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Young people from St Rose of Lima Primary School

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

Key Recommendations May 2019

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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. 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.

Key Recommendations

1. Cross-political consensus is required to ensure that investment is long-term and sustainable, beyond the term of a single government.
2. The problem cannot be understood and resolved through education alone. From the level of government down, address the problem holistically across the public services which impact on it – education, health, social welfare, housing and employment – and invest in public services. Don't throw money at the problem!
3. Build on the work to reduce inequalities in society and to meet the targets of *Every Child, Every Chance*.
4. A rights agenda should underpin all of our work with children and families.
5. Reframe the narrative around poverty, attainment and wellbeing and prioritise health and wellbeing for all pupils – 'Better welfare – better relationships – better learning.' Reflect this in how we work with communities, families and children.
6. Rationalise educational policy such that a clear set of priorities emerge.
7. Invest in multi-disciplinary research (giving due consideration to qualitative studies) to measure impact of interventions and to inform future developments.
8. Invest in knowledge exchange such that professionals and academics with a focus on the problem have opportunities to meet, problem solve and work collaboratively together.
9. Target resources towards those children in greatest need and particularly those children lying at the intersection of poverty, additional support needs and/or looked after children, recognising that some children are multiply disadvantaged.
10. Get the balance right between autonomy and accountability for schools. Remove the bureaucracy from the Scottish Attainment Challenge which takes school leaders and teachers away from their core purpose.
11. Build a coherent picture of practice which is research-informed.
12. Put the role of universities much more central to closing the gap and draw more fully on their expertise.
13. Build strong infrastructures and networks of support around communities, families and schools through investment in services such as educational psychology, speech therapy, children's social care, CAMHS, counselling, home-link services ...
14. Invest in the education of the teaching profession around poverty and its impact, and mental health and wellbeing (including supporting children with social, emotional and behavioural needs).
15. Poverty proof the school and ameliorate the impact of food poverty through provision such as breakfast and holiday clubs.
16. Listen to and respect the voices of the community, families and children and foster parental engagement in children's learning. Parents and children should be active agents in the change process.
17. Adopt an holistic approach when working with children and their families.
18. Recognise the professionalism and judgement of teachers.
19. Create the time and space within schools for collaborative working around the problem.
20. *We have individual and collective agency to make a difference in the lives of children and young people living in poverty* – be optimistic in outlook and fierce champions of children and young people.

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