverclyde Academy, focussing on their sense of belonging to school, we have sought to cast light on this complex problem.

Programme Aims and Objectives

The seminar series sought to:

- Examine, through multiple disciplines and drawing upon the perspectives of academics, early adolescents, practitioners, the 3rd sector and policy makers, how the relationship between poverty, attainment and children's mental health and wellbeing is currently understood, particularly as it pertains to early adolescence, and how this understanding might be extended.
- Examine how a child's sense of belonging to school impacts upon their mental health and wellbeing and attainment.
- Enable new insights to inform international and national policy about how to address the attainment gap associated with poverty.
- Create lasting networks to foster partnership working and to create opportunities for future collaborative research.

Three International Seminars

The seminars systematically explored the relationships between poverty, attainment and children's mental health and wellbeing in order to understand the drivers of these relationships, lying at the intersection, as illustrated in figure 1. Seminar 1 explored the relationship between poverty and attainment; seminar 2 the relationship between poverty and the mental health and wellbeing of children; and seminar 3 examined the intersection between poverty, attainment and wellbeing with a specific focus on our sub-theme of a *sense of belonging to school*. The series concluded with a focus on Scottish educational policy and an exploration of the implications of what had been learned from the seminar series to inform public policy, children's services and schools.
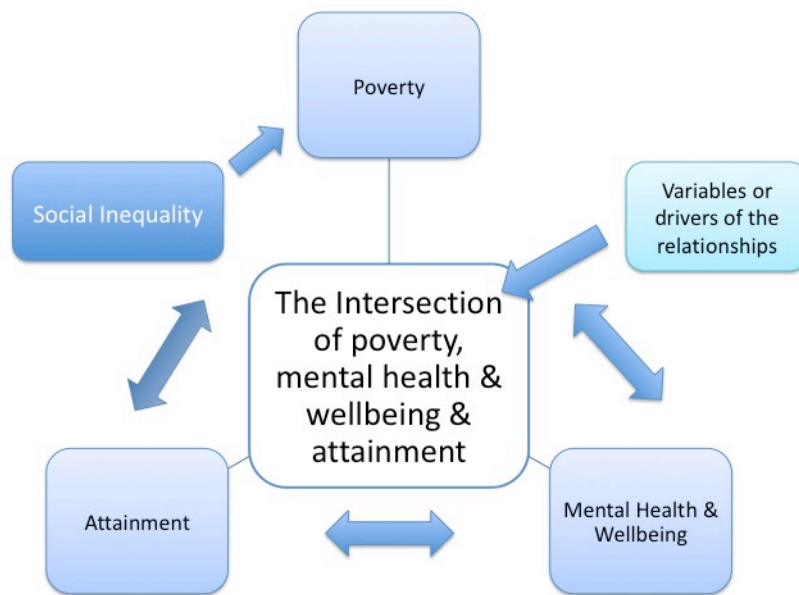
Figure 1: The relationships explored within the seminar series

Key Insights and Implications for policy and practice

Understanding the Problem

Insight

The importance of furthering understanding of poverty and its impact on the lives of communities, families and children through a multi-disciplinary lens.

Implication

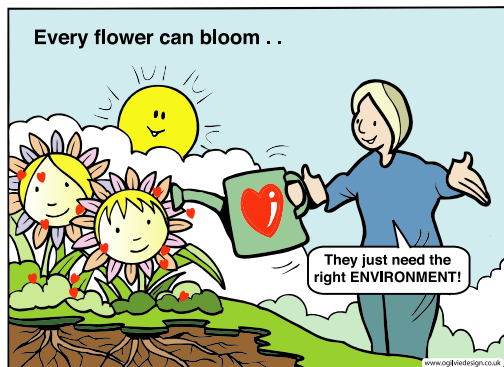We require a multi-disciplinary perspective on the problem.

The complexity of the problem.

The quest to 'close the gap' requires a political solution which has an holistic focus on all aspects of public policy which have a bearing on the problem. Invest in universal public services – education, health, social, housing and employment. There is no single solution.
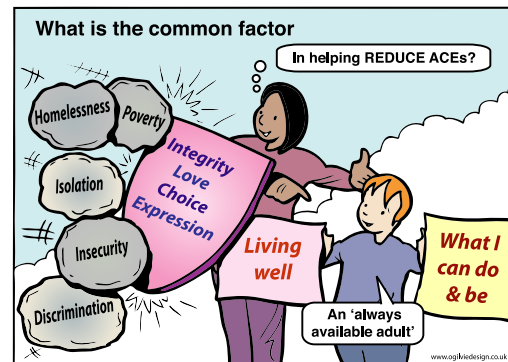
The attainment gap manifests itself before children commence formal schooling [16]. Disparities in mental health are in evidence when children enter primary school and magnify thereafter [1].

Investment in early years education should continue to be a national priority. Support caregivers through the services of health workers and home-link workers.

The relationship between poverty, attainment and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is complex.

The more unequal a society, the greater the impact on inequitable outcomes across the population as a whole. On a range of indicators - health, education and life satisfaction – there are poorer outcomes for children living in unequal societies [18].

One third of children in the lowest decile of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation also have Additional Support Needs (ASN) and/or are Looked After. Children with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Needs (SEBN) are significantly represented within this category [3, 19] but least likely to have a co-ordinated support plan [20].

Avoid over-simplistic solutions which individualise the problem (the answer being 'make children more resilient') and do not take account of the environment. The socio-cultural and political context shapes the experience of communities, families and children and may be a critical factor in the production of ACEs. A focus on nurturing capabilities may, in the long-term, be a more effective solution [17]. 'When a flower doesn't bloom you fix the environment, NOT the flower.'

The quest to close the poverty-related attainment gap needs to be understood within the broader framework of inequalities in society, requiring a fiscal solution.

Universal provision is important but we need to direct targeted resources towards meeting the needs of children who intersect poverty, ASN and Looked After Children and who are multiply disadvantaged, particularly those who have SEBN.

The Change Process, Impact and Sustainability

Insight
Change and impact take time.

Significant investment has been invested by the Scottish Government through the Scottish Attainment Challenge. How do we know that the funding is utilised in such a way that it is building capacity within the system (rather than short-term fixes or compensating for cuts in services elsewhere) and that interventions are sustainable?

Implication
Investment needs to be long-term and sustainable beyond the term of a government.

This is an appropriate point to take stock and commission independent evaluative research to ascertain impact and set the future direction of policy.

A collaborative approach

Insight

Schools cannot through their efforts alone solve the problem.

Implication

Build strong infrastructures and networks of support around communities, families and schools with access to age-related and appropriate services at time of need [3]. Invest in services such as CAMHS, educational psychology, counselling and home-link workers.

Impact is dependent on strengthening inter-professional, inter-sectoral and inter-agency links such that shared understandings and common goals emerge.

Create the spaces and opportunities for inter-professional, inter-sectoral and inter-agency work to take place. This requires investment by the Scottish Government and intent and goodwill on the part of professionals.

Parents are central to closing the gap. Strengthening parental engagement in children's learning is a clear tenet of the Scottish Government's approach.

Strengthening parental engagement should continue to be a priority in Scottish Government policy and in the practice of schools.

The need for research-informed practice

Insight

Public policy and practice to 'close the gap' needs to be research informed.

Implication

Invest in multi-disciplinary research and knowledge exchange to inform developments and evaluate the efficacy of public policy and interventions on the ground.

The dangers of being over-reliant on meta-studies derived from 'big data' which may tell us the 'what' but not the 'why' and may not be relevant to our own specific context or circumstances.

Give due consideration to mixed-methods or qualitative studies, the latter of which give insight into the experience of children, parents and school communities within their initial settings.

Higher Education has an important role to play in furthering understanding of the nature of the problem and its potential solutions. Also to strengthen opportunities for knowledge sharing which is multi-directional.

Strengthen the role of HEI in the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

A skilled, reflective workforce with a rich understanding of the complexities of the problem and who have empathy towards children living in poverty is key.

Invest in lifelong learning opportunities for professionals which cross disciplinary boundaries, are research informed and develop understanding of poverty and its impact on wellbeing and attainment.

Support for families and building on the assets of the community

Insight

Recognition of food poverty and the need to support families outwith normal school terms.

Implication

Alleviate food poverty through initiatives such as breakfast and holiday clubs.

Recognise the power of communities and work respectfully with them.

Listen to the voices of communities and recognise and build on their strengths. 'It takes a village …'

We should not be working in isolation with
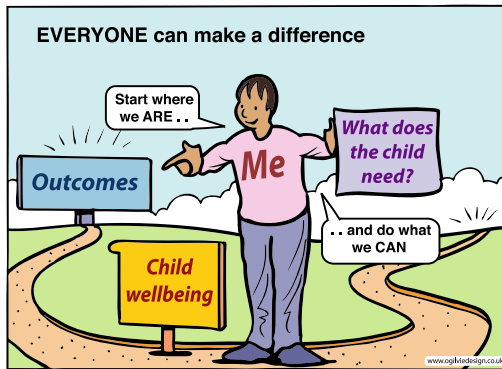
Adopt an holistic approach when working with

children without involvement from families.

children and young people to meet their needs, involving their families.

We can make a difference

Insight
Poverty is a structural issue but we can make a difference.

Everyday interactions with children and families make a difference.

The scale of the problem is significant. However an optimistic outlook is more likely to lead to success.

We all have a responsibility towards the welfare of children and young people.

Implication
We have individual and collective agency to make a difference at an individual and community/societal level to the lives of children and young people living in poverty.

Focus on happiness, love, care, understanding, listening, kindness and connection to ameliorate the negative impact of poverty in children and young people's lives.

Be optimistic in outlook and fierce champions of children and young people.

A rights agenda should underpin our work in closing the gap and inform all of our actions.

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All materials relating to the SUII Seminar Series can be found at:
https://www.scottishinsight.ac.uk/Programmes/OpenCall201819/PEAW.aspx